

The third part of the diaries of Ewan Walker, this gentle story follows the growing relationships between the young protagonists and contrasts the warmth and resilience of the Walker family in Scotland with the materialism and dysfunction of characters in affluent southern England, ultimately highlighting the importance of love, community, and personal integrity.

Something Retail

From my Father's Diaries
Part 3

Peter Walker

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Author's Note

Although these stories are written in the context of real-world events, the places and areas described in this narrative are entirely fictitious, as are the events that make up this story.

All characters in this book are completely fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This story contains strong and emotive language in certain places, as it reflects the kinds of language used by young people 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.

Two of the characters are openly gay, and there are many references to this aspect of their lives, but there is no sexual content. However, if this is likely to offend you, please DO NOT read this book.

Chapter 1

Monday 13th July 2015

Normally a visit to the Compton Parfitt Manor Hotel is a most pleasant experience. A large Georgian house that was the centre point of the Compton Parfitt estate, it was one of Northern England's most outstanding country house hotels. To stay there was to experience the lifestyle enjoyed by Sir Hugh Drake, a master steel manufacturer in the neighbouring big town of Hallan. That he was a director of the Great Central Railway enabled him to have his own waiting room at the village station and the most important trains stopped there when he wanted to travel.

However, for Stephen Richard Melhuish and his eighteen-year-old son, Sebastian Jordan Stephen Melhuish, their visit was not an experience that they would wish to repeat. For Stephen Melhuish's ex-wife had summoned him and Seb to a meeting. Jordan (which name he used amongst his friends) had felt very hurt by his mother's decision to walk out on him and his father three years before. His father worked as a globe-trotting engineer for Constructions Rhône-Rhin SA, a Franco-German company that did a lot of large civil engineering contracts in Europe and the Far East. Jordan, an only child, was uprooted from his family home and found himself as a boarding pupil in the wilds of Scotland at Strathcadden Academy. Although this school was a Scottish state school, it had a substantial boarding provision. At the time, he had found the experience quite out of his comfort zone, especially as the school had a unique uniform, in that he had to wear a kilt.

As part of the divorce settlement, Kathryn Melhuish, a successful Chartered Accountant, had agreed to pay the boarding fees and took out the lease on a small cottage in the Borders that would serve as home for Melhuish Senior and Melhuish Junior. Jordan Melhuish initially felt lonely and lost, very much a waif and

stray, as pupils arriving part-way through a school year were affectionately called. Although he was addressed as “Melhuish” by some of his peers at Barrowcliffe High School, he found it strange to be addressed as such by staff, although the “laddie” suffix made it seem less harsh. He struggled with his academic work which, in Secondary Four, was more advanced than the GCSE work in Year 10. Therefore, after six weeks they moved him to Secondary Three. There in S3CB he had met Ewan Walker who, with his family, took him under his wing and had become his closest and most trusted friend.

Having achieved considerably more than he ever would have at Barrowcliffe, Jordan had become a fully-fledged Auld Caddie. Just a week before, he had left Strathcadden Academy on a high, having won a number of rowing races at a newly established regatta on the River Cadden. It was the jewel in the crown for the Corscadden Festival, and it was a feather in Jordan’s cap, especially as he was playing a game that was totally new to him. Jordan certainly did not have the normal physique for a rower. He was very skinny and was more suited to cross-country running.

It was Jordan’s greatest wish that his mum and dad would get back together. She would stop this relationship with Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn’s Bank, whom she had met some five years before at a conference. Now this summons to a meeting at Compton Parfitt Manor gave him some hope that this would be the case. He wanted to see Mum and Dad kiss and make up. Stranger things had happened. Ewan’s half-brother, Christian, had been reconciled to his maternal grandparents after they had been set free from a weird pseudo-Christian sect run by a fundamentalist American pastor. If Chris could get over that, surely Mum and Dad could do the same. Dad certainly wanted it.

Jordan's heart fell into his trainers as he went into the drawing room at Compton Parfitt Manor. He saw Mum. However, sitting in an armchair at one end of a coffee table was Rupert Bell-Dick with a glass of gin and tonic.

Kathryn Melhuish started the conversation, "Stephen, Sebastian, thank you for coming. I want to get this over and done with quickly. I am not going to beat about the bush. Rupert and I are becoming partners. I want you both out of our lives: - completely."

The bluntness of his mother's initial statement floored Jordan. "Mum, I thought you and Dad were getting back together."

"You know what thought did, Sebastian," replied his mother. "In the early days, we were on a roll. But now I want to keep a healthy distance. So, I am dumping you – both of you. Sebastian, you are eighteen now. You are old enough to stand on your own two feet. And that's what you are going to have to do. I paid a fortune to send you to that Scottish place. And that's what you are getting from me. You are on your own."

"I am going to uni next term. You promised you would help me with it when you and Dad split up."

"I have changed my mind. Rupert doesn't want anything to do with you, Sebastian... Sebastian, you are looking gormless. Stop it! And how dare you come to a hotel like this dressed in jeans and trainers? I am appalled! Stephen, I have sold the house."

"You never told me about that," said Stephen.

"I didn't have to. It's in my name, remember? We agreed it when you were free-lance in case you went bust."

"What about my share? It's in the settlement."

“You can go whistle for it, Stephen. And, by the way, I am not renewing the lease on your house in Keillor. I’ve told the estate agent. The owner wants it back, to put it on the market. Your lease is up in a month.”

“KATE! Thanks very much! What the bloody hell do you think Seb and I are going to do?”

“Move back in with your mum and dad. They live near there, don’t they? Forty-five-year-old boomerang kid – should make you feel younger.”

“Mum, my stuff is still at home,” said Jordan, thinking about his collection of model trains, cars, and aeroplanes that he had built up since he was a child.

“No, it isn’t. I had bagged it all up and it’s with a house clearance company. The house is now empty and I’m exchanging contracts tomorrow.”

“They were mine!” Jordan cried. It did sound childish and petulant. “What about my PlayStation? I saved up for that for two years. What about my racing bike and my medals?”

“I sold them.”

“Can I have the money?”

“No. Moving house costs a fortune. Besides, they were mine. I let you have them on a licence.”

Jordan slumped back into his chair. “I thought you and Dad were getting back together.”

“No, Sebastian. That was just to get your father here.”

Rupert added his contribution. “Sebastian, as far as I am concerned, I have no interest in you whatsoever. This is the first time I have seen you, and I want it to be the last. Your mother has every right to do what she is doing with your property and the

house. You are eighteen and it's high time you stood on your own two feet. What is that damned ridiculous bangle round your right wrist?"

"The colours of the rainbow... If you really want to know, I'm gay!"

"Good God! Just as well I don't want to know you. You're a pervert! It's against God's Law. Get out of my sight!"

"Well look at this," snapped Jordan. He pulled up his sweatshirt to reveal a grey t-shirt on which was emblazoned in bright colours, *Sorry Girls. I love boys.*

"At your age at my school, do you know what we would have done with queers? We would have thumped them until they stopped being queer. And the headmaster caned queers. We hated arse-bandits. Still do. I hate to think about the disgusting things you do with your boyfriend. You should be in prison. A spell of conscription into the army would do you a power of good. You are nothing but a pervert."

"Are you telling me that I stick my dick up Ewan's arse?" Jordan shouted. Other people in the drawing room were looking over their coffee and their newspapers. "I don't do that sort of thing!"

"Sebastian, how dare you use language like that?" squawked his mother, horrified. "In the drawing room of a top hotel as well! Well really!"

Stephen Melhuish was starting to see red. "Don't you dare call my son a pervert! As for the settlement, I shall be seeing my solicitors."

Rupert sat back in his chair and sipped his gin and tonic. He would have enjoyed smoking a cigar if he were allowed to. He considered the no-smoking laws an intrusion into a perfectly

reasonable thing for a man of his age and status to do. He would have liked to blow smoke into Stephen Melhuish's face. "I wouldn't bother, old chap. I have a very good solicitor and legal team back in Town, as you know. They do a lot of work for high-ups in the Conservative Party. They would wipe the floor with you and take away even your shirt."

"Sebastian, Stephen, you need to go. I do not want to see you again. Rupert has given me fun. We are free spirits. The thing is you both were so boring. I married beneath myself, Stephen."

The two stared at the new partners. Rupert added, "Go on, hop it."

"Rupert," snarled Stephen Melhuish, "what I want to do to you would put me in prison. You and Kathryn are not worth a prison sentence. That is all I want to say to you. Come on, Seb; let's leave these damned people to their own devices."

The two men went back to the car. They could see the Range Rover that belonged to Rupert. Its tweaked number plate made it obvious. It was not only a top of the range model, but one that was further enhanced and customised by a leading conversion company.

"Hope someone puts a scratch down it," muttered Jordan as he got into the car.

"True," replied his dad. "But that shit, and his bitch aren't worth it. I hope they don't until they get back to London, because we would be the first suspects. We have a big enough grudge. Do you know those things are worth quarter of a million?"

Stephen Melhuish and his son both burst into tears and held each other. Neither could give a damn that people could see them.

“Seb, I never expected it to come to this.”

“Nor did I, Dad. I can’t believe what she’s done to us. I can’t believe what that man said about me. I didn’t think people still came out with that sort of stuff. Perhaps he’s gay and wants to hide it up.”

“Don’t think so, somehow. Your mother goes on about how good he is in bed, and how boring I was. I was working my bollocks off to keep her in shoes, clothes, and handbags. She’s like her mother, completely up her own arse.”

“You worked your bollocks off for me as well, Dad.”

“I don’t resent that at all. You know how much I love you. I wish I had a job where I could have seen more of you.”

“I do as well. You’re not upset that I’m gay?”

“Of course not. Lots of men are, even if they don’t admit it. I have known that you have a boyfriend for ages. He sounds a really nice lad. What’s his name?”

“Ewan. He lives in Corscadden.”

“What’s his second name?”

“Walker.”

“Is he anything to do with the Walkers department store in Corscadden?”

“His granddad owns it, and his aunts run it.”

“They sound a lovely family.”

“They are. Ewan’s mum died last year. It really screwed him up, but I was able to help him.”

“That’s the sort of person you are, Seb. Unlike Mr Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking – what a banker!”

“I like that, Dad.”

“Sums him up. Let’s get out of here.”

It took them two hours to get back to the small cottage outside Keillor. It seemed to take two days. When they had got in, the first thing they noticed was an envelope from the estate agent:

Dear Mr Melhuish

We have been advised by your ex-partner, Mrs K Melhuish, that she will not be renewing the lease on Clematis Cottage on your behalf. We have advised the owners, Mr and Mrs Carney that a new lease will need to be set up. They have advised us that they wish to put the property on the market, and they need to have vacant possession.

Therefore, we regret to inform you that your lease will not be renewed. This letter is serving as the formal notice to quit at the determination of your lease.

We can assure you that you have been a model tenant and we would be delighted to assist you to find another property to lease through us. We are confident that we will be able to introduce you to another landlord, although there are many tenants seeking properties in this area. We continue to make every effort to find suitable rental properties, and we will let you know immediately if a suitable property becomes available.

The bitch had not been lying, for a change. Now they had just over a month to find a new house. That would be hard enough. However, Stephen Melhuish was due to travel to Japan in three weeks’ time and would be away for at least three months.

A phone call to the estate agents did not allay his fears. The market value of the cottage was offers in excess of 250 grand. The sale process was to be through sealed bids. The only possibility of coming to an arrangement with Mr and Mrs Carney was to be the successful bidder. The way the market was, the

chances were that the successful bid would be approaching £300k. The deadline for submitting bids was to be Thursday 3rd September.

The problem with that deadline was that Stephen Melhuish would be in Japan. Everything had to be done in writing including the mortgage offer. Things were slow enough in Britain, but having to conduct a legal transaction from the other side of the world would be a nightmare. Stephen Melhuish was well paid and had a reasonable deposit. However, his credit record had been blotted by his mobile phone provider, Speak-Easy. Stephen had upgraded his account, but the company had failed to cancel his old account. The result of this particular incompetence was that his previously unblemished credit record had a black mark, which Speak-Easy had refused to remove. A process with the Financial Ombudsman was still in progress.

Stephen Melhuish had been bitten by the Scottish system for sealed bids before. He had bid for a house unsuccessfully the previous year but had still had to pay all the fees for the preparation of the bid. Money for nothing.

Jordan Melhuish (Seb to his father, and Sebastian to his ex-mother) was definitely not a mummy's boy, especially after today's performance. The sight of her sitting aloof in that armchair next to her fancy man made him feel sick. Rupert was everything he disliked about men. He was a typical power-bloke, snazzy suit, shaven headed, and with an aggressive ego. Jordan had heard that nobody crossed Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn's Bank. He had concluded that Rupert was a psychopath. They said that a good proportion of top people had psychopathic tendencies. He imagined Rupert and his bit of fluff (he could no longer bear to think of her as his ex-mother) in the gym. She was in her tight-fitting Lycra doing feeble jerks as if she really needed the attention of a doctor. He would also be in tight Lycra, the clothing emphasising his spare

tractor tyres brought about by far too many corporate luncheons. He would be aggressively attacking the equipment, which would get the better of him and win after about a minute.

But this bit of fluff was the woman who had carried him in her womb for nine months. She had fed him. She had taken him to bicycle races in his early teens. She had cuddled him when he was upset. But, three years ago, she had suddenly rejected him and his father. Jordan could not think why. One day she was there, and the next day she had disappeared in the car with no explanation. He remembered how he had tried to ring her mobile, but he heard it ringing in the house. He rang his dad who rushed back home from France. Within two weeks he was at Strathcadden Academy. It was only later that Dad had told him everything.

Now the rejection was complete and irreversible. His mother had picked up so many airs and graces since she had tagged along with Rupert. She wasn't his mother any more, just a rather unpleasant woman who was completely full of herself. Jordan cuddled up to a cushion in the living room and started to cry. He wanted Ewan, but Ewan was in Germany with Aidan. Chris would be in Corscadden but would be at work. A feeling came through him for a fleeting moment that he should go down to Keillor Station and jump out in front of a fast train. He got a grip of himself. That would be a slap in the face to Dad, and to Ewan. Dad came through and held him. As he got a grip on himself, he said, "Dad, I hate that man. He stole Mum."

"I do as well. He went on about breaking God's Law. He should look at himself with his floozy. It's called adultery."

"Dad, it hurts."

"I know. I hope someone had something to say to the Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking about homophobic comments. He had no right whatever to say that to you in public.

In fact, it's illegal. Instead of mooching about here, we'll need to go to see Grandma and Granddad."

Jordan felt his face and long dark hair. There was some youthful fluff about his face. He thought of Dr Cuthbert who said, "Melhuish, laddie, you need a shave." The sight of Rupert with his beard and shaven head repelled him. He made up his mind that he would keep his hair long but always be clean-shaven. Dad had said that he didn't trust men with beards. He was right. Jordan went up to the bathroom, got out his razor, and plugged it in.

The journey across Keillor was short; it is not a big town. Within fifteen minutes, Stephen Melhuish was at his parents' house with Seb. It was not much bigger than the cottage that they were going to have to leave. Richard and Celia Melhuish had downsized ten years before. The house had a large mature garden surrounding it which showed Celia's undoubted skill as a plantswoman and gardener. The late afternoon sun cast dreamy shadows across the lawn and the flower beds. The four of them were now sitting on the patio drinking tea. Celia had set out a range of home-made biscuits.

"So, what has happened?" Celia asked. She was gently caressing her son's hand. Although he was forty-five, he got great comfort from it, just as he had done forty years before when he had got himself into the usual scrapes of an adventurous childhood.

"Kathryn got me to go over to Compton Parfitt to discuss 'something important'. Not to put too fine a point on it she told me that she was ditching me and Seb for good. Rupert was there and was rude and obnoxious. The way she spoke to Seb – I wouldn't say that to my worst enemy. She berated him for having jeans and trainers, just like he is now."

“You don’t look that bad, Seb,” said Richard.

“That man had some horrible things to say to me. The words he used. He said I was a pervert, should be in prison, and should be conscripted into the army. He said how they would beat up queers, and so on. Then he called me a....”

“That’s awful. What was it he called you?”

“It’s very rude – an arse-bandit. I don’t do that sort of thing. Mum was furious when I told Rupert that. I was rather rude myself. I didn’t want to be, but I couldn’t take any more.”

“Seb,” said Celia, “even a saint would swear under those circumstances.”

“Mum, she sold our house in Barrowcliffe. She has given Seb’s collection of model cars, trains, and planes to a charity shop, I think. She also sold his PlayStation, and both his racing bikes. His medals and photos went to the charity shop as well. She refuses to hand over the money for the house due in the settlement. Even worse she won’t give Seb any money for the stuff she sold. She said she had loaned them to him on licence, even though he had worked for and bought some of them himself. And she’s ratted on the agreement to support Seb through university.”

“Good grief! That’s appalling! Why did she do that?”

“She says she wants the money for the legal fees for selling the house. What’s more she has stopped the lease on Clematis Cottage. Now Mr and Mrs Carney want to sell up and the estate agents have given us a month’s notice to quit.”

“You can always stay with us. It will be a bit of a squeeze,” said Richard. “Seb can stay on the sofa bed in the study. It’s not ideal, but that’s the best we can do.”

“Anything will do, Dad. I have to go to Japan in three weeks for three months. I will have three month’s leave and will sort out a house after that. The trouble is that I have a blot on my credit record, thanks to my mobile phone.”

“What happened there?”

“Speak-Easy upgraded my account. But they didn’t close my old account, and they say I owe them fifteen hundred quid. It’s with the Ombudsman at the moment. They say I have a very strong case, but it will take a while to sort out. Speak-Easy are on the defensive.”

“It was on the news this afternoon,” said Celia. “They have been fined ten million by OFCOM for their atrocious customer service. The Ombudsman has hundreds of cases.”

“I know that, Mum. They say it will be at least six months before they work through everything. Going back to Kathryn, I tried to talk to her mum and dad about the situation. They just told me that that Kathryn and her happiness was the most important thing to them.”

“Stephen,” said Richard, “that’s typical of her. She was always bloody selfish. She will be the loser; you mark my words. She’s blown it. If she comes snivelling back to you, you tell her to sling her hook.”

Jordan simply wished the pair of them to find a cliff at least two hundred metres high and fall over the edge.

Jordan loved his grandmother’s garden with its borders which were a riot of colour for most of the year. It had even featured on the BBC programme *Gardeners’ World*. Grandma would tell him what the plants were, but he could only remember a few of them. The patterns looked wild but were carefully

planned so that there were colours that went together in a way that was pleasing to the eye. Many of the plants were fragrant and there was a heady scent in the warm evening air. There seemed to be a peace and comfort there. Jordan was not religious, but he could identify strongly with what Ewan said about meeting God in the cathedral of a woodland scene. In this beautiful garden came the feeling of a small voice assuring Jordan that all would be well.

Jordan sat down on a seat that was under a clematis arbour at the far end of the garden and got out his mobile. The waterfall next to the arbour splashed into a large pond that had a sizeable population of fish.

“Eejay, it’s Jordie,” he said as Ewan answered. “How’s it all in Dringhausen?”

Ewan told him about how Aidy, Andreas, Matti, and he had gone up in a plane from Dringhausen aerodrome. It was the same machine that had nearly tipped Aidy and Andreas out of the sky the year before. Herr Seidel, the engineer, and his team had worked like Trojans to replace the engine and sort out the undercarriage that had been bent when the old donkey had landed heavily when she had gone tits up last year. They had also done up D-OLTS so that she looked as good as the day she first flew. She was an entirely different machine.

“So how did you get on with your mum? It was today, wasn’t it?”

“Not good, Eejay. She told me and Dad she never wanted to see us again. She had fancy boy with her. He was incredibly rude and called me a pervert among other things. I was quite rude back and told him that you and I don’t do that sort of thing. It’s the first time I have ever met him, and it will be the last. I never want to see him again. Dad had a good name for him.”

“I know he’s called Rupert, but I don’t know his second name.”

“Bell-Dick. He’s Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn’s Bank in London. Dad called him Mr Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking. He looks like a typical big shit at a bank – a power dresser with a shaven head and a beard. Eejay, don’t even think of growing a beard. I know it’s a fashion. Nor should Aidy or Chris. I can’t see a shaven headed man with a beard without thinking of that big Bell-Dick.”

Jordan could hear laughter at the other end, as if it were in the next room, not well over a thousand kilometres away.

“We were laughing at the idea of Aidy and Chris with beards. Don’t worry Jordie, I agree with you. Last year I was in Carlsborough with Ed and his dad. All the men were like that there. I felt terrified. We locked ourselves in the car. As for that man, Bellend seems to fit. He sounds a complete twat.”

“He is, Eejay. What’s more, Mum, if I can call her that, has a tattoo on her shoulder. Her dress was showing it. I didn’t want to read it. I was feeling sick enough as it was. She said that Rupert and she were now free spirits.”

“As if! I can’t think of a more trapped spirit than a Head of Corporate Banking, especially a Dickhead of Corporate Banking. Or one trapped in her sense of self-importance. Jordie, don’t worry about any of us getting a tattoo. We hate them as much as you. We’re coming back on Saturday. So, hold on until then and come back to Corscadden.”

“Do you mind if Dad came as well. He needs me as much as I need him...and you, Eejay. I’ll ring you tomorrow, or we can go on Skype...” Jordan faltered, and tears were filling his eyes. He turned the phone off. He gazed into the beautiful garden, the handiwork of his grandmother. The sun’s rays were

picking out the tops of the shrubs and heavy scents wafted towards him. It was a peaceful scene, but he was hurting like hell. Eejay's mum had suddenly gone, and it hit Eejay hard, and he helped him to pick up the pieces. But Eejay's mum hadn't intended to go; she had been taken ill. But his mother had chosen to go as a deliberate action. She and Rupert had flicked two fingers in his and Dad's face. She had tried to obliterate any evidence that he had been her son. Yes, it hurt.

Dad was too ordinary for the Chetwynd family. He had blotted his copy book in the early days by pronouncing the name *Chet-wind* instead of *Cheating*. Jordan's maternal grandparents had often thought that their Kathryn had married beneath herself. They were typical of the Sussex County set, all horses, gymkhanas, Goodwood, and Henley. They took their social position very seriously. Jordan was like Dad, quiet and down to earth, who disliked the trappings of social pretension. Jordan had gone to an ordinary school, with his ordinary friends. Charterhouse was far too expensive, and he had failed the Common Entrance. Besides Jordan had been a competitive junior cyclist, something he could not do if he had Saturday morning lessons. All had gone when he found himself at Strathcadden, even though he had gone cycling with Aidy and Eejay – they had a spare bike, but it was not as good as either of the machines Mum had sold. No, she could have Rupert and take a running jump. To Jordan, she was, to all intents and purposes, dead.

Despite that, she was Jordan's mum who had been a good mother for the first fourteen years of his life. Now the selfish bitch had rejected him, and it hurt. He started to cry again. Big boys weren't meant to cry, but he felt anything but big. A feeling, almost the soft whisper of a voice, came over him that seemed to say, "*Just sit and be. Let my peace come over you. I understand.*"

Jordan felt a more immediate presence, that of his grandfather who had sat down next to him and put his hand round him. “We’re here, Seb. We won’t let you down.”

“Mum took everything I had left at the house. I had saved up for my PlayStation and my bikes. Those cars, trains, and planes were part of me. If I had known, Dad could have collected them for me.”

“He tried to. He collected the soft toys that you had. They’re here. He went back a couple of weeks later, but your Mum had sold them or had taken them down to the charity shops.”

“It sounds like she did it deliberately to hurt me.”

“It does look that way, I am afraid.”

“What did I do to her? I don’t understand. I wasn’t a rebellious teenager. I didn’t argue with her.”

“She’s the one with the problem – especially with Rupert Bell-Dick. He is not a nice man. From what I understand from old contacts at Glynn’s Bank, he always had a reputation for being sly, devious, and manipulative. If anyone stands up to him, he will give them hell. He is a bully and undermines those who work with him. He is a notorious womaniser. Your mother has fallen for the suave wealthy man, but I can guarantee you that when he’s bored with her, he will dump her like an empty can of deodorant. Or he will drop dead and leave her a rich widow.”

“I hope he doesn’t, Grandad. Mum never wants to see me again, and I can tell you that the feeling is quite mutual.”

“Of course they are. Your emotions are very raw at the moment. The trouble with your mother is that she wants instant entertainment. Even her parents said as much. I couldn’t stand her mother. She was really stuck up, and her daughter is just the

same. No doubt Rupert will be looking to buy her an equestrian centre in the South of England, so she can indulge her whims with horses. In that respect, she has Little Dick round her little finger. She will demand anything from him, and he will buy it. He certainly has more money than sense.”

“Why did she sell my bikes and PlayStation? I keep going on about it. Sorry it sounds childish.”

“No, it isn’t. It was an act of spite. As for the money, it’s peanuts to her, although your dad said how money-grubbing she was. Come on, let’s go back to the house.”

Jordan’s soft toys that he had kept from when he was a small child were on a chest of drawers on the study. At least they had been rescued to a good home. The thieving vixen would have taken them from Clematis Cottage. She had snooped in there before while Jordan and his father were away.

Jordan only told those he trusted most intimately about the presence of the soft toys. At moments like this, he needed them. The study was the smallest bedroom in the house, but even with the sofa-bed opened out, there was still plenty of room. He went upstairs to move his most favoured soft toys onto the sofa bed that Grandma had already set up. Jordan was very grateful at having at least one set of grandparents who understood.

Richard Melhuish had cooked a simple but tasty supper using vegetables from the garden. Stephen and Seb would stay for a couple of days before they had to pack their stuff from Clematis Cottage and put it into store. Acrefair House was not as spacious as Stephen’s original childhood home, but it was homely and intimate. Stephen was, like his son, an only child, so the Melhuish family had tended to rattle about like peas in a drum. Although Richard and Celia Melhuish had downsized their house, they had considerably upsized their garden.

The living room was warm and snug, and they all settled down for a quiet evening listening to classical music. After the day's events, neither Stephen, nor Jordan, could do much else. And just before midnight, Jordan got into his bed. Last time he bunched up around his favourite bed-time companion, a yellow Labrador puppy he called Woofflet, he was in pyjamas. Now he was in clean sports kit. There was a familiarity and safety about Woofflet, and he was relieved that Dad had rescued the soft toys that he had had from being consigned to the charity shop, or even the tip. He had a deep attachment to them; they were part of him. At least they were in Acrefair House and would be safe and well looked after.

Instead of a toy yellow Labrador, Jordan really wanted Ewan who was not only warm but would cuddle him. With Ewan, Jordan felt safe. No, he never wanted to see his ex-mother again.

Chapter 2

Monday 27th July 2015

Clematis Cottage was losing its atmosphere as a home while Jordan and his father were emptying it. The *For Sale* sign had been put up, while the estate agent's particulars had been prepared. The sealed bid process would ensure that several bidders would have failed and been stung for the fees. It had happened to Stephen Melhuish last year. He had been left out of pocket to the tune of several hundred pounds. The removal men were shifting the furniture to put it into store. It would be safe, though. Both Jordan and Stephen were careful to ensure that they had everything that they wanted, and the car was full. It would not be far to cart it over to Acrefair House. They took the keys back to the estate agent. At least Stephen would get his deposit back. McManus Properties were known for their scrupulous honesty.

The fly in the ointment was, not surprisingly, Stephen's ex-partner. "I am sorry, Mr Melhuish, we have not been able to get hold of Mrs Melhuish. The number we have is not obtainable."

It was the landline for their house in Barrowcliffe.

"Try this mobile," said Stephen. It didn't work either.

"We have written to her to try to get the keys back, as she is legally the leaseholder. The last we heard from her was when she told us that she was not going to renew the lease. We did ask her to fill in the final paperwork, before she could get back the deposit. We have not heard a thing."

"I am not surprised. I paid the deposit. We have left on terms that are not very friendly, to say the least. If you do send the deposit back to her, she will hang on to it. Would you be able to send it back to me?"

“I am afraid we can’t do that. Mrs Melhuish is the leaseholder. She really should not have leased it in her name. You should really have signed the lease. Legally she is in breach of the terms of the lease for sub-letting.”

“She did it on my behalf as I was working abroad. She did it in this office. I’m quite happy to break this logjam and pay for the locks to be replaced. It seems typical of her.”

In the car back to Acrefair House, Stephen said to Jordan, “It’s what I’ve come to expect from your mother. She always was selfish. Now she delights in taking the piss. That’s another load of money that I have lost because of her. I wish to God that I had never met her.”

“You wouldn’t have me.”

“I don’t mean it like that. I am glad I have you, Seb. You have done so well at Strathcadden, and I am proud of you. I wish I had been able to see more of you at school, being a prefect and so on.”

A couple of days later Stephen and Jordan Melhuish were on the train from Keillor to Corscadden. It was an hour on the fast electric trains of the Great Central Line. If they had driven, it would be at least treble that time. When Jordan saw Ewan, he rushed to him and cuddled him and held him close. Jordan had always had a strong bond with Ewan, even though Ewan was thirteen months younger. After what had happened the week before, he really needed his boyfriend even more.

Although Jordan liked Keillor, he felt more at home in Corscadden, and Brewster House was more a home for him than Clematis Cottage. That was natural. Jordan had only spent short periods with his father, because of the nature of his job. Jordan had been adopted by the Walker family over the last three years.

His relationship with Ewan was one of childhood sweethearts. The fact that he was a boy didn't matter one little bit. Both he and Ewan had strong feminine sides to them but were quite content to be boys.

The one who needed a fuss made of was Jordan's father. He had never been to Brewster House before or met any of the Walker family. Compared to the last interactions he had had in Compton Parfitt Manor, this was pure bliss. Guests in Brewster House were always an excuse to get away from the humdrum routines and enjoy some convivial company. Laura Walker had been preparing for her new role as Senior Radiographer and Advanced Nurse Practitioner at Strathcadden General Infirmary. Joby had taken some leave. Therefore, he had been in his workshop with his noisy big-boy's toys and making a lot of oak shavings which ended up at Robertson's Fishery and Smokehouse. Instead, they were now in the kitchen, and Christian, having just come in from work, set about marshalling his troops for a good, tasty supper.

The adults had been ordered out of the kitchen and went through to the drawing room. Joby put on a record and soon the music was drifting gently through the electrostatic loudspeakers complete with the hole that Ewan had left in the right-hand speaker fifteen years before. Joby and Laura listened as Stephen Melhuish explained why he thought his wife of twenty years was a vixen.

Later that evening, Jordan curled up around something that was more satisfying than Woofflet. Ewan responded by curling up round him before starting to breathe slowly and having small twitches. Jordan felt safe and loved.

The next morning after breakfast, Ewan and Jordan were ready for a hill-walk along the Cadden Skyline. Aidy had some

work to do for his university second year. He had got a first in both Semester 1 and Semester 2 examinations, but there was still a lot more to get done. Aidan was not one to sit back, anyway. Doing well always spurred him on to do even better. Chris went to work at Walker Bros as usual. So, it was just Ewan and Jordan. With rucksacks on, they walked up to the skyline path at Corr Hill.

The day was dry but cloudy with sunny intervals. There was just a light breeze, and they were wearing their running shorts. They enjoyed feeling the air gently passing their bare legs, like they had when they had worn their kilts. The path would be dry, as it had not rained for over a week. So, they had their trainers on, rather than hiking boots, but since it was cool, they were glad to have sweaters on over their t-shirts, and over that, each had a hoodie top.

“You’re here now Jordie,” Ewan said as they made it onto the skyline path. “How are you feeling now?”

“Still not that good, Eejay,” Jordan replied. He was a sensitive young man, and the rejection still hurt like hell. So, as they walked, Jordan poured out his feelings to his young friend who seemed to know when it was best to say something, or keep his big trap shut, other than to say short phrases like, “What a bitch!” or “He sounds a real twat!”

By the time Jordan ran out of stuff to say about it, they were almost at the point where the path dropped down from the side of Ben Luffen down towards the River Cadden. At this point the river was in its narrow valley that it shared with the A825 main road. There was a bridge over the river at this point. Here, walkers used to have to do a dice with death by crossing the busy road. Now there were traffic lights.

The two boys crossed the road into Rowallan Country Park. The paths were well-made up here to allow wheel-chair

access. They walked along the wooded valley until they reached Rowallan Viaduct, the point at which the Great Central Line plunged into Mauder Tunnel. Ewan would never repeat his escapade through the tunnel's gloomy portal, behind which was an intimation of Hell.

“This is where I had my melt-down at the start of last year,” Ewan said as they sat down on the seat below one of the arches. Although Ewan had passed this way many times since, it was the first time he had sat there since he was picked up by the mountain rescue team. This time the weather was benign. There were no showers or thunderstorms; these were predicted later on in the week, and Ewan always took care to keep off the skyline if there was a threat of lightning. With good reason – he had had his own close shave with an earth-strike, and one or two hikers had been struck at other times.

“Jordie,” he said gently, “the last time I was sitting here, I was feeling just like you.”

“That was the time you had the bust up with Mrs Learmont.”

“Yeah. Simon had put a picture he had got from the net that showed what you and I don’t do. I wasn’t very happy. Mrs Learmont sent me to Craigie Boy. Craigie Boy went mad with me. Dr Cuthbert was there and told me to go away and do some growing up. So, I did – and got into deep shit.”

“What happened?”

“I got fed up with being out here, and I wanted to call Aidy. He would have got Mr McEwan out to pick me up. That’s when it all went tits up. My mobile battery was flat. And it started to rain heavily and there was lightning. You know I’m scared of lightning. I freaked out. After a couple of hours, the mountain rescue people were there, thank God. I still miss Mum.

I cried at Christmas. It was the first Christmas without her. So, I know how you feel.”

Ewan held his boyfriend close.

“The difference with my Mum,” said Jordan, “was that she chose to dump me and Dad. It’s like she’s dead, but I know she isn’t. She has taken the piss out of Dad and will no doubt do it again. I never want to see her again.”

“You won’t. It’s going to be hard to put her behind you, but you will in the end. I will always miss Mum, but I have Dad, Laura, Aidy, Chris, Benjamin, Daniel, and most of all you. You did so much for me last year. Now I want to do it for you. Just sit with me and take in the peace.”

Although their peace was interrupted by trains rushing above them, the two boys relaxed listening to the water in the river some ten metres away. Birds flitted from branch to branch. Two red squirrels chased each other up the trunk of a tall ash tree. A wood mouse poked its nose from the grass and scampered up the track before disappearing into some brambles. The peace the two boys got was every bit as meaningful as any church service in a cathedral. They got up and went up the hill to their favourite spot, Barrock Cross. The two boys put their rucksacks on the ground and got out their lunch. Ewan had a pair of binoculars which he always carried on his hill-walks. He always enjoyed looking at some little detail in the landscape. On this occasion he gazed up Strathcadden towards Corscadden. He noticed a southbound train emerge from the depths of Maunder Tunnel.

He changed his viewpoint slightly. There was Strathcadden Academy. He and Jordan were now Auld Caddies. No more would they do the myriad prefects’ duties of last year. Eighteen months ago, Craigie Boy had really done him over, even more than the time he blew up that follicle scope. For someone

who was so skilled in the use of the English Language, it was always a blank spot as to what the thing was really called. But he didn't really care that much. The damned thing was so complicated anyway, even though Craigie Boy said it was a doddle. Craigie Boy would. He was a Physics teacher, and to Ewan, Physics was impenetrable. How he had got a Grade A at Standard grade, he didn't know. He was sure that Craigie Boy wasn't that hot at French and German. He wasn't that hot at English but was not very pleased when Ewan had told him as much.

Ewan could easily pick out the back of Dennistoun Park, and the gaggle of buildings in which he and Jordan had spent their teenage years as Caddies. The Wests was clearly visible, with The Easts forming a mirror image. Now the former was a much more pleasant and private experience to use than it had been before. The spaces were so private that male bonding of sports teams could not take place. For Secondary Five and Six students, that could be done in Greatorex House. Down at Strathcadden Academy, no doubt Jannie Brian and John the Jannie were busy getting the school ready for the next academic year.

The two young men talked about being Caddies and Auld Caddies. They snuggled together. There seemed to be an even deeper attraction between them. Ewan felt excited by his beautiful boyfriend, noticing the little details like his brown eyes and black hair that covered his ears and came down to his collar. Ewan felt very protective to Jordan, even though Jordan was over a year older than him. Ewan had been the same with Aidy, and Aidy was eighteen months older. He held Jordan closely. Jordan was so vulnerable. He was a gentle teenager, who was sensitive to others. What had happened to him was the pits. Chris had been let down by his grandparents, who had been snared by a lunatic parody of Christianity but had been rescued. Chris had been able to forgive them. But what Jordan's ex-mum and her Rupert had

done was beyond the pale. For there to be forgiveness there would need to be the world record humble pies. It certainly wouldn't happen soon. Somehow Ewan doubted it would ever happen. It would be the trite sort of thing that some green-horn young evangelical would trot out.

Jordan was feeling very safe and protected. He loved Ewan, who was one of the prettiest men he had ever come across, both in looks and character. Ewan was taller than him, with long colt-like legs. He was typical of the men of Buchananshire, who fitted in well to the stereotype of the wiry Scot. Ewan was scrawny, and still underweight, but had such a beautiful face. In some ways it was quite girlish. The face was a male version of his mother's. Jordan had known Mary Walker; she had even doctored him when he caught mumps in September 2013. She had talked to him at length about how it would be quite possible that he would not be able to father children. After Mum's performance, the last thing Jordan wanted was a relationship with a woman who might well do the same with him. She had kicked Dad in the balls (figuratively, but the way she had carried on, it would not have been a surprise if she had done it literally). Jordan was terrified of some of the Caddie girls, but there were others who were his friends. They felt safe with him, and he felt safe with them. He held on tight to Ewan and caressed his face. There was soft and fine fluff there, as with many seventeen-year-old youths. However, Ewan had gone through Secondary Six without Mrs Learmont or Dr Cuthbert admonishing him, "Walker, laddie, you need a shave!"

Deep waves of love were passing through both Ewan and Jordan, brought on by the intense emotional and physical feelings, as well as subtle signals and pheromones that were being exchanged. Finally, Ewan said, "Jordie, I love you beyond anything else in the world. I want to be yours and you to be mine."

“Eejay, you are gorgeous. I want to marry you. Will you marry me when we leave uni?”

Ewan gazed at Jordan. The pupils in Jordan’s beautiful brown eyes were dilated with love and attraction. His own pupils were as well.

“Of course. We have been teen sweet hearts for three years. We will declare our engagement when we finish at uni. Jordie, I want to have you for the rest of our lives.”

The two boys kissed deeply, and each drew a heart in the sand that was below the rocks. They cuddled and petted each other. It was an intimate and intense private moment, well away from the rest of the world, some of which was speeding two hundred metres below them in the depths of Mauder Tunnel. Jordan got his digital camera and a tripod from his rucksack and set up a picture on the self-timer. (*Author’s note:* The ten images of them Jordan secured would be precious to Ewan for many years to come. One of these images formed the basis of a painting that was hung up in the study in Brewster House. It is still there.)

As they walked up Ben Morcharrie hand in hand, there was a lightness in their step. The whole scene seemed to have had the colour control turned up. They dropped down into Corscadden to make a little diversion to the jeweller’s shop. There each bought a little silver cross on a chain. On one of the crosses, there was written, *Ewan to Jordan* and on the other, *Jordan to Ewan*.

However, they both felt it right that they didn’t announce their engagement to anyone until they had graduated from Edinburgh University. Instead, Ewan wrote:

There was peace in our hearts at Barrock Cross.

I gripped you tight and held your hand,

While you held me with deep, deep love.

That steadfast love will last a life.

There was peace in our eyes at Barrock Cross.

A longing gaze into your face,

Returned to me with love and warmth,

And your pupils were wide with radiant light.

There was peace in our souls at Barrock Cross.

There was no clamour or sounding brass,

Just the silent whisper of our voice,

And the heavenly shout of all our love.

There was joy in our souls at Barrock Cross,

The treasure of eternal love received,

In Holy cupped hands we hold our peace,

Assured with joy that all will be well.

Jordan was very touched by the poem. He was not in the least bit religious, but he had a spiritual side that was sympathetic to the way that Ewan found God in the natural environment. Still in their hiking gear they sat outside Brewster House. They were gay. They were not monsters, just two gentle teenage boys who loved each other so much that they wanted to commit the rest of their lives to each other. For Ewan, he wanted to do it before God, and he wanted Jordan to share his God, a God of life, light, love and beauty. Jordan was looking for these but had not found it yet among God's Holy People. Fifty years ago, they would have been sent to the slammer. Dr Cowan would have had them shot. Dr Cowan was a bastard.

Now thank God, things were more enlightened. Even the church was accepting it, and the Reverend Matheson had no

objection to their love. It may have been something to do with the foundation of sand on which the moral revulsion of the Christian church toward homosexuality had been built. For at the start of the Twenty-First Century, evidence came to light of a number of scandals involving priests' assignations with altar girls and altar boys. Now the feisty leader of the Conservative Party in Scotland had come out stating proudly that she had a girlfriend (a couple of years later, she gave birth to a baby boy – he is definitely a mummy's boy).

It had been a long day, and both flopped onto the bed and snuggled up to each other. Yes, it would all be well.

Stephen Melhuish would have tended to disagree with his son. While Seb's relationship was building, his had collapsed in a way that would cause him pain for many years to come. It had started with the total idealism of a young man and a young woman. They had bought their own home; a thing that not that many youngsters could do nowadays. They had a delightful son. It all was going so well. Out of the blue, there was that call from Seb that Kathryn had gone missing. He remembered getting Seb to dial the mobile. He could hear it ringing upstairs. Seb had rung the police and given the number of the car. They had rapidly found it in Surrey. The cops had told Seb that his mother had been found safe and well. They had told Stephen as well, but with the extra information that Kathryn had decided to dump him.

Stephen had not known about Kathryn playing away with Rupert. She had carefully kept it a secret. It was something she did during the holidays. She would take Seb up to Keillor to stay with his grandparents and clog it down to Surrey. She would e-mail Rupert regularly from work, and he would e-mail back from work. She had pretended that everything was alright between her

and Stephen. But it was all carefully planned and executed – the two-faced vixen!

Laura and Joby listened carefully. Joby had let Laura down nineteen years before, but that was entirely due to a coincidence of unfortunate circumstances, what the pilots call the Swiss Cheese Rule. Joby had been very young and innocent. The end result was positive in that the two of them had a son in whom they were both immensely proud. Christian was a month off nineteen but had the sense of a thirty-year-old. They had two more beautiful sons, but they were pampered six-month infants. Joby's other two sons were delightful and innocent young men.

The end result could not have been more different for Stephen. His love of his life had been two-timing him and ditched him for some overweight banker who looked and acted like a spiv. It had been so sudden. He remembered the journey back from France. He caught the train as he would not have got a flight until the next afternoon. Seb had looked after himself that previous evening and taken himself to school. He had not said a thing about it to anyone. There were the phone calls and the solicitors' letters. He knew they would come, and to protect Seb, Stephen looked to send him to a boarding school. The independent schools were out of the question. Even though Stephen had a well-paid job, the fees were well beyond his reach. Besides, two years before, Seb had failed the Common Entrance exam. It was Stephen's parents who alerted him to Strathcadden Academy, and Mr Mitchell had found a place to squeeze Seb in as a waif and stray.

It had been no surprise that Seb had got mumps with the stress of it all. Stephen had always looked forward to being a grandfather. The mumps had caused Seb to be infertile. Seb had always had crushes on other boys; so did many others of his friends. Stephen did not mind one little bit that his son was openly gay and had a steady boyfriend. Kathryn had gone into

orbit when she had found out, and Rupert had made a stream of homophobic comments. One such message had been forwarded to the Police, and they had something to say about it to Rupert. He didn't do it again.

Laura had, of course, been let down far more by her parents who had not supported her when she needed them most. Her grandparents, Mr and Mrs Hayward, had along with her sister, Imogen. Still, life had been a struggle for her and Chris. However, Brian and Brenda Salway were victims of a pseudo-Christian sect that was based on a joyless puritanism based on hell, fire, brimstone and damnation. She and Chris had been reconciled once her parents had come up to Corscadden and were undergoing a careful religious detoxification programme. Their rehab was going well.

But there could be no reconciliation between Stephen and Kathryn Melhuish. While Laura's parents had been trapped, Kathryn had been as free as a bird and been planning on ditching both Stephen and Seb for at least three years and had been aided and abetted by Rupert. Rupert had been caught out at an early stage while having a tryst with Kathryn and he had to move out of the family home. For Kathryn, life was fun with Rupert. He took her on exotic holidays. He had alerted her to a well-paid job in a top practice, Robson & Gibbs, with its head office in Portsmouth. She could shop for shoes, clothes, and handbags. She regarded Stephen and Sebastian as utterly boring. Sebastian had got mumps and was now infertile. It was typical that he was gay and had a boyfriend. She never wanted to see them again, however much pain it would cause them.

“How did you find all of this out?” Laura asked.

“Her parents told me,” Stephen replied. “I tried to talk to them to see how I could get back together with Kathryn, so that Seb had a mum again.”

“What’s their take on it all?” Joby asked. This kind of thing was beyond him; he was much more comfortable with railway traction motors.

“They have taken sides, and it’s definitely not mine. They’re quite snobbish and told me that Kathryn had married beneath herself. They like Rupert, and like even more the fact that he is very wealthy. They told me that Kathryn could get far more out of life with him than me. They told me not to contact them again, nor should Seb.”

“How has Seb taken all of this?” Laura asked. She had to concentrate hard to make sure that she referred to Jordan as Seb to his father.

“He has been remarkably strong. He is a sensitive lad. I have tried to protect him as much as I can, but there is only so much I can take on my own. Mum and Dad have helped a lot.”

“Do you have anyone else?” Laura asked.

“No family as such. I was an only child, as is Seb. I have not got to see Seb as much as I would have liked. I have kept in touch through Skype and mobile. The thing is that my job takes me all over Europe and the Far East. I can be away for months at a time. We had a cottage in Keillor, but Kathryn cancelled the lease, and the owners are selling it. I must confess that this is the first time I have been to Corscadden since I dropped Seb off at Strathcadden Academy. It seems a very good school.”

“It is,” said Joby. “Our boys have certainly done well there.”

“So has Seb. He came on leaps and bounds when he met your Ewan.”

“Jordan, I mean Seb, comes here a lot. He is part of our family. He and Ewan are inseparable.”

“He talks a lot about Ewan. He tells me about how much he loves Ewan. It was quite funny when we saw Kathryn and Rupert a couple of weeks ago. Rupert was going on about how he hated gays. Seb had his rainbow bangle, and Rupert demanded what it was. So, Jordan lifted up his top and showed him the t-shirt that says *Sorry girls, I love boys*. You ought to have seen Kathryn. She was appalled. Rupert really started, and Jordan told him in no uncertain terms what he and Ewan did NOT do.”

“How do you feel about Seb’s orientation?”

“Intensely relaxed. How do you feel about Ewan?”

“Exactly the same. My dad reckoned he knew about Ewan’s orientation when he was six. I was slower off the mark. I reckoned he was when he was twelve. Ewan came out when he was fourteen. He wanted to shock his grandparents and failed totally.”

“Seb’s mother went into orbit when he repeated it. It was funny watching her reaction in the hotel. All these people were looking up over their papers and coffee. The thing is, she is so status conscious and has got even worse now she’s met Rupert.”

“Do you think there is any chance of Kathryn coming snivelling back to you?” Laura asked.

“Don’t think so, somehow. She doesn’t think she’s done anything wrong. Her view is very much along the lines: if it feels good, do it. She planned this carefully and cleverly. By the time I knew, she had done it. I keep on thinking that surely, I would have noticed something. Either she’s a very good actress or I am as thick as two short planks. I do have something on her, which I haven’t done anything about because I had hoped that we would get back together. She charged all her journeys to play away from home to her expense account. I’ll let her old employers know about it.”

“She doesn’t work there anymore,” said Joby.

“True. But they could forward it to the police.”

“How much did she sting them for?”

“About a couple of thousand over the three years.”

“I wouldn’t have thought they would be that interested. They would give her a caution and get her to pay it back.”

“Even so it would wrest a couple of grand from her. She wouldn’t like that. She also came up to Clematis cottage and took Jordan’s electric guitar and amplifier. She sold it along with his PlayStation and his racing bikes.”

“It seems rather mean, if you ask me,” said Laura. “I would have said it was theft.”

“That’s the way she is, I am afraid. Her view was that any presents that Seb got were really on loan from her. She gives with one hand and takes away with interest with the other. A suitable partner for a banker.”

Joby and Laura spent a pleasurable couple of hours showing their guest about Corscadden. Stephen Melhuish had got everything off his chest. If he said anything more, it would have been like a stuck gramophone record, and he didn’t want to bore his hosts with anything else. Seb had told him about his success as a rower. Stephen had met rowers at university. They all seemed rather bigger than Seb who was not exactly a muscleman. Stephen had never been surprised at Seb’s success as a cross-country runner, and a track athlete. He had been a successful junior racing cyclist, until... Don’t mention it again. But Ewan did not have a rowing physique either, nor did Chris from what he had seen of him. All of them were skinny. However, he was so proud of his son’s achievement and enjoyed

the walk along the river from the rowing club to Corscadden Bridge and imagined it for himself. He wished he had been there. Corscadden was a pleasant town, with a seemingly more vibrant atmosphere than Keillor. Keillor was typical of a pretty but sleepy country town of the Borders. When the trains were off, it almost died. As soon as the Great Central Line was restored, it had come back to life, but the pace of life in Keillor was slow, to say the least.

Stephen was intrigued to hear about the Corscadden Festival and Joby's late wife's part in setting it up. It seemed a rural version of the more famous Edinburgh Festival and its Fringe, with all sorts of pop-up events. He enjoyed hearing about Ewan's boyband, the *Kilted Spice Boys*. He was amused by the idea of the audience of teen girls swooning over the four boys. That all four of them were openly gay seemed not to matter.

They found themselves at Walker Bros, making their way to the restaurant. Christian was there to meet them. If he had a tail, it would have been wagging furiously.

“Hi Mum, hi Dad!” Chris’ greeting was different to his normal “Good afternoon, Sir, good afternoon, Madam.” It still meant everything to him to have two parents. He showed them to a table and gave them a menu. A couple of minutes later, a tall lanky youth appeared to take the order with Chris in support. Both were dressed in Walker tartan kilts, grey jackets, white shirts and blue ties, the house dress for young employees who were serving customers. They looked very smart. The lanky youth had a name-badge with Ryan Fleetwood on it. Stephen noticed that Chris had a similar name badge with Christian Salway on it. Having not heard about Chris’ story, Stephen was intrigued.

“How come Chris has a different surname to you?”

“It’s a long story,” said Laura. “Joby, you tell Steve the story.”

Joby told his guest about the conference of railway engineers at York University, and the boring old farts who went on about Stanier Black 5s and Type 4 diesels. A party in Fulford sounded much more exciting, but he hadn't reckoned on the poor taste of the event. His performance had been pitiful and humiliating. Nobody had known that the rubber product was defective.

"So don't tell Chris that I have told you the story," said Joby. "He's a bit sensitive about it. His little brothers had a more orthodox beginning."

Benjamin stirred in the pushchair. He was waking up and Laura fed him. And Daniel did the same.

"What about Ewan and Aidan?"

"As you know, I had a first wife, Mary, who passed away eighteen months ago. She hadn't been well for some time. She was taken ill on a conference in Switzerland and died a couple of days later. She was only forty-nine."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"It was a shock to us all. Aidan and Ewan had recently befriended Chris, and he was really a tower of strength to them. His early life was not easy, but he has a very sensible head on his shoulders."

"It shows. It certainly looks like that – the way he gets on with the customers."

"Mary was nine years older than me. She was a friend of Sarah, my sister. That's how she got to know me. She was quite a feisty girl when she was young – a bit of a tomboy in fact. When she was at uni, she was known as Scary Mary by the tutors. She could give as good as she got and even the professor was circumspect. She was notorious for her big bike, a BMW flat

twin. She got into a number of scrapes, including one with The Law. She last took it out ten years ago and got a speeding ticket. We've still got the bike. It's in the garage and that's where it's going to stay. I wouldn't take it out for all the beer in Cardean. Neither of the boys are interested in it, but it's a reminder of their mother."

"How did you get to know Laura?"

"I caught her on the rebound. I have a flat in Edinburgh where I stayed during the week. We had met at New Year. We met again. Her flat was close to mine, and she was very good to me. I won't go into it, but I found out that I was Chris' father."

"Did Mary know anything about it?"

"God no! I didn't either until I met Laura."

Laura added, "I don't think Mary would have been very pleased if she knew that her tomboy's toy-boy had been a naughty boy."

"It took two."

"Yes, I was a naughty girl as well. It was not an immaculate conception."

"Aidan looks very like you, Joby. Ewan looks quite different."

"Aidan does. He's the spit of me. Chris is Aidan with long blond hair. We called them The Twins, because their birthdays are 5 days apart in August. They are nineteen next month. But now we have real twins."

"And you are forty-one the day after tomorrow," Laura added, "going on about sixteen."

"Steve, do you want to stay for my birthday? You would be more than welcome."

“Of course. Thanks. It would keep my mind off things. So where does Ewan get his looks from?”

“He’s a male version of his mother. When Ewan was born, Dad said, ‘He’s a Fairbairn.’ He looks very like Mary’s brother. Aidan is quite shy, while Ewan is a little more out-going. Both are thoughtful, sensitive and caring.”

“Seb is always saying how gentle and caring Ewan is.”

Chris came up to the table to ask if they were enjoying their meal. He added, “Mum, Dad, don’t forget you’re modelling for the photo-shoot tomorrow.”

“Would we dare?”

“I’ve texted Aidy and Eejay to remind them. Jordan’s coming as well. He might as well do something useful.”

“Can I come and do something useful?” Stephen blurted out.

“Of course. I have had one of my middle-aged male models drop out this morning. You are photogenic, so you will do brilliantly.”

Stephen Melhuish had never thought of himself as a model. Chris went to attend to another of his customers.

“What have I let myself in for?” Stephen asked.

“Chris does all the photography for the store,” Joby replied. “It all goes up on the web. Dad used to have it all done professionally. It cost him a fortune. Somebody did it in-house. When he went, Dad asked Chris to do it. He’s very good. We all do the modelling. Mum and Dad do stuff for the older customer. We do it for the middle-aged, while Aidy and Eejay do it for the youngsters. Chris gets female friends from the school to help out. Oh, you don’t have a tattoo, do you?”

“No. Why’s that?”

“Chris will not use models who have tattoos, or who have very short hair.”

“Seb told me about how Chris did a fashion show.”

“It was brilliant,” Laura said. “He is very artistic. He should get a top grade in his Art Advanced Higher.”

“Dad’s grooming him to take over the business,” Joby added.

“Why didn’t you go into the business?”

“Dad didn’t think I would make it. My sisters, Jenny and Sarah, have all the business sense. They run the place. Dad is about to retire – at the end of October. He has been threatening to retire for several years now. He’s seventy-three. Mum’s seventy in October and they are going to have a real big bash with all their friends. Jenny and Sarah have almost completely taken over. He will still be there for advice, although he has promised not to stick his big nose in. I was keen on trains as a kid. I still am. I got into Physics, electricity, and electronics as a teen. My model trains are still there in Mum and Dad’s house. They still work. I was lucky enough to be sponsored by Dunalastair Engineering who do a lot with electric trains. I was sponsored to do research at Edinburgh University. Laura will tell you that I am good at electric motors, but not so hot on reproduction.”

“You’re right there – one out of ten.”

Chapter 3

Wednesday 29th July 2015

The following morning a minibus pulled into the drive at Brewster House. There was also a van which contained some of the clothes that were going to be modelled. Charles and Muriel Walker were already comfortably seated, and soon the rest of the Walker tribe was there. Christian was weighed down with his camera equipment. There was a lot of professional looking gear. As part of his Art Advanced Higher, he had completed a photography module and had learned how to use the plethora of kit that professional photographers use.

Due to the gender imbalance in the Walker tribe, three girl Caddies joined the party to model the clothes that would appeal to young female customers. One of these was Gemma Hammond, one-time Head Girl of Strathcadden Academy, but now an Auld Caddie like the rest. The others were Caitlin Ward and Sara Young, two other Auld Caddies. Benjamin and Daniel Walker were in their car seats. Having been well fed, changed, and with lots of attention, they did what most infants of nearly six months do; they fell asleep. They wouldn't take much part in the day's programme on this occasion. In later years they would thoroughly enjoy the attention, just like both their half-brothers had in previous years.

The scene for the shoot was near Inverluker, the gateway to the Kyle of Tonsil. The River Luker passed through a pleasant valley with steep wooded sides leading up to heather-clad hills that looked a typical Highland scene. It would give the clothes a theme of high summer in the West Central Highlands. It was one of those days in which all four seasons came at once. Tents were put up so that the models could change in privacy. In the early days of the shoot, there were no such facilities. Granddad was setting up the loo-tent.

Christian decided that Stephen Melhuish would look good in a kilt beside Dad.

“I have never worn a kilt before,” said Stephen.

“There is a first time for everything,” Joby replied. He couldn’t remember the first time he had worn a kilt – probably as a toddler.

Like Christian had many months ago, Stephen understood the feeling of freedom that the kilt gave. Today, Christian was in his jeans. They emphasised just how slight he was.

The main tent had an awning that sheltered everyone when play was interrupted by the occasional passing shower. Ewan was glad that Jordan was there when one such shower gave a lightning discharge that was succeeded a few seconds later by a long peal of thunder.

However, for most of the day, the sun shone brilliantly, and Chris had some wonderful lighting for his pictures. There were dramatic scenes as cumulonimbus clouds rolled in to bring showers and retreated up the valley towards Dallennan.

The Walker family was known to have next to no excuse to party. The restaurant had provided a wonderful picnic lunch that was enjoyed by all. There was tartan a-plenty for Chris to photograph, and he too changed into a kilt. They all appreciated the lambs-wool jumpers they were modelling along with the tartan.

During their time as Head Boy and Head Girl, there seemed to be a kind of chemistry between Christian Salway and Gemma Hammond that was beyond their duties. Chris had, however, held off after Gemma had mentioned her boyfriend, Shane, who lived in her village of Merton o’ Kenniebrig. Later in the year, she had discovered that Shane had been two-timing her

with a student at Cardean College. As far as Gemma was concerned, that student was welcome to him. He would quite likely do the same to her. Gemma had met her and found her to be an air-headed bimbo. Anyway, Merton o' Kenniebrig was an over an hour's drive from Corscadden, which was why Gemma was a weekly boarder at Strathcadden Academy. Shane was as thick as two short planks who could not say the word "proton", let alone "Cathode Ray Oscilloscope". Gemma was fascinated by Physics in exactly the same way as Shane was not. At least Chris had a vague idea what a proton was and got round cathode ray oscilloscope by saying "CRO".

Now that Shane had moved in with his girlfriend in Cardean, the coast was quite clear for her to start to pair bond with Chris. He was gentle, while Shane could be overbearing. He was slim and elegant, while Shane was a couch potato. He would certainly meet his match with his new bimbo in Cardean. She looked like a hippo and had a temperament to match. A love duel between Christian and Shane would be as mismatched as a battle between a slender mongoose and a bull buffalo.

"You chose a lovely spot to do this, Chris," Gemma said as her eyes caught Chris' gaze.

Chris smiled gently and replied, "They've used this spot for years. They used to come in Granddad's camper van and change there. One day somebody caught Uncle Jon enjoying a loo with a view and told him that a man of his age should know better. A copper came round and found Granddad in the open changing his kilt. Granddad organised tents the next year."

Gemma laughed. She said, "I know Mr Walker is Aidy's and Eejay's granddad, but how come he's yours as well?"

"The obvious way to answer that one is to say that Mum married Aidy's and Eejay's dad after their mum passed away. But it's not the whole truth. Their dad is my dad as well."

Gemma was looking as perplexed as Christian was when she was showing him the Physics equipment in the lab. “I’ll explain,” Christian replied. “Dad went to a funny party when he was at a conference. I was the result.”

“Very funny party, I should say,” Gemma replied. She was more familiar with Newton’s Laws of Motion than tomboys’ toy-boys being naughty boys.

“It was not an immaculate conception.”

“I always said you were Aidy with long blond hair. All the girls at school thought you must have been Aidy’s brother.”

“Don’t go round telling other Caddies. It will be all over the town in a day.”

“Chris, my lips are sealed,” Gemma replied. “I know as well as you do about nosy Caddies.”

“While I’m at it, you know that I am Jannie Brian’s grandson?”

“Well, knock me down with a feather! You have your mum’s colour, but she doesn’t look much like Jannie Brian.”

“No. She takes after Grandma, her mum. Aunt Imogen is more like Granddad.”

“Your dad doesn’t look that old, Chris.”

“He’s forty-one. He was twenty-one when he went to that party.”

“He looks quite a bit younger than Aidy’s Mum did.”

“There was nine years in it.”

“Dr Fairbairn looked after me when I was at school. I know she was Eejay’s mum.”

“Granddad says that Eejay is a pure Fairbairn. Uncle Alex is an older version of Eejay. What about your mum and dad?”

“Dad’s fifty-three. He works on oil rigs, so is away quite a lot. Mum is forty-five. She is the secretary for MacEachran Construction. My sister lives and works in Inverness. Did you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I was the only one, until I discovered how I was related to Aidy and Eejay. I now have little twin brothers, Benjamin and Daniel. They are nearly six months old, now.”

“Will they be Caddies?”

“Of course. Dad went to see the Headmistress at St Lawrence Kirk Primary. Eejay reckons that Craigie Boy will be Headmaster when Benjamin and Daniel go up to be wee Caddies.”

In the common room at Greatorex House, male Caddies were like black grouse in a lek. Gemma had always been like the female black grouse, moving around in a manner that suggested she was totally unimpressed. At the best of times, the pair bonding that resulted from the leks was, to say the least, limited. Instead, she had landed next to one who was well outside the lek and was pair bonding with him. She had talked to Tamsin a couple of days ago who wanted to lay her eggs in Aidan’s nest. Gemma wanted to lay her eggs in Christian’s nest.

Almost without noticing, the two young people were now holding hands and gently caressing each other.

It was getting on into the evening by the time the encampment was taken down and the equipment put away. The midges were starting to bite. Christian had several hundred images which needed to be whittled down to a few tens to adorn the website. One or two were easy to select for elimination, but the vast majority showed Christian Salway’s artistry with the

camera. The images were never deleted but stored in the company's archives.

The more routine fashion images were taken in a studio set up in the boys' noisy room above the garage at Brewster House, starting the next day. There it was all indoors. The noisy room was, in fact, a spacious apartment that formed an annexe. There was a large living room, which was the noisy room itself. It also had a small kitchen area where there were all the supplies that the models needed. There were two bedrooms, one for male models to change in, and one for female models. There was also a bathroom.

Thursday 30th July was Joseph Walker's forty-first birthday. However, he and Laura spent it doing the modelling in the noisy room. Benjamin and Daniel were never far away and were enjoying being the centre of attention in their pampered early infancy.

The clothes had been stored in totes in the garage below, and Joby was given strict instructions that he was not to use his noisy big-boy's toys because they didn't want a patina of oak dust over the samples. During the photo-shoot, a couple of representatives of Walker Bros' suppliers brought some of their wares to be modelled.

At lunchtime, the older models retired to the drawing room, while the younger ones went into the garden. Mostly they bounced on the trampoline at the far corner. Christian and Gemma spent theirs at the other end of the garden sitting on a swinging chair. There, they opened up fully to each other. Gemma had not known about Beckton-on-Sower, and when she did, she certainly regarded it as an intimation of Hell. She had not heard about the spiking of Chris' drink with ketamine and that shit whose name he had forgotten.

Her life story in Kenniebrig was nowhere as interesting, thank God. And thank God she did for watching over this beautiful and gentle young man to be delivered safely into her hands.

On Friday, the Fairbairns came, and they too added their contribution to the modelling session.

Christian was always careful to make a backup copy when he transferred everything to his laptop computer. It had never happened to him, but he had known it to happen to others when something had gone wrong. The thought of losing three day's photography work didn't bear thinking about.

Stephen Melhuish had never thought of himself as a model, but he was every bit as photogenic for a middle-aged man as Joseph Walker. He would get his parents involved in the next session as they too were elegant and appreciated beautiful clothing. He had almost completely forgotten about Rupert Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking at Glynn's Bank.

Aidan had noticed Chris and Gemma. "You are like Dad, Chris," he said. "You are a dark horse."

The following Tuesday, 4th August 2015, was the day that Caddies waited for in trepidation. Like all students across Scotland, they would find out their grades for Nationals, Highers, and Advanced Highers. Although Christian Salway, Ewan Walker, and Jordan Melhuish were confident that they had done their level best, there was always that slight doubt. Had they really answered the questions in the way that they should have? Just as they did the year before, the three of them found themselves in Greatorex House, tearing open the envelopes that contained the news.

It was good. Ewan had scored top grades for all subjects, including 100 % for German and 98 % for French. Mr Etherington and Mrs Learmont were thrilled. 95 % for English was amazing as was 92 % in History, and 90 % in Geography. Both Christian and Jordan had scored highly as well. Christian scored a Grade A in Art with 92 %, Grade A in English with 88 %, Grade A in Economics with 86 %, and Grade B in Spanish with 79 %. He had narrowly missed a Grade A. Jordan's score in French was A (89 %), German A (87 %), English A (81 %) and History B (76 %). Gemma too had scored top grades in Physics, Chemistry, Maths, and Engineering.

There were the usual whoops and screams of delight, with girls hugging each other in unrestrained joy. Some boys did as well. Most had broad grins on their faces. There were a few whose faces were tripping them up as they had bombed out. Their next step was either clearing, or Cardean College to re-sit. There were the predictable pictures of photogenic girls leaping in the air with their results. Glum boys represented those who had bombed out.

Chapter 4

Tuesday 11th August 2015

Christian, Ewan, and Jordan received the confirmation of their places at Edinburgh University. Ryan secured his place at Stirling. There were preliminary assignments. Jordan had a month's internship at Constructions Rhône-Rhin SA, having chosen an assignment to relate experiences of industrial French. Ewan went to work at a law practice that dealt with EU law in Edinburgh's New Town. Christian continued with his job at Walker Bros. He found it strange to be in Brewster House with just Mum, Dad, Daniel and Benjamin. During the day, the twins were farmed out to Grandma's crèche, while Laura was getting her feet under the desk as Senior Radiographer and Advanced Nurse Practitioner at Strathcadden General Infirmary. She was due to start full time at the beginning of October.

This job suited Laura down to the ground. There were no shifts, except in emergencies and a Saturday morning every month, but plenty of responsibility and pay to match. Although based at the Strathie, her job took her all over the West Central Highlands, which enabled her to see all sorts of places she had never heard of. All of them were pleasant. There was also time to do things properly; there was never the pressure that there was in some of the hospitals in the big cities. Most of the work was to patch up those who had had bad scrapes on the narrow roads of the area, or who had fallen off the hills. She also visited and got to know many of the doctors' practices that varied from single handed affairs in the deep countryside (or the middle of nowhere) to large practices of several partners in very swish premises. She had got to know quite a bit about Mary Fairbairn, who could be quite feisty at times, or even a "bloody difficult woman". All were shocked when she died so suddenly.

Christian spent half his day serving his customers at Walker Bros, and the other half sorting out the Walker Bros

website. The on-line shop had been Sarah's idea, and it was originally set up by an outside web-developer. However, having started at a reasonable price, they were getting greedy and pushing up the price to an astronomical level. Charles Walker decided it really should go in house. He was lucky that there was a keen young member of staff, Jonathan Clements, who knew his stuff about websites. Jonathan was an Auld Caddie, and ten years ago had been a waif and stray. Chris and Jon hit it off straight away. There was a lot of work to do, as the deadline was 1st September.

Charles Walker was winding down, in his words, so that he would finally retire at the end of October, which coincided with Muriel's seventieth birthday. He had intended to go in 2012 when he was seventy, but always had that feeling that something else needed to be done with Walker Bros. Jenny and Sarah were now running the show. The Inverluker store was up and running. It was now repaying the investment. He didn't want to end up being a backseat driver but wanted to be around to be able to help. He spent at least two hours every day on the shop floor serving his customers. He would miss them. Many of them he had known since he was a boy. He got a real sense of satisfaction in being able to provide them with something they really wanted to buy. He made sure that the goods were of good quality and provided excellent value for money. As he was a master tailor, his specialism was to provide exquisite bespoke tailoring to gentlemen, whether it was suits or full Highland regalia.

Charles' conversations with his customers had given him ideas of what new lines he would stock. Both Jennifer and Sarah would do the same, and they would discuss them at their weekly Monday morning meeting. Members of staff were empowered to do the same and encouraged to tell their boss about what they had picked up. Like his father and uncle before him, Charles prided himself that if it existed, Walker Bros could get it.

On Tuesdays, Charles always went in early. Walker Bros opened late on a Tuesday morning to allow for staff training. He did this not only to set an example, but to keep abreast of what developments there had been that he may have missed. On this particular Tuesday he had a sense of foreboding. He knew that experts from Riverside Networking Solutions were meant to be upgrading the Walker Bros computer systems. He had an uneasy relationship with this organisation. When computers had arrived at Walker Bros in the mid Nineteen Eighties, the machines were simple, and a local man provided the expertise. When the Synergy Consortium took over, they put in the latest stuff, with a bespoke software system that was too clever by half. It didn't work, and the hardware was none-too-reliable either. Just as well, for the company closed within a couple of months.

When Walker Bros resumed under old management, the old gear was set up again and continued reliably for another ten years. Eventually Charles and his management team realised that a new system was needed, and their antediluvian machines were pensioned off. A company from Cardean did the work and were very helpful. Nothing was ever too much trouble. They charged a fair rate for a good job. However, the owner of the company wanted to retire – who could blame him? – and the company was sold out in 2013 to Riverside Networking Solutions from Sunderland. As their fees went up, the quality of service went down, which considerably irritated Charles Walker.

It was hardly surprising that Charles Walker had a sense of foreboding, for when he got in, he found that his computer would not log in. He turned it off and restarted. A phone call from Jenny came, “Dad, there’s something up with the computers. Get a message around to all staff to log out of the computers and not to use them.”

This time his computer had started up and logged in. All seemed well with his desktop. He went to the e-mail and

immediately sent a whole staff e-mail telling everyone that there seemed to be a problem with the network. All staff should log-out and he would be on to Riverside Networking Solutions immediately. He sent the message. He felt momentarily satisfied he was ahead of the game.

Wrong. A message came up on the screen: *Thank you for sending that e-mail. You have been locked out. All computers are now locked and encrypted. The network has been locked. Your files have been encrypted and will be destroyed if a payment of 300 bitcoins per terminal is not paid within fourteen days.*

Charles Edward Walker was not one to swear. He thought it was undignified for a man of his age and status to have a mouth like a sewer. On this occasion, however, the air in his office was blue. He came out with words he thought he had forgotten, and words that he thought he never knew. Jenny and Sarah came through to see what the trouble was.

“There’s a silly bugger born every minute and I am one of them. I have just wrecked the network. I sent a whole staff e-mail, and I have infected every machine.”

“Dad don’t do anything except have a cup of coffee,” said Jenny. “We do three things. Firstly, tell all staff not to turn on their computers. The second thing is that we go onto emergency plan. Thirdly we cancel the training and brief the staff and get out all the old tills. We need to let Buchanan and Inverluker know.”

Fortunately, there was a very old computer that had no network connection. It still used *Windows 98* and had a copy of *Office 98*. It was connected to a printer. By some kind of miracle, both worked, and soon urgent memos were being printed off for the staff who were just starting to get into work. An urgent phone call went out to both Buchanan and Inverluker. However

early-birds had arrived and turned on their computers. Bad move. They too were on emergency plan.

Fortunately, Charles had always insisted Walker Bros should have a disaster recovery programme. Data were backed up. The old tills were still on the premises ready for the off in case the modern points of sale equipment went tits up. They all had fresh till-rolls and ink-tapes. Fortunately, the credit-card readers were not affected. If this wasn't going tits-up, Charles Walker didn't know what was, even though he found the phrase rather belonged to the farmyard. His granddad was a sheep farmer and knew that sheep had a death wish and could find ever more inventive ways of pegging it.

It was clear that somebody at Riverside Networking Solutions had opened an e-mail attachment and let out some ransomware while they were doing the upgrade. There was going to be an almighty rumpus. Charles Walker was thunderously angry, and the focus of his wrath was going to be Riverside Networking Solutions that supported the Walker Bros network. That said, he was a man of impeccable good manners, and despite his stress, he was nothing other than kind and supportive to all his staff who were going to have a couple of hard days at work.

Fortunately, the telephone network was separate from the computers. In his work with the Chamber of Commerce, Charles had heard about these very clever combined systems. He always had a lurking distrust of computer systems, so in Walker Bros the two were kept well apart. So, an hourly conference call to his store managers at Buchanan and Inverluker over landlines was a vital part of the emergency action plan.

By half-past eight, the old tills and manual dockets were set out in every department. Files of price lists had been distributed. The staff had been fully briefed and by the opening time at ten o'clock, everything was ready to go. Charles told his

staff “to look like swans, calm and serene above, even though paddling furiously below”. Not a thing was out of place as far as the customers could see.

Another hourly ritual that Charles Walker appreciated less was the call to Riverside Networking Solutions. The answerphone message that greeted him was said in a dead-pan Wearside female voice, “Welcome to Riverside Networking Solutions. We are not in the office at the moment, but your call is valuable to us. Please leave a message after the tone.” The tone of voice suggested that the call was anything but valuable. Charles left a message that they should contact him as a matter of extreme urgency.

The phone remained silent.

At about half past ten, he managed to get through to a young man called Milo. “At last,” he said. “I have been trying to get you from half past seven this morning.”

“Sorry, mate. We were up until late last night with a job.”

The slovenly manner of the young man irritated Charles even more. If he caught one of his employees addressing the customers in that way, a dressing down would be the least result.

“So, what can I do for you, mate?”

“I need to speak to Mr Bowcock as a matter of urgency.”

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Charles Walker, proprietor of Walker Bros, Kirkstoun Place, Corscadden. I need to speak to Mr Bowcock immediately about the upgrade work that Riverside Networking Solutions did on the Walker Bros network yesterday evening.”

“Kevin’s on holiday. He’s not back for three weeks.”

“He was meant to be doing the updating and upgrading work on our network.”

“He can’t have. He’s been on holiday for a week now.”

“So, who did it?” Charles Walker was doing a marvellous job in keeping calm and carrying on.

“What’s your name again?”

“Charles Walker of Walker Bros of Corscadden.”

“Never heard of you.”

“We have had an account with you for two years now, when you bought out Cardean IT Solutions.” Charles was wondering why these people had the word “solutions” in their name. They just seemed to produce problem after problem.

“Do you have an account number?”

“Yes. WB/325601.”

“Hang on, mate, I just need to put the computer on.”

Charles restrained himself from giving the man an earful about how he had got to work at seven that morning, and how all his staff were in before half past eight, ready for the day’s trading and thanks to this outfit, their systems had been damaged, and it was thanks to the efforts of his staff that the company would be trading as normal. His train of thought was interrupted by mutterings from his opposite number in Sunderland whose computer seemed to be taking for ever and a day to load up. In addition, the man’s password had been changed. Finally, he got there. “What was the account number again, mate?”

“Whiskey Bravo – stroke – 325601.”

The man seemed to be doing a lot of typing. “No such account, mate. You did say ‘Whiskey Bravo stroke? Had a wee dram?’”

“Yes, I did say that. You haven’t typed in the whole words?”

“What should have I typed in, mate?”

“Have you not heard of the radiophonic alphabet?” asked Charles who was by now thinking that he had fallen into some ludicrous comedy sketch at a fringe pop-up event at the Corscadden Festival.

“Sounds like a rock group to me.”

“Whiskey stands for the letter ‘W’, while Bravo stands for ‘B’. Stroke means a forward slash. Right there on your keyboard, next to the Shift-Key. Surely you should know that?”

“I’m new here... Ah, here’s your account. Yes, we did a job last night using remote access.”

“Good. We are getting somewhere. If Mr Bowcock didn’t do it, who was it that did the job?”

“No idea. Hang on – I’ll find out...” He put the phone down on the desk. Charles could hear him get up and say, “Conor, I’ve got this old codger on the phone going on about the Walker Bros job. Who did it?” Another voice said, “Marley. He’s not in yet. Tell the old codger he’s in a meeting.” Charles heard the receiver being picked up again. “He’s in a meeting and can’t be disturbed. Can I get him to ring you back?”

“I need to speak to him as a matter of urgency. I don’t think I am conveying how urgent it is. Could I speak to Mr Tanner?”

“Who’s he?”

“The proprietor of your company.”

“Oh, you mean Alex. He’s not in the office.”

“Can I speak to someone who can actually help me with this job you are meant to have done for my company last night?”

“Only Marley can do that. Is it urgent?”

“Urgent? You don’t even start to understand how urgent it is. All the computers you are meant to have updated and upgraded have completely failed. It is costing my business a lot of money. So will you please find someone who can help?”

“I’ll get Marley to give you a ring when he’s finished in his meeting.”

Milo put the phone down while Charles Walker was on the verge of apoplexy. Sarah came into the office, and said, “Did you get anywhere, Dad?”

“Absolutely nowhere,” Charles replied. “I need another coffee. If I caught any of our staff speaking to our customers like the way that young man spoke to me, I would sack them on the spot! The person I need is on holiday. Aren’t they always? The dimwit who did the upgrade is ‘in a meeting’, but I actually heard that he hadn’t got into work yet. How do people like that make their money?”

The phone remained silent.

At midday, Charles rang Riverside Networking Solutions yet again. The insufferable Milo answered, “I’ll see if he’s in mate...I mean back from his meeting.”

In the background Charles heard, “Marley, it’s that old Scots codger that I was telling you about.”

“Oh shit! Not him. How does he expect me to sort that stuff out; it’s from the Ark.”

Marley picked up the phone.

“Good afternoon,” Charles Walker started. There had been little that was good about the morning, and the afternoon promised to continue in the same vein. “I haven’t had the pleasure of speaking to you before, Marley, but I am glad I have managed to get hold of you, eventually.”

“So how can I help?” was Marley’s response in a tone of voice that suggested that helping Charles was the last thing he wanted to do.

“You can sort out my network that you worked on last night,” Charles snapped. “It is completely non-functional.”

“Which job are you talking about?” said Marley who was playing for time.

“Walker Bros in Corscadden.”

“I think I know. That’s the outfit that lives in the nineteenth century. They don’t open on a Sunday. They have a software build that is one step away from the abacus. You ought to see the boss...”

This was too much for Charles Walker who shouted, “I am the boss! I am Charles Walker, the son of Richard Walker, one of two brothers who founded this company. I had a perfectly good network until your goons did something to it. And I want someone who is not a goon to sort it out.”

Charles could hear Marley gulp, before he said, “I thought I was talking to your IT guys.”

“We don’t have any. That’s why we have a contract with your organisation, although, judging by your performance, I should have got my grandsons in to do it.”

“I’ll have a look to see what’s happening. Hold the line.”

As he waited, Charles heard Marley call, “Milo, Indo, come and have a look at this. It’s no wonder that the Scots geezer up there is hopping mad. It’s got the Wannaspit ware on it. How the hell did it get on there?” Charles could hear some furious tapping before he could hear, “Indo, you fuckwit, you know what you’ve done. That e-mail you sent round got caught up in the update. You know what you’ve done? Alex is going to kill you when he finds out.”

Charles heard the receiver being picked up again. “I think we know what’s wrong.”

“Are you going to sort it out?”

“We’ll need to come up to your premises.”

“When? I need it sorting out immediately. My network is a vital part of my business.”

“I’ll have a look in the diary. We’re very busy at the moment. The earliest we can do it is Monday 21st September. Because you are so far out, there will be a £1000 call out fee per engineer. There will be three of us, after that it will be £500 per machine...”

“WHAT?” yelled Charles Walker. “Do you mean to tell me that because of your company’s incompetence I am going to be hit with a bill for £53000?”

“We’re not a charity, you know. It’s going to be a lot of work, and it will take five days at least. In the meantime, you can write things down on bits of paper.”

“Is Mr Tanner there? I need to speak to him.”

“Sorry, mate. He’s away at the moment. Can I give him a message?”

“Yes. I am struggling to remain polite and professional in the face of what could do irreparable damage to my company because of sloppy practice. I would like to talk to him as a matter of urgency. Therefore, please would you be so kind as to ring him and ask him to ring me as a matter of urgency. My phone number is 01781 46 2525.”

“Oh, a landline. How twee!”

“Yes, it is a landline. It is perfectly good, and Mr Tanner and I will be able to have a perfectly good conversation on it. Good afternoon.”

Jenny and Sarah had come into their father’s office, partly to hear what, if any, developments there had been with Riverside Networking Solutions, and to ensure that their father didn’t have a seizure.

“How have you got on Dad?”

“Nowhere, I am afraid, but I know where I am going to go with this. I have asked Alex Tanner to ring me and if I could get hold of him, I will wring his neck. He has employed some utter imbeciles called Marley, Indo, and Milo. The conversation I have had sounded like something of a parody of a stand-up show. If I don’t hear from Tanner in an hour, I shall be on to Derek Yeoman next door. They can’t come for seven weeks. Do you know that they have quoted me 53 grand to sort this out? Even if we lose, I reckon Derek’s fees would be half that. They were like cheap chavs. I wouldn’t pay them with used sales dockets. I have half a mind to get one of Aidan’s or Ewan’s mates in to have a go.”

“Dad, that’s a brilliant idea. You know how good some of the kids are with computers.”

“Before I do anything else, I am going to have a bite to eat. After that I’m going to remind myself what this is all about – my customers.”

Charles Walker was as good as his word. As well as lunch, he had a pleasant couple of hours with his customers in the tailoring department. He was well away from his back-office worries. He asked Christian and Ryan if they knew of any of their friends who knew how to do computers. The immediate thought was Liam Cosgrave. He knew everything about computers. Ryan got out his mobile, and rang his pint-sized friend, and said, “Hey, Mouse, Mr Walker at Walker Bros needs you and needs you now!”

“Ryan, are you taking the pee?”

“No. He needs you to sort out his computers.”

“What me? Is this a wind-up? Is Mr Walker there?”

“Yes. I will put him on to you.”

“Good afternoon, Mr Cosgrave. I am Charles Walker, and I own Walker Bros. We have had some problems with our network. I have them supported by a company in Sunderland, but they have messed it up. I overheard one of them say something about Want to Spit. It has got onto our network and crippled our system. The company say they can’t get out for seven weeks. Could you help? I will pay you, of course.”

“I know what it is. It’s called the Wannaspit Trojan. It’s ransom ware and luckily, it’s easily removed. I’ll come down straight away. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Liam Cosgrave was as good as his word. A diminutive young man who looked rather younger than his seventeen years, he looked somewhat out of scale to his lap top.

“Firstly, Mr Walker, have you backed up your data?”

“Yes. We did our last back up last night before Riverside Networking Solutions messed everything up. We are on manual systems at the moment. Roger has brought down his laptop, and we will put everything onto a spreadsheet at the end of the day. Fortunately, he has a copy of the software we use.”

“That makes it a lot easier. Unencrypting the data can take a long time. I will need to re-install your business software, as the Trojan will have wrecked it. Is that alright?”

“Of course. Do whatever you need to do. You can access any part of the premises. If anywhere is locked, let someone know and they will let you in. Many thanks for coming so quickly. I really do appreciate it.”

“Mr Walker, could I borrow some of your staff? If I can show them what to do, we’ll get the job done quicker. How many machines have you got here?”

“I have about a hundred here, thirty at Buchanan, and twenty-five at Inverluker.”

“I think the best place to start is with the main server. Do you have a system password?”

“Riverside will have it. Come up with me to the office. I think they will give me a hard time about it, and I don’t want my customers to see.”

“Actually, I can get around it, and change it, so that all machines use the same one.”

Five computer literate staff members, including Christian and Ryan were soon up in the server room (once a small bedroom when the premises was a town house), and Liam got to work on his case. It involved tracking down the offending software and deleting it.

“When was the anti-virus last updated? It says here it expired in 2012.”

A call to the provider confirmed Liam’s worst fears. The subscription lapsed in July 2012. This did not please Charles Walker one little bit, as he had paid a large sum of money every year to Riverside precisely for that purpose. Five minutes with the company’s credit card ensured that that problem was sorted. However, the current system had become riddled with viruses.

“Mr Walker,” said Liam, “I think we will need to wipe everything clean and start again.”

“Do whatever you need to do. Could you write a short report for me?”

“Yes. These pros seemed to have made a real mess here.”

So, the work started, firstly with Liam coaching his friends on how to get rid of the Wannaspit Trojan. This would enable the hard drives to be wiped clean. The machines still used Windows XP. There was the company’s original copy available which Liam copied onto five flash-drives. Next there was the anti-virus software to install, before installing the company’s data-base software.

“It’s going to take a while,” said Chris. “How long can you spare?”

“Don’t worry about me,” replied Liam. “I only live round the corner. I’ve told Mum this is going to be a big job.”

All the staff at Walker Bros stayed on well after closing time, with Charles Walker and Roger Hewitt, his General Manager, putting all the transactions onto the one functional copy of the database. Once the server was right, Liam’s little team started work on the other machines.

All the staff worked late for the rest of the week. For Christian, this was a taste of what he would be expected to do when he took over the running of Walker Bros. He just got on with it, as did the others. It took the rest of the week to sort out the entire network, including trips out to Buchanan and Inverluker. However, the staff at Walker Bros found that their system worked far better than it had for a couple of years. It could now do things that they had forgotten it could do.

Liam's report on the state of the system as maintained by Riverside Networking Solutions was excoriating. There was a menagerie of malware that had been picked up which had been slowing the system down and reducing the functionality of the company software. The updates had been handled incompetently, while the upgrades had achieved the opposite effect.

Jenny and Sarah asked Liam if he could look after the company's networks on a regular basis. Charles brought up the problem in his weekly legal health check with Derek Yeoman in Gordon Morton Solicitors. Derek Yeoman's advice was to get hold of Alex Tanner and tell him that his company was in serious breach of contract, and that the contract should terminate forthwith.

Finally, at the end of trading on Saturday, Walker Bros was functioning normally. All the old tills were put back into the stock rooms. New till rolls and ink tapes were ordered. The disaster plan had worked. No sales had been lost. Fortunately, the on-line shop had been set up on a separate computer, and the Buchanan branch had been able to process the orders. That week Charles, Jenny, and Sarah set about with great energy to sack Riverside Networking Solutions and find someone else to do the work. Smart-ass young computer professionals did not refer to Charles Walker as an old codger.

Liam Cosgrave had done a fantastic job, but he was going to university to do computer studies. Another three years and he would be back, and they would happily employ him to take on the IT management. In the meantime, he would come back at weekends to do any work. In the more immediate future, Christian Salway and Jonathan Clements had to get the website ready for the deadline, which was still 1st September. Christian's preliminary assessment at uni would be on the importance of disaster planning for businesses.

Chapter 5

Monday 17th August 2015

Christian Salway was glad that Walker Bros was not open on a Sunday. By the end of Saturday, he was all in. Many people wondered why Walker Bros didn't trade on a Sunday. Now he knew the reason why. He had had four late nights during which he had worked until gone midnight and was back at work before eight. On Saturday he had driven Liam and the team to Buchanan before going on to Inverluker. It was well into the evening when they got home on Saturday. He had intended to go to Edinburgh on the train after work and meet with Aidy to go to a couple of gigs at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on the Sunday. Instead, he didn't even get changed out of his work clothes before he flopped down next to his mother on the sofa and fell asleep. The next day he spent much of the day crashed out, with one or other of his baby brothers in his arms.

On Monday morning, as he walked down Priestfield Avenue into town, he noticed young people in brightly coloured sweatshirts or in blue blazers, green jumpers, and the familiar kilt (Douglas Blue Modern). The Autumn Term had started already. Some of the Wee Caddies looked like badly wrapped parcels, but they would grow into their sweatshirts and kilts. Another couple of years, the kilts would be too short. It reminded him of how his kilt was tailored for a fourteen-year-old as he was so skinny. Therefore, lengthwise it was a little short. The kilt he was wearing for work was the same.

Many of the older students heading for Strathcadden Academy called out cheerily, "Hi Chris!"

Christian felt distinctly odd. He was not going into school. He thought of the current bunch of prefects, and his successor as head boy, Daniel Taylor. He thought of Gemma's successor as head girl, Tamsin Heady. He thought of the two of them introducing the Wee Caddies to the school. Mr Mitchell

and Mr McEwan would be busy welcoming the students back. The prefects would be doing their duties. He thought of Miss Tyrell in the art room in Jordon House. She had been an inspirational teacher and his love and skill for art had deepened in the eighteen months he had been there. Christian wondered what it would have been like if he had started as a Wee Caddie, rather than a waif and stray. He didn't want to think back to The Grange School in Beckton.

In another six weeks, Chris would be at Edinburgh sharing Dad's flat in Marchmont with Aidy, Eejay, and Jordan. Another three years and he would be full time at Walker Bros learning the ropes. Another eleven years, Daniel and Benjamin would be Wee Caddies. Christian would be thirty. Eejay had said that Craigie Boy would be Headmaster. He thought about Mr McEwan. He would be in his seventies.

He thought of Gemma. He had her in his mind's eye. She was slightly taller than him, and was typical of people of the area, i.e., she was slim with long legs. Her hair was cut quite short, quite a bit shorter than his. Her face had a slightly boyish look to it. She had come out running with him just before the crisis at Walker Bros. She was a good runner, and the sight of her running sent pleasurable feelings through Christian. He was falling in love. Maybe in eleven years they would have their own little brood.

As he passed St Lawrence Kirk, his eyes strayed over to the Cemetery behind the church. Its neat rows of memorials testified to the generations of people who had lived, loved, worked, brought up families, and died in this remote but truly beautiful corner of Scotland. There was a large section of previous residents who were under-represented, the tens of hundreds of young men who had been slaughtered in the mud of The Somme and of Passchendaele. Now he was into Kirkstoun Place. It looked like as if a bit of Edinburgh's New Town had

been taken as a cutting and rooted there. There was a square of eighteenth-century town houses as well as the Crown Hotel. In the square, in a large space surrounded by iron railings stood St Columba's Church. The trees gave dappled shade in the morning sunshine. On the other side there stood the row of town houses that housed Walker Bros. The ground floors had housed a range of shops. These had been knocked together over the last hundred years or so. When Richard and Raymond Walker took over the block, the ground floor proved inadequate for their needs, so they had taken over the floors above. At one point in the fifties, it had been suggested that the old houses should be demolished, and a brand-new department store be built on the site. Both brothers saw the artist's impression drawn up by the architect and politely told him that no one would forgive them for putting up that carbuncle in a much-loved part of the town.

Christian had seen what the architects had done in Beckton and Carlsborough. Beckton had been a fine Georgian town on the main coach road to the North. By the time the architects had finished with it, there was very little of architectural merit left. Instead, there were ugly square buildings of the nineteen fifties and sixties that surrounded a wide dual carriageway road. Even the historic Town Hall that stood on arches in the middle of this thoroughfare had not survived. Despite listing as of being of considerable historic interest, it was demolished to make way for a large crossroads and a complex set of traffic lights. The Queen's Hotel, a fine Georgian building was demolished to make way for a multi-storey car park which still dominated the Beckton skyline. In Carlsborough, there had been few buildings of merit. The modern buildings that had replaced them had no merit whatsoever and rapidly became tatty as they weathered.

Just outside Walker Bros was the main crossroads in Corscadden where Dallennan Road, Cardean Road, Fife Road,

and Buchanan Road met. There had been plans in the nineteen sixties to demolish the buildings opposite Walker Bros to widen the A825. This included the old Corscadden Grammar School which now served as the library and community centre. This had parts that had been built in the Sixteenth Century. Fortunately, sense had prevailed. When the Great Central Line had been closed, a large motorway was to be built on its track-bed, which would have taken the traffic off the A825. Instead, a large section of the town that was near the old railway would have gone to accommodate the motorway. That plan had been ditched, and the railway was reopened after twenty years of abandonment. Many lorries were taken off the A825 which eased the traffic congestion in the town. In short, Corscadden had survived the architectural ravages of the latter part of the Twentieth Century completely intact.

As he crossed to Walker Bros at the traffic lights, Christian could see a large number of Caddies crossing Corscadden Bridge from the station and turning into Dennistoun Avenue. Granddad would be busy with John the Jannie with his wee...ae...vannie. Grandma was driving her bus that brought distant Caddies from far-flung villages like Merton o' Kenniebrig. She had got to know the Caddies and woe betide any that tried anything on.

Christian would spend the morning waiting on at the restaurant, and the afternoon on the website with Jon. The first version had been lost, but all the files had been backed up.

For Charles Walker, wrath was something that was best delivered cold. He had a lot to be thunderously angry about, for his company had been put at risk by the incompetence of a vital service provider. It was a mercy that his customer database had not been hacked, for there was every risk that it could have been,

with the consequent fines. His anger was not directed at his staff – he had been fulsomely grateful for all the hard work that they had put in over the last few days under very trying circumstances – but at Alexander Tanner, the proprietor of Riverside Networking Solutions from Sunderland. However, he knew the wisdom of the axiom, “Make sure your words are sweet. One day, you may have to eat them.”

Charles’ wrath was stoked up somewhat by a letter that arrived that morning from Riverside Networking Solutions. Not only was there a bill for the “upgrade” work of £1550 + VAT, but also, they had charged him for all the phone calls that he had made on the Tuesday, at a rate of £100 per hour + VAT. There was also a letter stating that Riverside Networking Solutions would attend Walker Bros premises on Monday 21st September at 09.00. A call out fee of £1000 + VAT per employee was payable, and a fee of £500 + VAT per machine would be charged. To confirm the booking, would Walker Bros kindly forward a non-refundable deposit of £3000?

In all his years as proprietor of Walker Bros, Charles Walker had sacked very few of his employees. In fact, he could count the occasions on the fingers of one hand. It was never pleasant, but what they had done was completely outrageous. The actions of Riverside Networking had fitted into this category. They charged tens of thousands a year to look after the IT network, and they had not only failed abysmally, but they had also ripped him off. Now they were charging him £100 + VAT per hour to call him “mate” and to refer to him as “an old codger”. He decided that he would get the phone call to Mr Tanner over and done with. Afterwards he would reward himself with a couple of hours with the customers. The first attempt was met by, “Mr Tanner is in a meeting.” So, Charles wrote a whole staff e-mail to thank his staff:

Dear Colleague

I want to thank you all for all your hard work in keeping things going during the recent problems with the computer network. Our computers are supported remotely by a company in Sunderland. On Monday evening they carried out an “upgrade” that rendered our system useless. I shall be taking this up with the owner of the company.

I am very grateful for the way all staff rallied round to ensure that trading was not affected. I would especially like to thank Liam Cosgrave, who, although not one of our colleagues, identified the problem and reconditioned all our computers. He gave many hours of his time to do this for us. He also trained some of our younger and more tech-savvy colleagues to sort out the problem. The result of this is that our system is working fully. Many colleagues tell me that it's working far better than it did before.

Some colleagues have asked me at times why we bother having all the old tills and sales dockets as a back-up. After these last few days, I think the answer is clear, in that there has been no adverse effect on our trading. I would also add that your hard work and dedication, including many hours of overtime, was vital in ensuring that we were able to continue to serve our customers without any interruption.

With kindest regards

Charles Walker

Once he had pressed the SEND button, Charles rang Riverside Networking Solutions again. There was the usual menu of items spoken in a dead-pan female Wearside voice that reminded Charles of a bored priest reading out the Litany to a totally disinterested congregation. When he got to speak to a real human, the reply was the usual “Hello, can I help you?” in a tone that suggested that it was the last thing the receptionist wanted to do.

“Good morning,” Charles started affably. “May I speak to Mr Tanner?”

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Charles Walker of Walker Bros in Corscadden. I need to speak to Mr Tanner as a matter of urgency.”

There was a pause and some muffled conversation about Alex speaking to a Scottish geezer. There was a distinct “Tell him to bugger off. I’m too busy!”

“I’m sorry, Mr Walker, Mr Tanner is in a meeting with an important client.”

“Well, I am an important client. I pay thirty thousand a year to your company. I need to speak to Mr Tanner, and I need to speak to him now.”

“I have said that he is in an important meeting.”

“He isn’t actually – he said, and I heard it, ‘Tell him to bugger off. I’m too busy.’ So will you kindly ask him to come to the telephone?”

“He won’t like it.”

“Well, I don’t like sitting here being told to bugger off. He is going to like it even less when I put things into the hands of my solicitor. So, for the third time of asking, will you please get Mr Tanner to answer the telephone to me? Please will you do it now?”

In the background, Charles Walker could hear the receptionist speaking to Mr Tanner, mentioning words like solicitor. Tanner’s reply was short, explosive, and vulgar.

“Hello Mr Walker,” said Mr Tanner, “how can I help you? You realise that I have had to break off an important meeting with one of my most important clients?”

“I am very sorry I have done this,” replied Mr Walker doing a sterling job of not telling Tanner that he was a lying spiv. “However, I, too, am an important client of yours, and I am telling you now that I am an important ex-client of yours. I am telling you now that I am dismissing Riverside Networking Solutions from the contract you hold with Walker Bros of Corscadden.”

“You can’t do that!”

“I can. I have spoken to Mr Derek Yeoman of Gordon Morton Solicitors of Corscadden. I can also sue you for the damage that you have done to my company during the botched upgrade work you did on Monday to Tuesday last week.”

“You can’t do that. The work was done, wasn’t it? We did the work on Monday evening. It worked fine.”

“So fine that it infected my entire network with the Wannaspit ransomware.”

“That won’t have come from my employees. One of yours did it. Perhaps they opened an e-mail that they shouldn’t.”

“I am sorry Mr Tanner, but the network logs show that the Wannaspit was added to the network during the upgrade.”

“It can’t have. Kevin Bowcock did the work. It’s on the service sheet. He’s one of my best engineers. He would never have allowed anything like that to get mixed up with an upgrade.”

“He didn’t, you know. He’s on holiday until the end of next week. The work was done by another of your employees called Marley.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I was told that Mr Bowcock was on holiday. He was off the week before last, last week, and next week. Surely you know when your key members of staff are on holiday?”

“If Mr Bowcock wasn’t here, the work shouldn’t have been done.”

“Well, it was, and it ruined my network. Do you have members of staff called Marley, Indo, and Milo?”

“Yes. What is that to you?”

“The fact that I overheard a conversation between Marley and Indo in which Marley called Indo a very rude word which I don’t use with my staff. Indo had forwarded an e-mail which had the Wannaspit ransomware.”

“How come you were listening in to conversations between members of my staff?”

“I couldn’t miss it. The phone was put on the desk, and I heard everything, including calling me an old Scots codger and a geezer. I would never tolerate any of my staff saying that about one of my customers. And I haven’t finished yet. I utterly object to being addressed as ‘mate’. I am NOT Milo’s mate. His demeanour was, to say the least, slovenly.”

“That can’t be right. I expect all my staff to be very professional with my customers.”

“Perhaps while the cat’s away, the mice come out to play. Mr Tanner, I am not satisfied with the urgency with which you are dealing with this. I do not consider a wait of six weeks to have you come up to fix my network as remotely acceptable. Nor do I accept a bill for £100 + VAT an hour for being told I am an old codger, and to be addressed as ‘mate’.”

“We’re very busy and you are a long way away from us.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry. We got the work done locally – a friend of my grandsons, if you really want to know.”

“You’re not allowed to do that. You are in breach of contract. How did he get into the system?”

“He used the password.”

“He had no right to that.”

“He had every right. You don’t seem to understand that my network was non-functional last Tuesday. My staff had a lot of extra work to do. They work hard enough as it is, without all the extra work because your goons had destroyed my computer network. And you haven’t been maintaining it properly even before this happened.”

“What’s the evidence?”

“I’ll share the report that was written for me. You will understand it better than I do. I am a mere tailor and shopkeeper, not a computer expert.” Charles Walker read out the menagerie of malware that had been picked up.

“You’re making it up!”

“How can I make this stuff up? I know little enough about computers as it is. By the way, your engineers think that my system is one step up from an abacus. Their words, not mine. What I do know is that security software has to be kept up to date. We have paid you to ensure that it is, but our copy was three years out of date. Can you explain that to me please?”

“You have no right to allow a kid to access any network that we are responsible for. You are in breach of your contract. I will be speaking to my solicitor with a view to suing you.”

“The point, Mr Tanner, is that this seventeen-year-old has repaired our system and it is fully functional, unlike the state it was left in for us on Tuesday morning. He had to reinstall everything, and he had five of my tech-savvy staff working with him. If I receive a solicitor’s letter on your behalf, I guarantee you right now that I will countersue for compensation for putting my company at an unacceptable risk. Fortunately, we back up our data. We also have a back-up plan.”

“Bully for you!”

“Mr Tanner, I really don’t think you understand about customer service. If one of my customers is displeased with our service, we do everything to put it right to the customer’s satisfaction. A satisfied customer may come back. A dissatisfied customer certainly will not. And we at Walker Bros are definitely in the latter category. I have found you very similar in your approach as your junior employees whose manner was akin to a cheap chav.”

“Are you calling me a chav, Mr Walker?”

“No, I am not. I am simply observing that your attitude to customer service is, to say the least, rather lacking. To assure the future success of your business, you will need to work on that particular area. This is advice that I am giving you for free, with fifty-five years of experience. You are free to heed it or ignore it. I won’t know as my company will have nothing more to do with yours. As I have said, I will confirm this in writing and will advise my solicitor so that he will be aware of the action you propose. Good morning.”

Charles Walker was as good as his word and dictated a letter to be sent to Riverside Networking Solutions, with a copy to Derek Yeoman at Gordon Morton Solicitors. The following two hours with the customers were rather therapeutic.

Chapter 6

Early September 2015

Christian and Jon had worked hard on the website, putting in many hours in the evening and the weekends. It was now ready to go before the management team for final approval and signing off. The initial feedback was very positive. Chris and Ryan had shown their creative skills to good effect and Jon had got it all into effective webpages. Now Christian had three days off.

Aidy and Chris had their joint nineteenth birthday on Thursday 27th August 2015. They spent the day quietly at home, doing a 10 k in the morning. In the late morning, Aidan drove them to Merton o' Kenniebrig to pick up Gemma. In the car they planned what they would visit at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. This was the first time that Chris and Aidy had met Gemma's parents beyond chance encounters. Iain Hammond worked on an oilrig. He did two weeks on and two weeks off. Janet Hammond was company secretary for MacEachran Construction. Eleanor Hammond worked in a bank in Inverness. They were all there when Chris and Aidy pulled up in the Fiesta.

The Hammond family took to Christian and Aidan immediately. Christian had served them in the Restaurant at Walker Bros, and they were impressed at his professional manner. He was more than a Saturday boy. They had often wondered about the Walker family. Now they had met Aidan. They didn't know that Christian Salway was a Walker but had noticed the strong similarity between the two boys. They had lunch, and Gemma showed Aidan and Christian the model railway she had built in the top of the house. Ponies were not for her. Dad had bought a pony for his daughters some years ago. Ellie took to him immediately, but Gemma fell off painfully and decided not to go anywhere near a horse again. Ellie had become an

accomplished horsewoman. Gemma liked to do things with her father. She was adept at anything mechanical and electrical. She was a good woodworker. She was something of a tomboy.

Later on in the afternoon, Chris drove back to Corscadden. Gemma sat in the front seat with her hand on Chris' thigh. He enjoyed wearing his casual kilt, and feeling the physical contact with his girlfriend gave him a feeling of contentment. Aidan was thinking about dark horses.

The Twins' birthday was a quiet family affair in Brewster House, with a few friends as well. Ewan had finished his internship in Edinburgh, and Jordan had come home from his work experience at Constructions Rhône-Rhin SA. Ryan had come over from Foster Crescent, all of six minutes' walk away. This time Mum and Dad had done the cooking. Christian still felt immense pleasure at having Mum and Dad. He also felt immense pleasure having Gemma snuggled up to him. They were pair bonding.

At the end of the evening, after everyone had gone home, Gemma went upstairs to the guest room. She whispered to Christian, "Come up with me, Chris."

"What would your Mum and Dad say?"

"They don't mind. Ellie did the same with her boyfriend. They did it themselves. What about your mum and dad?"

Chris smiled. He knew exactly what had happened when Mum and Dad had had their first encounter, so they couldn't talk. Anyway, Chris was not into that kind of shenanigans. He warned Gemma about the Jack-and-Jill nature of the family bathroom. They were snuggled together in bed, having some sweet pillow-talk before Chris went quiet and his hand started to twitch.

Gemma had been waiting for this moment for several months now, ever since she had found that Shane was two-timing

her. He thought it was perfectly acceptable, and he would stalk her until he got her. He had wanted to go beyond the limit. A quiet word from Dad had put an end to that. Shane had learned in no uncertain terms that stalking was illegal, so it had better stop and Shane should never come anywhere near Kenniebrig again, if he knew what was good for him. In a stand-off between a couch potato and a burly oily, there would be no contest. Neither Mum nor Dad had liked Shane, and Gemma knew they were right.

Chris was different. Mum and Dad knew that Gemma had an eye for the beautiful young employee of Walker Bros. She had often told them how she wanted to lay eggs in his nest, to use Tamsin's expression. They had seen him as head boy at Strathcadden Academy and heard him speak. They had seen the fashion-show the year before and thoroughly enjoyed it. They knew of his success as a cross-country runner and were genuinely impressed to see him as a competitive rower.

Now Chris was next to her. His breathing was slow, and he occasionally twitched. He looked so beautiful asleep. She heard Aidan, Ewan, and Jordan coming upstairs chattering excitedly. They went into the bathroom to do their ablutions together, as usual. She had already experienced *The Colossus* and its pairing with *The Cloudburst*. Both were aptly named. Chris was nineteen, she was seventeen, eighteen in October. She wanted a quiet party with her friends and Mum and Dad. Chris would be there, of course. Then Chris rolled over towards her, and his long hair flopped over his face. She moved it so she could see his face. Like the rest of him, it was smooth, with hardly the faintest wisps of fine facial hair. She didn't notice Aidy peek round the door. A deep sense of contentment flowed over her. She had a feeling from the earliest days that Chris was going to be her Mr Right, and this was going to be the first of many tens of thousands of nights together. Not immediately, of course. She had a room in Pollock Halls, while Chris was going to stay with

Aidy, Eejay, Ewan and Jordan in a flat in Marchmont. She would find out where it was tomorrow. Then she heard Joby and Laura dealing with Daniel and Benjamin, giving them their midnight feed. It would be the same for them when her eggs hatched.

Chris and Gemma woke up the next morning to the sounds of ablutions in the bathroom next door and *The Colossus*. Gemma watched Chris get out of bed to go to the bathroom. As usual, he wore sports shorts and a T-shirt in bed rather than pyjamas or his birthday suit. They cuddled again before they got dressed and went down to breakfast.

“Well, here comes our dark horse,” said Aidy.

“Just jealous, Aidy,” Chris replied. He looked at his father who knew it was best to say nothing. He didn’t want to be reminded that nearly twenty years before, he had come out of a girl’s bedroom, having put on his trainers but not his jeans and fallen asleep in the kitchen totally rat-arsed. Unknown to either of them there had been a conception that was not in the least bit immaculate. The owner of that bedroom was now about to go to work and was pouring coffee from the percolator. The six-month old products of Joby’s second assignation with her were now sitting in their high chairs looking around and enjoying all the attention.

Later that Friday morning Christian, Gemma, and Aidan caught a train down to Edinburgh. Chris had intended to go to the Fringe a couple of weeks before but had cancelled his trip as a result of the extra work caused by the Wannaspit ransomware. Now it was the last opportunity that year to go to the Fringe with its variety of zany shows. Dad’s flat in Marchmont was a great place for them to stay.

While all of them were quiet people, they delighted in the absurd. There was plenty of that on offer. As well as the usual acts of people painted silver from top to bottom, jugglers, and

other street performers, there were shows that varied from a comedian who described eating chillies on live television, to political satire that lampooned right-wing politicians who took themselves so seriously, wanting to take Britain out of the European Union. Chris, Gemma, and Aidy hadn't laughed so much for ages. (Chris and Gemma didn't dare laugh when Mr Mitchell smashed his presentation at the end of June.) On Saturday evening, the gigs they wanted to go to were all full up, so they went to a classical concert, where there were plenty of seats. It was a contrast to the raucous comedy that they had seen earlier, but enjoyable just the same. There was an atmosphere of lively joy about the place with thousands of young people out for a good time. Time went quickly as they were enjoying themselves so much.

Gemma rang her parents (who were just going up to bed) when they got to the flat. Dad told her some good news. A letter had arrived with the results of the final interviews she had had with Dunalastair Engineering in Corscadden.

"Chris," she screamed with delight as she put down her mobile, "Dunalastair have selected me for sponsorship through Edinburgh University! Do you know what this means?"

"A celebration!" Chris replied.

Aidy got out a bottle of white wine and some nibbles, before ordering an Italian take-away to be delivered to the flat. The Pizzeria was just around the corner, so the courier was there in ten minutes. It was well after midnight before the three young people went to bed, with Chris and Gemma falling to sleep in each other's arms. Aidy was thinking that it was time that he had a girlfriend. His chat-up lines left something to be desired; the girls would start telling him about their boyfriend at home, or even their girlfriend. Perhaps he should be like Ewan and have a steady boyfriend.

Ewan and Jordan had spent Saturday running and climbing on the climbing wall at the Strathcadden Sports Centre. They had played their guitars at top volume in the noisy room, while Dad used his noisy big-boy's toys to finish another piece of furniture for the twins' nursery.

Gemma and Chris got up late for them. Chris was a man of habit. He had become used to getting up quite early. At school, it was half-past six so that he could do his patrol duty, that strange tradition that had spilled over from the Saint Oswald College. Now he didn't have to do that, it was quarter past seven, so he could make Mum and Dad their breakfast – having Mum and Dad meant so much to him. He was rather protective of his father, even if the circumstances of his conception were rather demeaning. It was half past nine when they woke up. Gemma rolled on top of Chris and said, "I've got you pinned down and you're all mine."

"I'm all yours," Chris replied. "Do you know what?"

"What?"

"I can't get away and I don't want to get away."

Gemma found that Chris had tickly spots. She was not ticklish herself. Eventually the need for the bathroom separated the two young people and they got up. They went through to rouse Aidy by leaping on him like two excited puppies.

Later in the morning, Chris and Gemma caught the train to Corscadden. Aidan was staying on over the week to complete an assignment for the start of the Autumn Term. When they got in, they went up to Brewster House for an hour or so. They told the family all about the weekend. Eejay and Jordan would have enjoyed it, but they were so tired after their internships which had been pretty full-on for the previous fortnight.

It was time for Chris and Gemma to get into the Fiesta and to drive to Kenniebrig. Chris was a steady driver. Unlike one or two of his contemporaries who thought they were indestructible, he had had a close scrape with that ketamine and the other shit whose name he had forgotten. He certainly didn't want to spend any time at the Strathie. Gemma appreciated his steady driving. Shane had been a pillock in his car, showing off what he could do. Gemma did not enjoy that experience. Her dad had had something to say to Shane along the line that if he killed himself by running into a wall, that was one thing, but taking his daughter with him was quite another. With Chris, it was different. He drove gently; he didn't go ape when someone overtook him. That was Christian, the gentle long-haired blond who had arrived at Strathcadden Academy as a shy waif and stray. That was the baby-faced and talented teen who was head boy with her in her Secondary Six Year. Yes, he looked a lot younger than nineteen – he was a year older than her. He was nineteen going on thirty as far as emotional intelligence was concerned, a calm self-confidence without being cocky about it. Chris didn't have to join the lek in the common room in Greatorex House.

First thing every morning, several sacks of mail were delivered to Walker Bros. The envelopes were sorted into trays for managers of each department to pick up. On this Monday a recorded delivery letter was placed into Charles Walker's tray and was duly taken up to the management suite for his attention. Its contents did not make for pleasing reading:

Dear Mr Walker

We thank you for the prompt payment of our client's account. However, we have been informed by our client, Riverside Networking Solutions that you have decided to terminate the contract for network and computer maintenance services that you hold with our client. We have been instructed to advise you that our client will not accept a termination without at least one year's notice, and that you are liable for the next year's fee for their professional services. The fee is thirty-seven thousand pounds + VAT (Forty-four thousand four hundred pounds, £44400).

Our clients have also advised us that you employed unauthorised staff to perform work on the network and have impugned their reputation in so doing. We are sure that you did not intend to impugn their reputation and would wish to make amends as soon as possible. We have been instructed to suggest that a payment of twenty thousand pounds would be considered sufficient for this purpose. You will need to submit a payment of sixty-four thousand four hundred pounds within ten working days. Failure to do so will result in our seeking damages at Sunderland County Court.

Yours sincerely

Josh Cudden

Foster & Partners LLP, Solicitors.

Charles Walker postponed his meeting with his daughters and other senior managers until the afternoon, and went out to Cardean Gate, where Gordon Morton Solicitors had their office. Derek Yeoman had always told him he was immediately available if something urgent cropped up. Walker Bros was their most important client, paying them handsomely for their legal services. It was cheaper for Walker Bros than having their own dedicated legal department. If this wasn't something urgent, Charles Walker didn't know what was. Besides, the two had been friends for many years.

Derek Yeoman was as good as his word, and Charles Walker was ushered into his friend's office. He read the letter and was incredulous as he did so. Finally, he said, "This cannot be right. If anyone is in breach of contract, Riverside Networking Solutions are. You have paid them their last account as I advised you to. You have settled their account as a matter of good will. They do not have a legal leg to stand on. They are trying it on. I will contact Foster & Partners straight away. I will advise them to tell their clients not to take the matter any further. If they do, we will file a counteraction for negligence and serious breach of contract. We will demand compensation for the extra work that you have done.

"I'll report back to you immediately I get anything back. I'll start work immediately. You're in luck; my morning clients have cancelled their appointment, so I have a couple of hours free. Firstly, I will contact Josh Cudden. With a name like that, I suspect he's a junior and he has been prevailed on to take the case. It should be a pushover."

Charles felt a sense of relief. Derek would make minced meat of them. These Wearside wide boys were trying it on. He would be very happy to tell a court a blow-by-blow account of his dealings with Riverside Networking Solutions and the problems that they had caused for his company. Fortunately, all calls were recorded for staff training purposes. If the very worst happened and they screwed the company for every penny they had, at least Walker Bros was a limited liability company. However, he had hoped that his last few weeks at Walker Bros would be a downhill run to his retirement.

Charles' next appointment was one that he always enjoyed, serving the customers.

On Saturday, Gemma Hammond was in Corscadden and had met up with Tamsin Heady. This was not unusual. The two girls liked to go shopping together. Although Gemma's interests were predominantly with machines, she still liked nice clothing and style. She described herself as a "girly tomboy". She would wear boyish clothing and had her hair cut quite short, but she wanted her clothing to be fashionable. Tamsin was rather more girly. The two girls were very close to each other. Both were interested in birdwatching and would talk about what interesting birds they had seen while out in the countryside. Gemma was interested in how Tamsin was getting on as head girl at Strathcadden Academy.

The natural place to start was the lekking ground in the Secondary Five and Six common room in Greatorex House. Two Secondary Five lads had gone beyond the pops and whistles of normal lekking. They had had a set to in which feathers flew. It had to be broken up by a couple of prefects. There was a lot of testosterone induced squawking. Dr Cuthbert was very cross, as was Mr Mitchell, who had suspended both boys for five days. The girl they had been trying to impress was not impressed and did not have the least intention of laying her eggs in either nest.

Craigie Boy and Miss Birch were pair bonding.

Tamsin had been running the school orchestra with Mr Struther, and they were rehearsing for a performance at the end of September. She was hoping to do Music at Edinburgh University. She had also been appointed captain of the hockey team.

"That's where I'm going in a couple of weeks," said Gemma.

"I'm going on Tuesday to an open day," Tamsin replied. "They are doing auditions as well. I've got two things to play, *Liszt's Mazurka in A* and *Rachmaninov's Vocalise*."

“What are they like?”

Tamsin got out her mobile and played the two tracks that she had recorded on the grand piano in the Music Department.

“I wish I could play like that,” said Gemma.

“It takes a lot of practice. Some of Rachmaninov’s music is so hard. Even he couldn’t play it without practising it again and again.”

“I don’t think Aidy could do it,” said Gemma, who was a modestly talented player of the keyboard.

“He’s digitally challenged. He’s good at the organ, but doesn’t have the finesse on the piano,” Tamsin said with a smile. If she had feathers, they would be puffing up slightly. “But he’s gorgeous. I want him to be mine. You’re going out with Chris, aren’t you?”

“How do you know?”

“A little bird told me,” Tamsin replied. “It’s all over the common room.”

In the few weeks she had been an Auld Caddie, Gemma had forgotten how nosy Caddies really were. “Chris is lovely. He was interested in me this time last year, but I told him about Shane. Shows how little I knew.”

“Who was Shane?”

“Don’t ask. He was a student at Cardean College. He was a prat. I was taken with his car and thought it was fun to be able to go out where we wanted when we wanted. The last bus to Kenniebrig goes at five thirty. He used to like to show off. The car was a typical chav mobile. It made a lot more noise than power. I found out he had this other bimbo at Cardean College. That evening he wanted to have it off with me in the back.

Fortunately, he had done his back in because he was so fat, and he couldn't turn round in his seat. I managed to leg it home and told Dad. He went spare and went out to have a little word with Shane. I have not seen Shane since. Like all bullies he was a coward."

"So, what do your mum and dad think of Chris?"

"What do they think? They really like him. I wish I had got to know him more last year."

"You knew him pretty well. You did a lot with him."

"We could have done a lot more."

"Gemma, with Chris, what you see is what you get. He's quiet and serious."

"He is. Conscientious as well. I feel safe with him, especially in the car. He drives sensibly. He's a true gent. He's very gentle and loving. Have you met his family?"

"I know his mum married Aidy's dad not long after Aidy's mum died. Chris is so like Aidy, and I think there is more to it than meets the eye."

Gemma smiled. She knew but wasn't going to spill the beans to Tamsin. It would be all over Strathcadden Academy by the end of school on Monday and across the whole town by Tuesday mid-morning. Instead, she diverted Tamsin's attention to Aidy. "Aidy is a true gent," she said. "Tread carefully, otherwise you may spook him. Another couple of months and you will be pair bonding. He's slightly jealous of Chris, I think, but he doesn't show it. So, you're in with a chance. I'll give you the nod and wink when he's back from Edinburgh."

In the end, Gemma didn't have to give Tamsin a nod or a wink. Aidan had finished his summer assignment on the Friday of the following week and had it ready for handing in for the start of term. He had a sense of smug self-satisfaction, especially as some of his classmates would be rushing to get it in at the last minute or even having to explain to the tutors why they needed an extension. Now he was heading for home for a few days at Brewster House. As he headed to Edinburgh's Waverley Station, he saw a girl in front of him dressed in a manner that was very familiar to him. It was the knee-length green socks with yellow band she was wearing that caught his eye, with the black shoes. She had long legs that were topped with a tartan skirt that had the familiar Douglas Blue Modern pattern. From below her outside jacket there peeked a dark blue blazer. She must have been a Caddie Lassie – even the gay boys would not have worn their kilts that short!

“Are you heading up to Corscadden?” Aidy said. It was not a chat up line that set the Thames (or the Forth) on fire.

Tamsin turned round and said, “Hi Aidy, long time no see!”

“Tamsin, what are you doing here? It's a long way to get away from Mr Mitchell and his mates.”

“I've been at the Music Department at the university for an open day, and they asked me to do an audition.”

“How did it go?”

“I liked it. I am thinking of applying for a B. Mus degree. They showed us round Alison House and the Reid School of Music. Have you been there?”

“No. I didn't think they would want someone like me – a mere languages student.” Aidy smiled gently. “How did your audition go?”

“It was good. They wanted me and a couple of others to play to an audience afterwards. I played both of my pieces, and they gave me a piece one of the students had requested – *Chopin’s Polonaise in A*. Fortunately, I have played it before, so it all came back. There were some bits I thought were a bit ragged, but they didn’t seem to notice.”

“They must have been interested in you to get you to do that.”

By now they were boarding the Corscadden train. Tamsin had a ten-minute wait at Corscadden before a north-bound service took her to Maunder, the next station up the line. The train was busy, as it always was, but by a stroke of luck they found two seats next to each other. Their eyes met and something seemed to click. Neither could say what it was, let alone describe it, beyond a sense of ease and trust. Aidan gazed at Tamsin. He had not eyed up a girl in this manner before. Her face exuded a gentle intelligence. She was wearing thin-framed glasses which seemed to enhance rather than detract from her appearance. She had a gentle smile. Her light brown hair hung over her left shoulder in a loose ponytail. She had fine eyebrows and beautiful green eyes. Under her dark blue blazer, she had the familiar green V-necked jumper worn by students from Secondary Five and Six. She also had the blue and grey tie, done up neatly as befitted the Head Girl of Strathcadden Academy.

With her long thin legs and slim build, Tamsin Heady was a very elegant young woman. She reminded him of what Grandma looked like when she was a teenage girl. There was no doubt that as she approached her seventieth birthday, Muriel Walker was still a very elegant woman. While his late mother was slim and athletic, she didn’t have Muriel’s elegance. She was more the tomboy with the powerful motorbike. There were plenty of Caddie Lassies like that, many of whom were in the women’s Rugby squad. Some of them were terrifying. Tamsin was the

kind of girl that he felt safe with. If Aidan had tail feathers, they would now be fanning out like a peacock.

Tamsin had never been impressed by the lek in Greatorex House. She had fancied Aidan Walker for years but knew he was shy. She had held back. There was always the risk that he would suddenly open up about the wonderful girlfriend he had found on his course at uni. She need not have worried. His body language showed that his lekking ground was two corner seats in a crowded electric train.

She could see the pupils were dilated in his beautiful blue eyes; Aidan was agog. She had him where she wanted him. Aidy had turned nineteen, but he looked younger. Although not as baby-faced as Chris, there was still just a tiny bit of youthful fluff on his face. Aidy had a slight build, very much suited to running. When she was in Secondary Four, Tamsin had always had this crush on the captain of the men's running squad. Now she was wiser and had listened carefully to other girls as to how they netted their boys. She was sixteen, seventeen in January, but so what? Another twenty years, she would be thirty-six and he would be thirty-nine. So what?

The two young people were holding hands. Waves of pleasure washed over them.

Just as the train pulled out, Aidan asked, "How's everything at Caddie-Land?"

Tamsin, as one would expect from the Head Girl, had her finger well and truly on the pulse. She described in detail the lekking ground in Greatorex House, including the set-to. She went on to describe the pair-bonding between Craigie-Boy and Miss Birch. Secondary One were a bit of a handful this year. The parents of three kids from Secondary One had been called in and Mr Mitchell and Mr McEwan had read them the Riot Act. Danny Taylor, the Head Boy, had outed himself as gay, and one of the

other prefects, Thomas Herring, was his boyfriend. The general reaction was as expected, a grand so what?

Aidy rapidly remembered how nosy Caddies were, and adept at minding everyone else's business.

Rowing at Strathcadden Academy had taken off in Secondary Five and Six. Mr Farjeon and Miss Birch were enthusiastic coaches. They all wondered what went on in the coaching launch. Mr Jackson, the new Physics teacher, had also joined in with the coaching. Indoor rowing was now popular across the school, and Caddies were competing in the Rowing Scotland school leagues. Tamsin had done a couple of indoor races and come quite high up. Cross-country running was a bit in the doldrums, although James Carter, the captain, was managing to keep it going. Women's football and rugby were going from strength to strength. Tamsin's hockey team was enjoying mixed fortunes. The men's rugby and football squads were hopeless.

Mr Struther was raising the Music Department to new heights. They now had a full orchestra, and Tamsin was performing on the piano. She didn't like the organ, as she felt its action ran counter to the delicacy of touch needed for the piano. Ben Tollick from Secondary Five was in charge of its noisy keys.

They talked about their music. Mr Struther had got hold of a large number of tablet computers for his musicians to keep their music on. This would save having to buy and store lots of sheet music. The tablets had a natty little footswitch which the artists could press to turn over the page. They had cost a fortune, but Mr Struther had applied successfully for Lottery funding. Aidy opened up his laptop, from which he was inseparable, and transferred some of his composition files to Tamsin's tablet.

Now the train was in the western valleys of Perthshire, about to cross over into Buchananshire. It plunged into Dungairrie Head Tunnel, and they would be into Corscadden in a

few minutes. Tamsin leant her head against Aidy's chest. She could hear the steady beat of his heart, and waves of contentment flowed over her. She was pair bonding. She moved Aidy's hand onto her bare thigh, and he caressed it gently. She was in love.

Aidy smiled gently at his young girlfriend, so sweet and innocent, but full of life and so interested in others. They were musical soulmates, ebony and ivory living together in perfect harmony as the old song went. She exuded intelligence. She was elegant and had modelled for Chris. She was his view of the perfect girl. She started to caress his face.

They had their first kiss as the train clattered over the points at Corscadden South Junction and drew into Corscadden Station. It was natural for Aidy to stay with Tamsin on the platform. They cuddled and kissed until the train to Maunder pulled in. Aidy was full of cuddle hormone. He was in love too. He said, "Come back tomorrow for lunch, and we'll have the rest of the day together."

They kissed again, and Aidy had to make a rapid exit as the guard was about to close the doors. The evenings were getting earlier, and it was starting to get dark.

At the far end of the platform, one of Tamsin's friends from Strathcadden Academy saw what was going on. By the end of school the following Monday, nosy Caddies all knew that the Head Girl had a boyfriend. Tamsin Heady (16) had been seen snogging with Aidan Walker (19).

Early the next morning, Aidy and Chris got up early for a dawn training run. They did a 10 k and had worked up a good appetite for breakfast. Ewan and Jordan were spending the weekend in Keillor. Aidan said nothing about his little tryst on Corscadden Station.

“I’m doing half a day today,” said Chris over the toast and coffee. “Gemma’s coming over at lunchtime and staying overnight.”

“How’s it going?” Aidan replied.

“Steady. Don’t you get any ideas.”

“Would I dare, Chris?” said Aidan. His eyes went dreamy as he thought about Tamsin on the train. Chris noticed the faraway look in his half-brother’s eyes.

“You look like you’re in love. Don’t tell me you’re being a dark horse, Aidy.”

“Would I ever?”

Before the theme could develop any further, Joby came down with Benjamin and Laura came in a few seconds later with Daniel. Benjamin and Daniel were continuing to thrive on all the attention they were getting. Both were sleeping through the night. Each twin was starting to crawl. They had started eating solids. In fact, both boys were doing everything a seven-month infant should do. Each didn’t know that he had brothers but recognised the faces of those who played little peek-a-boo games with him.

When Chris had gone to work, Aidan told his father and step mother about Tamsin coming over in the late morning, so there would be another mouth to feed at lunchtime. “Well, well, Aidy,” said Joby, “it takes a dark horse to know one. At least we’ll have more of the feminine touch in this house. We should call it the Love Nest. Despite all the odds I have brought five boys into the world.”

“Tell me all about her,” said Laura.

“She’s the Head Girl at Strathcadden,” Aidan replied. “She’s into music in a big way. We met on the train coming back

from Edinburgh yesterday. She was going to an open day at the Music Department. You've heard her play; she can knock spots off any of us. You will see what she's like in a couple of hours."

Aidan was waiting on the platform of Corscadden Station ten minutes before the train from Maunder was due. It felt like ten hours. He was excited. He had often heard his male friends talking about their girlfriends and felt left out of it. Now he had one. His reverie was interrupted by a southbound freight train hauled by one of the ubiquitous twin tri-bo electric locomotives. Dad had often told him that they were beefy locomotives for a man-sized job. The freight train seemed to rumble on for ever. Finally, the last wagon went through, and he watched the flashing red light disappearing down the line, across the bridge over the Cadden, across Corscadden South Junction, and into the dark depths of Corscadden Tunnel.

Aidan's reverie returned. While he was running that morning, he could not get her out of his mind – the gentle face, her green eyes, her long brown hair, her slim body and coltlike legs. He hoped she would have her shorts on – but so what? He was bonding with her, not her wardrobe. A northbound express raced through the station. As the express rounded the corner just after the viaduct over the River Sliver, the southbound stopping train came into view and presently pulled into Corscadden Station.

Aidan's heart was beating with eager anticipation as he saw Tamsin getting out of the carriage. In a film, there would be soft lighting and focus. The two of them would have come together in slow motion. There would be violin music, rising to an intense crescendo as the two young people embraced and kissed deeply.

Instead, a northbound freight train rumbled through the station. But the two young people embraced to its accompaniment. Aidan had forgotten how tall Tamsin was – his height, if not a centimetre or two taller. They kissed, ignoring the audience that was getting off the train, including several nosy Caddies. It left, leaving the love-struck couple alone on the platform. It was going to be more than a brief encounter.

Eejay of course had his boyfriend, Jordan, and they were going steady.

Chapter 7

Late September 2015

Tamsin's parents, David and Anne Heady, had often worried about what sort of boyfriend their daughter was going to date. They owned and ran D A H Fine Cabinets in the village of Maunder. This company was now a well-known name across Buchananshire and Kyle of Tonsil. It sold much of its stock through Walker Bros in Corscadden.

The village of Maunder had a couple of thousand residents and was best described as "a place on the main road". The Heady family lived in the quietest of quiet corners of this village where nothing ever happened. Maunder's biggest asset was its station on the Great Central Line, served as it was by regular fast electric trains. The station was a good launching point for the many hillwalkers and mountain bikers who enjoyed the trails into the hills. There were young people, of course, of which Tamsin was one. They tended to be attracted to the bright lights of Corscadden, which was the next station south, and was less than ten minutes away. All of them went to Strathcadden Academy.

Tamsin had a precocious talent as a musical performer on the piano and clarinet. She had done her first public performances at the village hall when she was seven. She was also a regular performer tinkling the ivories in the restaurant at Walker Bros on Saturdays, and on some weekdays during school holidays.

David and Anne Heady performed in a folk and ceilidh band that had done gigs in various pubs around Buchananshire. Tamsin sometimes played with them, but she had a talent that far exceeded the sum of theirs.

An only child, Tamsin was very close to both her parents and a soulmate to her mother. However, David Heady was not

going to hold his breath for his daughter to take over the business. Fine cabinet maker though he was, the making of musical instruments was not his forte, if one could pardon the expression.

David and Anne Heady had seen Aidan Walker perform on the pipe organ. He was a talented keyboard artist. They had talked to him. He was a polite but shy young man from a very musical family. Tamsin could do a lot worse than to date the grandson of the owner of Walker Bros. She could be in a far worse place than Brewster House.

Tamsin described the processes going on between her and Aidan as pair bonding. She had two great passions in her life. She was a talented musician, and a keen amateur ornithologist. Outside the house she shared with her parents in Mauder was a large set of feeders that attracted a large number of small birds into the garden to feed. Very occasionally a predatory bird like a sparrow hawk would come to make a meal of the birds. Its intrusion was never welcome. Additionally red squirrels would raid the nuts; they were welcome.

When Aidy and Tamsin got back to Brewster House, Dad was in the garage with his noisy big boy's toys. More bookshelves. Although Brewster House had many tens of metres of bookshelves, there never seemed to be enough for this bookish family. Eejay in particular seemed to have hogged most of the space. Chris was starting to fill his own share as well, and Aidy was collecting a range of books for his university course.

Laura and Tamsin hit it off at once, and while they were chatting, Aidy got his dad from his man cave. Any excuse for coffee – the Walker family drank the stuff by the litre. It was, of course, the best roast. So, they were sitting in the kitchen, which was as much a family room as the drawing room.

Outside the kitchen, there was an extensive set of bird feeders. It was placed close to the bushes that adorned that side of the garden. The birds flitted in and out to gorge, before having a commotion that would make the thinner branches wave as they hopped about the place. Aidy and Tamsin sat for ages to watch them. Joby said, “Tamsin, are you going to tinkle the ivories for us?”

Tamsin had a browse through the wide range of sheet music that had been collected over the years, before selecting a Chopin piano concerto. She had not played it before, but her skill as a pianist showed at once. Although Aidy was able to play it, Tamsin had the delicacy of touch that showed how she had the skill to be an outstanding performer. Aidy turned the pages as she played on. The music, which was such a feature of life at Brewster House, had clearly gone up a level.

“Now, Aidy,” Tamsin said, “let’s hear you. Shall I choose a piece?”

Aidan played his piece, a piano concerto by Carl Maria von Weber, and Tamsin listened carefully, before saying with a wry smile, “Not bad at all. I think you’ll make a pianist one day.”

Aidy replied, “Go on, clever clogs, show us how it’s done.”

And Tamsin did just that. Aidan was knocked off his perch as the Brewster House maestro, but he didn’t mind. They did a duet together, in which there was a musical harmony of joy and beauty that developed as the piece continued.

Benjamin and Daniel took not the blindest bit of notice; they were fast asleep.

After that, Joby went back to the cacophony of his big boy’s toys in his man-cave, while Laura went through to the study to prepare for her new job. She was due to start a week on

Monday and had visited the Strathie a number of times to get her feet under the table. She and Joby had sorted child-care for Benjamin and Daniel. Briony Kerr ran a nursery at the bottom of Priestfield Avenue, and the twins would be well looked after. Both Benjamin and Daniel were easy-going children as far as babies went; each didn't mind who looked after him as long as food was put in at one end, and his nappy was changed at the other. The fees were high, but Mrs Kerr had looked after both Aidan and Ewan, and her nursery was one of the best.

Benjamin and Daniel were by now full of food and content. They were on the drawing room floor, playing with the little toys that seven-month infants loved to play with. The two little boys were also just starting to crawl about and loved to go to Aidy who adored his baby brothers. Tamsin picked Daniel up and he gurgled and wriggled with pleasure. Tamsin was becoming broody and thinking of nests full of eggs. Laura carried on with her work in the study, while Aidy and Tamsin decided to go out for a walk. They put Benjamin and Daniel into the carrier and put it on Aidy's back. Both enjoyed being high up on their brother's back, while Aidy and Tamsin went hand in hand through Corr Wood. Aidy had been up this track almost every day on his training runs or hill walking with his brothers and friends. He knew it like the back of his hand, but he remembered this particular trip very clearly. He had his hand in Tamsin's. Her hand was warm and held his gently. The clothes she was wearing emphasised how gorgeous she was. She had a thick jumper over a T-shirt. She had a short denim skirt. She had sports socks on with trainers.

As they walked, they gazed at each other, and their eyes were wide. She was two and a half years younger than he – she was one of the youngest in her year. He knew lots of silly songs about sweet little sixteen. People had written stuff like that for centuries. He was nineteen – well so what? It was none of their

business. He had this gorgeous girl in his hand. There didn't need to be a clumsy chat-up line.

Tamsin had shunned the lek in Greatorex House and was pair bonding with this gorgeous boy whom she had eyed up for the past three years. Theirs was not love at a whim. When Aidy had left, there was Chris who was equally gorgeous, but Gemma had him in her crosshairs and Tamsin loved her friend enough not to steal Chris from her. It was a sure-fire way to destroy a good friendship. It happened time and time again at Strathcadden Academy. The jealous enmity that arose was hard to break. As Head Girl, Tamsin had a number of students she was mentoring to bring them back onto an even keel.

She felt safe with Aidan. Many of the caddie lassies had commented how they always felt safe with Aidy and Chris. They were even safer with Ewan who was openly gay and had a steady boyfriend. Little thrills ran through her as she eyed over her boyfriend. He had his long-sleeved hoodie-top over a T-shirt, short black sports shorts, striped ankle socks and trainers. It was the way she had always imagined him.

There was a seat half way through the woods, next to Lockard Burn. There was a clearing where a large tree had fallen years before during a storm. This afforded extensive views across the town. Aidy placed his twin brothers in their carrier on the seat and sat down next to Tamsin. They kissed and cuddled and explored each other. Tamsin said with a smile, "Not in front of the children!" Neither twin would know about such things until much later. Each was warm and comfortable and enjoying the view, even though he didn't yet have a clue what it was. They cared neither where Tamsin had her hand, nor for that matter where Aidan had his hand. The concept of snogging would not be a reality for a good few years yet.

They got up, picked Benjamin and Daniel up, and went to the small bridge across the burn. Aidan and Tamsin kissed deeply. Tamsin put her hand up Aidy's shorts and fondled his bum, not hairy like other nineteen-year-olds'. After that she said, "Aidy, I've looked forward to this moment for the last three years. I love you."

"Tamsin, I love you too. You're my baby."

"And you are my baby, too. I love my baby."

Aidan Iain Alexander Walker and Tamsin Mary Pearson Heady were in total love. That first romantic tryst became almost immediately a treasured memory, and they didn't want it to end. But end, it had to. And they went back down to Brewster House.

As they came through the front door, Christian had just got back from work, and greeted them with, "Well, well, here comes our dark horse with his damsel not in distress."

"Takes one to know one," Aidan replied. "This house seems to be stables for dark horses."

"Come on Aidy, it's time for us to get some lunch on. Tamsin, you can help as well. Gemma's coming in a minute."

Lunch was a lively affair, as usual with the joyful chatter and laughter that characterised the Walker family. Depending on your point of view, it was a stable for dark horses, or a love-nest, for Joby's sons had all inherited his very strong romantic streak. Aidy and Chris were pair-bonding with girlfriends, while Eejay's romance with Jordan was every bit as loving.

Joby and Laura were lovebirds in their own right. However, on Monday, Aidy, Chris, and Eejay would be going to Edinburgh. Brewster House would no longer be full of fledglings who were now taking their first long flights, although there would still be the newly hatched Benjamin and Daniel at the bottom of

this very spacious nest. Still, it would be a foretaste of the empty nest.

Ewan's love for his boyfriend was as romantic as that between his brothers and their girlfriends. He was sitting with Jordan at the bottom of the garden at Acrefair House. The garden was the labour of several years by Jordan's grandparents. It was maturing with elegance. Although it was into autumn, and past its best, it was still very beautiful with many plants putting on a late burst of flowers. For Ewan, a very spiritual young man who loved nature in all its forms, it formed a backdrop every bit as meaningful as the finest artwork. There was a great sense of peace there as Jordan and he sat on the swinging chair under the rose arbour. Next to it, the waterfall plashed into the pond. The fish, known affectionately as the Scalies, swam about near the top. They didn't care where Ewan had his hand, or Jordan his hand.

Jordan tried to joke about his ex-mother in a parody of her upper-class pronunciation, "Those two were all over each other in the garden! Well really!" In other circumstances it might have been funny, but her final rejection of him still hurt like hell. It had happened two months ago, but it was still as raw as it had been at the Compton Parfitt Manor Hotel. Jordan felt sure that the memory would jolt him for many years to come. At least he still had Dad, to whom he was very close. But Dad was abroad and would not be back until the start of December. Grandma and Granddad were very supportive and were there for him. He felt safe at Acrefair House. No way would the vixen – he could no longer bring himself to call her "Mum" – dare to cross the threshold. The journey in itself would be too much like hard work. He was confused.

Although he loved his grandparents dearly and was especially close to his grandmother, they were old and must have

forgotten their years of teenage angst. But he had to admit they had a lifetime of wisdom. He was not the only one who had had teenage angst. Dad had it as well. As for the Chetwynds, he hadn't seen much of them, even when Mum and Dad were together. He knew about how they were top socialites in the South of England. Once his ex-mother (he could no longer bear to refer to her as "Mum") had walked out, they had sided with his ex-mother and rejected him. The pronunciation of their name was appropriate - "cheating". It was a family that was dedicated to making money and living a high lifestyle. The bank in which many of the family were involved was notorious for asset stripping. Others in the family-owned freeholds and managed leasehold property not to the advantage of either property owners or tenants. Jordan had never been able to fit in with it. They had once taken Mum (when she was his mum), Dad, and him to the races at Goodwood. It was a posh do certainly with lots of women in very fancy hats and minimalist but expensive clothes. For him it was like treading on eggshells. All he could see was a number of identical brown animals from a long way away and hadn't any idea why people put large sums of money on them. His mother had berated him for some gaffe of which he had not a clue. A posh do for him was a dinner in a country pub with Dad and his grandparents Melhuish.

Ewan was a balm for Jordan. The Walkers were not rolling in it like the Chetwynds. Their money was earned after a lifetime of very hard work by Charles Walker in a store that was well loved and respected by the community and its customers. Unlike the Chetwynds, they were at ease with anyone and made them welcome. They had made him welcome as a part of the family. And he loved Ewan and felt safe and loved with him. And Ewan was caressing him gently. He snuggled up even closer to his boyfriend but still wanted his ex-mother and the dickhead of corporate banking to take a running jump off a cliff at least two hundred metres high.

That evening after dinner, Richard and Celia Melhuish got out their photographs of Jordan's dad when he was a boy. There were many of them. Jordan's ex-mother had always discouraged her son from wanting to know more than the sketchiest details of the circumstances of his parents' childhoods in case it somehow undermined their authority. Clearly Kathryn Melhuish had something to hide.

The pictures showed Stephen as a runner and a cyclist, as well as a quiet boy among other quiet friends. Jordan had picked up his aptitude for both from his father. There were pictures of him at the boys' boarding school he had attended in the nineteen eighties. The only difference was that they wore trousers, not kilts (Douglas Blue Modern). They had both enjoyed seeing Dad as a kid in the nineteen seventies and eighties. Jordan (or Seb to Dad) had taken after his father, and it was hardly surprising that Stephen Melhuish as a teenager looked almost identical to Jordan, even down to his hairstyle.

There were a few pictures of Jordan as a child. Most were taken by his grandparents, with a number that Dad had sent them. Dad had taken a photographic diary of his son as he grew up, but Kathryn had thrown it out, as an act of spite.

The next morning, Jordan and Ewan got onto a north-bound fast train back to Corscadden. As they journeyed north, Jordan said, "Thanks for everything you have done for me, Eejay."

"That's what I'm here for. That is what love is about. You held me together last year when Mum died. Now I will hold you together. I know it hurts, but you mustn't let it pull you down, especially at Uni."

“Of course it won’t. I won’t let it. But it will haunt me from time to time. At least she and the Dickhead of Corporate Banking are out of my hair. To me they are like fleas. I hate them.”

“I know, but you love Dad, your grandma and granddad, and me. We’re more important than a fat guy who does corporate rip-offs.”

By now, Ewan and Jordan had arrived back at Brewster House. They were going to uni tomorrow, the start of a big adventure. Dad had done the same some twenty-three years before, and his adventures had led him to a situation, twenty years ago that he was reminded of every day in the form of a long-haired blond nineteen-year-old. Ewan and Jordan came into the kitchen to find Aidy and Tamsin and Chris and Gemma pair-bonding. The coffee machine was gurgling as usual. It never seemed to stop. Joby was feeding Benjamin and Daniel. He was well-trained in being a hands-on father. To his embarrassment, Ewan’s first words had come about from nappy changing, “More shit”, which he had repeated to his grandparents. It was agreed that if Aidan or Ewan had used rude words, they had been picked up from their father. At least Christian’s use of similar words was something that could not be laid at his door.

Now there were eight lovebirds in the kitchen and two very small nestlings.

After lunch, Joby and Laura went through to the drawing room and turned on the telly. They loved to watch *Rustic Refugees*, a lifestyle programme which showed a couple, often from London, being shown grossly overpriced houses by the presenter, quite often in the South West of England. The houses would have been done up to be bucolic chic. Once agricultural workers’ cottages, they would now be home to top IT consultants. Where,

fifty years ago, there was a bicycle propped up against the front wall, there was now parked a large sports utility vehicle on what was the front garden but was now fully paved over. The hedge had been removed to make way for cast iron gates that opened automatically to welcome the owner home. There was nothing bucolic about the price, which the guests had to guess. “Your guess is a little low,” the presenter would coo soothingly. “It is a bit above your budget, but the owner knows your maximum budget, which may be the starting point of a sensible conversation.”

“As if they are going to have a stupid conversation!” Joby interjected.

Still, it was a bit of evening relaxation after Benjamin and Daniel had gone to bed and both Laura and Joby would fall asleep in the middle of the programme. Today, however, it was after lunch. Benjamin and Daniel were having their sleepy time, so what better thing to do before being summoned by Their Lordships?

The first scene showed the presenter who was a horsey woman called Pippa. She had a haughty voice, which had more than a hint of patronisation. She started off with her teaser that showed a church that could have been anywhere. “But where am I?” was the cue for the titles. “I am in the County of North Sussex at...” She continued her commentary with bucolic scenes of well-manicured villages and country roads. Not a grubby farm worker to be seen anywhere. Then Pippa said, “There is no doubting it, that, with its close proximity and excellent road and rail links into London, property in North Sussex carries a hefty premium. The average price of a detached house is about £650 000, which is double the national figure. So, let’s meet our buyers...”

This couple was from North Surrey and wanted to move to North Sussex. The woman was slim and elegant, while the man looked like he had had too many large corporate luncheons. Jordan and Ewan came in. There was a look of shock in Jordan's face. "That's my ex-mother and the Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking," he exclaimed.

"Do you want us to turn it off?" Laura asked.

"Please don't," Jordan replied. "I want to see what they're up to and who they think they are."

The programme introduced Rupert and Kathryn from Surrey. Rupert was a banker and Kathryn was an accountant. They had been together for five years. Kathryn had a fixed smile.

"Two years of two-timing Dad," Jordan added.

"Look at her rictus smile!" added Ewan.

Rupert and Kathryn found that their town was oh so busy with the commuter traffic, and that it was getting oh so crowded. They were walking hand in hand in the park. Their house was too cramped to do large scale entertaining. In the background, Jordan could see furniture that Grandma and Granddad had given to his dad. They were valuable Melhuish heirlooms.

There followed scenes consisting of soundbites of each buyer saying some smug and inane comment that the production team thought would titillate the viewers.

The scene changed to the garden of an up-market country house hotel. There was a carefully rehearsed scene of Pippa, and Rupert and Kathryn walking towards each other, with the equally carefully rehearsed spontaneity of the greeting. It was clearly the fourth or fifth take. The requirements were not unusual, quirky with lots of character, plenty of space for entertaining, a cinema room, a good-sized garden with room for a hot tub, an equestrian

facility, no new builds, and definitely no neighbours. The most notable feature was the budget, 1.5 to 1.7 million pounds. Pippa told them they had to be realistic about what their budget could get in North Sussex, but they had four lovely houses lined up.

“Seventeen hundred grand?” Joby exclaimed. “Where do they get the money from?”

“They’re not the kind of people we hob-nob with,” Laura replied.

There were several badly edited clips of a car driving about North Sussex on a fine summer’s afternoon, followed by Pippa driving on a wet day. The road the car was driving down was narrow, but when Pippa was driving and giving her commentary, the road was wide and busy. Pippa had also learned her lines well. There were pictures of bare trees in the summer, along with crocuses and daffodils.

“My ex-mother was only interested in two things – making money, and moving in circles of ‘nice’ people,” said Jordan laconically. “Perhaps that’s where the money from my bikes has gone to. She never forgave me for failing the entrance exam to Charterhouse. Dad said I would have hated it. I was quite happy at Barrowcliffe, but my ex-mother said it was for the common kids and said I had picked up common habits. She said only the working classes sent their kids to comprehensive schools. Dad told her not to be so snobby.”

“Hang on,” said Joby, “I went to Corscadden Grammar School, before it fell down. I was at Strathcadden Academy when Mr Duffy was headmaster. It was a comprehensive school then, like it is now. I didn’t do that badly; I’m proud to be an Auld Caddie.”

“Yes, my ex-mother was snobby. And look at her now.”

The first house was a thatched chocolate-box cottage in a village. It had been a bakery, and the old oven was a feature of one of the reception rooms. In the first take, Rupert banged his head on one of the beams and swore loudly. They had to do a second take. Rupert kept his head lower this time, but the graze was obvious, even under the make-up. Pippa continued to coo about the quirky nature of the house, although it was clear that it would only accommodate a very small family. Kathryn pointed out that the house was even smaller than the house they had in Surrey, and there would be no possibility of large-scale lavish entertaining. Rupert complained that there wouldn't be space for his home cinema. The "useful" utility room (a cupboard under the stairs) would just about accommodate the hoover and his golf-clubs. All Kathryn could say was, "Wow!"

"I wonder what a useless utility room looks like," said Joby.

"Just like that one," Laura replied.

The family bathroom was downstairs. Upstairs there were three tiny bedrooms, the largest of which was the master bedroom. Manoeuvring around the bed required an act of contortion to move along the narrow passage afforded between the bed and the wall. If one wasn't to bang one's head on the steeply sloping ceiling with its beams, one would be better off crawling.

"There wouldn't be space for Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking to do that," Jordan observed. "He would get stuck. Go on, Fatso. Fall in love with the cottage and do us all a favour."

They went out into the very modest garden with its deck and patio. It was quite a nice garden, but it was the size of one of the garden rooms that Celia Melhuish had set up at Acrefair House.

“What about the equestrian facility?” Kathryn asked.

“Well, as you can see, there isn’t one here, but a local farmer does rent out paddocks for horses. Alternatively, there is a livery yard in the next village. So how much do you think that this cottage is on the market for?” said Pippa. “Kathryn, you can start...”

“I would say that it’s worth about nine hundred.”

“Rupert?”

“I will be more optimistic, about eight seven five.”

Pippa cooed, “I am afraid that you are both well out. The good news, though, is that it’s below your budget. It’s on the market at 1.2 million. It is a bit of a reality check. This is a very expensive part of the country. But do go back in and have a further look round and I’ll be waiting at the front door.”

“Beautiful house, but rather too small. It would suit a young family, but it’s not for us,” was the verdict that was broadcast. This was a second take. During the first take, Rupert had complained volubly that there would be no way that the drive could accommodate his Range Rover, his newly acquired Bentley SUV, and Kathryn’s Mercedes. Kathryn had complained that they would not use it as a holiday cottage.

“A young family earn enough for a twelve hundred grand cottage?” Joby snorted. “What planet do you live on, pal? You could buy most of Corscadden for that.”

Next there was the activity in which the couple were sent to a livery yard. Kathryn and Rupert each asked a question prepared in advance, while the livery yard owner gave her prepared answer. Kathryn was allowed to groom a horse, while Rupert was shown contributing to the mucking out. He loaded two forkfuls into a wheelbarrow. He did not look happy.

“All he’s fit for,” said Ewan.

“It’s too good for him,” Jordan added.

They drove to the next house. It was not far away. Pippa cooed again, “This one we are really excited about. It has spades of space for entertaining and spades of quirky features...”

It was a converted chapel on the main road through the village. Like many such chapels, it had been shoe-horned into a small plot between two houses.

“Neither of us is at all religious,” said Rupert.

“You don’t have to be,” Pippa replied. “Shall we go in?”

The kitchen was tiny, but on the opposite side of the entrance hall was a useful utility room which had space for not only a washing machine but also a tumble drier. A lavatory stood in the corner, so that one could watch the washing tumbling in the washing machine while having a few private moments. The useful utility room also housed an ironing board and a hoover. Pippa showed the main room. It was the original nave of the chapel. Right in the middle there was a spiral staircase to a mezzanine floor. Where the chancel had been, there was a corridor with a small family shower-room on the left and a small bedroom on the right.

They went up to the mezzanine floor which had the master-bedroom with an en-suite. Most of the mezzanine floor was taken up with a cinema room. It was painted purple. There was also a tiny box room that was being used as a study.

Outside, the garden consisted of a small, paved yard that had a few plants in pots. There was a hot tub by the back door. On the recording, all Kathryn’s lines consisted of “Wow!” accompanied by her rictus smile.

Pippa continued to coo, “This is the compromise. There is not much in the way of a garden, and there is no drive or garage. You do have an on-street parking space. I have been told that there are some lock-up garages to rent about ten minutes’ walk away. As I said at the last house, there is a fenced paddock that you could rent, and there is a livery stable. So how much do you think this converted chapel is on the market for? Rupert, it’s your turn...”

“About 1.3 million.”

“And Kathryn?”

“I would go for 1 million. It hasn’t got a drive, nor are there any equestrian facilities, and only a bit of lawn at the front.”

“You are both well out, I am afraid. This one is towards the top of your budget. This chapel conversion is on the market at offers above 1.65 million. It has only just gone on the market, but as you know, the property market around here is very vibrant. Two buyers have already made offers that are being considered. So, if you want to make an offer, you will have to move very quickly. So go back in and have a good look around and I’ll meet you at the front door.”

This scene was a second take. The first was ruined by the neighbour’s small boy and his friend who had kicked a football into the chapel’s yard. The producer was livid, and Pippa came out with some strong equestrian language that she normally reserved for the stables.

Rupert gave his opinion, “A fantastic property. I liked the entertaining space, and the home cinema. They certainly ticked my boxes. The deal breaker is, I am afraid, the presence of neighbours.”

Kathryn bemoaned the lack of equestrian facilities and the oppressive air of religion about the place. Despite the efforts of the developers, it still retained many features of a chapel.

As Pippa walked off camera, Joby observed that she needed a bum that big to get on her horse.

There was an evening shot, followed by a shot of the next day, accompanied by some bland background string music. Pippa was going to visit a garden of a stately home.

The third house was a thatched barn conversion.

“You say that you are after space and quirky features. This barn conversion offers them in spades. Additionally, you have a field in front of the house that you can use for equestrian facilities. This comes with the property. However, you don’t get it all. The compromise with this house is that you have neighbours. This conversion is one in a complex of seven Grade 2 listed farm buildings. The thatch was replaced 10 years ago, so should have another 15 years before it needs replacing.”

The barn was open plan. There was a kitchen at the far end. The living room occupied most of the space of the barn. It was lit either side by a tall window that filled in a door space to the original barn, one that could fit the largest farm cart fully laden with hay that existed when it was built. A combine could have driven in and out with ease. To the front of the house, there were views over the field towards the Downs. The main feature of the living room was a gigantic plasma TV set that was mounted on the wall. There was a gallery that ran across the barn in the middle, like a footbridge. Just off the kitchen area was another useful utility room. This was slightly larger than the ones in the other two houses. It could accommodate not only a washing machine and a tumble-drier, but also a dishwasher. A fridge-freezer was shoehorned in as well. This time the downstairs cloakroom was separate from the utility room.

At the other end of the living room there were two rooms, a cinema room and a small study. Accessing the gallery was a spiral staircase leading to a master bedroom with an en-suite. Opposite was another small bedroom, full of gym equipment. At the other end of the gallery was a third bedroom and a family shower-room. All had skylights, which were at a height. There were beams as well, but with sufficient clearance to allow Rupert to walk under without cracking his nut.

Jordan was disappointed. He still wanted his ex-mother and Rupert to take a running jump off a cliff at least two hundred metres high.

The house was so minimally furnished that it almost looked unoccupied, but what was there showed that neither expense nor vulgarity had been spared. There was every high-tech gadget that was possible to operate from an appropriate app. Pippa demonstrated how a smart phone could be used to change the heating, the brightness of the lights, close the blinds, and turn on individual hotplates or the oven. There was a sound system that served the whole house, so not a note of music or sentence of a soundtrack could be missed. The washing machine, tumble-drier, dishwasher, and fridges were all accessible from the internet, and could be controlled using another app. Rupert and Kathryn were tongue-tied beyond saying “Wow!” all the time.

“I would love to hack in to that,” said Jordan.

“You could turn off the central heating in the middle of winter,” said Ewan.

“I wish my ex-mother would wipe that bloody smile off her face and stop saying ‘Wow’,” said Jordan.

The bathroom had a huge spa shower and a wet area in minimalist chic. The master bedroom had an en-suite which was accessed through an archway with no door. At one end of the

bedroom there was a bath. There was a TV set mounted on the wall above the bath which could be viewed from either the bath or the lavatory. From a truss that straddled the main bedroom there hung a large TV so that both could watch something in bed. All the TV sets could tune into one Digi-box.

There was a courtyard to the side at the far end. The most prominent features were a large hot tub, a barbecue, and a pizza oven. The garden was to the front of the house, with an extensive gravel drive that would accommodate with ease the Range Rover, the Bentley, and the Mercedes. It also looked over the horse paddock. There was a loose box which had power.

“So how much do you think this fantastic property is on the market for? Kathryn?”

“1.5 million.”

“I think it’s closer to our top end,” replied Rupert, “about 1.7 million.”

“You are a little bit low,” said Pippa smugly. “This house is a bit above your maximum budget, £1999950. We have spoken to the owners, and they are aware of your maximum budget. There may be a bit of flexibility, but you will know how vibrant and competitive the market is. Do you want to go back and have a look around? I will meet you at the front door.”

The house clearly suited both Rupert and Kathryn down to the ground. Rupert said how it ticked all the boxes, although he would like to meet the neighbours. Kathryn was delighted at the vast area for parties and having her own equestrian facility. She was looking forward to her horse, and she knew of a supplier of horse boxes.

As Rupert and Kathryn came out of the front door, Joby said, “Look at the size of that man!”

Laura replied, "They have to have special ambulances for people like him."

Joby looked over at his middle son and his boyfriend and decided that Rupert would tip the scales on the pair of them. He said, "I have seen some porkers in my time. You don't get that around here."

Pippa announced that she had gone to see a garden of the National Trust in the area. More carefully rehearsed spontaneity was shown. Pippa was a true pro. She had prepared all the questions, and the property manager and the head gardener had given her equally well-prepared answers. They had learned their lines well. Pippa contributed to the planting of a tree into a prepared hole. She added two shovels of compost. She must have had some royal blood in her.

Finally, there was the mystery house. As Pippa drove with the couple to the mystery house, she asked them what they thought it would be. Their guess was a flat in a large country house that had been split into apartments. "We will soon find out," Pippa cooed reassuringly.

The mystery house stood in the middle of a wilderness of brambles and mares' tails. It was a new build. Pippa continued to coo, "This is why it's the mystery house. If you buy this house, you will have no neighbours. However, it's a bit of a project. As you can see, there is still quite a bit to do."

They went inside as Pippa explained how the previous owner had started it as a self-build project but had had to give things up because of health issues. There was a large area that Pippa described as an open plan living room, diner, and kitchen, which would be ideal for their entertaining. A feral pigeon clattered out through the gap that was to form the French doors. A pair of copper pipes emerged from a wall into the kitchen area. The utility room had yet to be useful, and the downstairs

cloakroom housed a lavatory that had not been installed. Neither the electricity, nor the water had been connected. The owner had provided estimates of twenty thousand for the electricity supply and twenty-five thousand for the water.

Up a temporary staircase were the bedrooms. Copper pipes emerged into what was going to be the bathroom and the en-suite. Drains led away to nowhere. A septic tank needed to be installed. Where the floors had been installed, they were made of chipboard which creaked loudly as they walked on it. A large rat scuttled away on a floor joist. Rupert was showing that he was being a pro by not losing his temper. He didn't want to have to take a second or third take in this dismal dump.

Outside, it was clear what the site of the house had been – a chicken farm. There remained much of the detritus of farming including an upturned trailer with all sorts of junk stored on it, pallets, old chicken food, and piles of manure.

Pippa cooed again, “As you can see, there is a large amount of space for you to entertain, and you could have a fantastic garden and equestrian centre. It does require some vision, but you have the chance to put your stamp on this property. How much do you think it's on the market for? Rupert?”

“Two hundred and fifty,” Rupert replied without hesitation.

“Ouch!” said Pippa trying not to let her outrage show on camera. “Kathryn?”

“I wouldn't be that cheeky, but it does need a huge amount doing. I would suggest no more than six hundred.”

“Well, I don't know what the owner would say to those valuations, but the current asking price for this property is offers over 1.1 million.”

“Go on Rupert, buy it,” said Jordan. “Learn what it’s like to shovel shit rather than just stirring it up.”

“There’s one born every minute. He’s one of them,” said Laura.

“Eleven hundred grand for a half-completed shell. They must be mad, or taking the piss,” said Joby. It was an opinion shared by Rupert. Even he wasn’t so rich or stupid to take on a rat-infested hulk. Politely he said that the project was far too big. He had also noticed that there was Japanese knotweed in a corner of the plot.

The penultimate scene was Pippa joining Rupert and Kathryn in the drawing room of the country house hotel. There was tea and cakes on the coffee table, but no plates for the guests. There was a simple reason for this. The food and teapots were merely props. The scones were made of plaster and used for every episode in order to save money. Having told them what a pleasure it had been to show them the houses, Pippa cooed again, “Have you come to a decision, and what happens next?”

“We have. We will be going back to the barn conversion and meeting the neighbours. We will consider making an offer.” Kathryn still had her insincere rictus smile.

“Make sure that the neighbours are the right kind of people,” said Laura.

“My ex-mother says they have to be nice people, who enjoy parties, and go to Goodwood, Ascot, Wimbledon, and Henley,” Jordan replied in his parody of his mother’s refined voice.

Just before the credits came on, Pippa announced, “Rupert and Kathryn did go back to the barn conversion. They met the neighbours and decided to put an offer in. A couple of other offers were also made, but they were able to stretch

themselves, and in the end their offer was accepted. We wish them luck in their new home. If you would like to be on *Rustic Refugees*, please apply on-line to...”

“I bet it was well over two thousand grand,” said Joby.

Jordan said, “My ex-mother has taken several bits of furniture that my grandma and granddad gave to Dad. They have been in our family for years. I’m going to e-mail Dad and tell him to watch it, if he can bear the torture. I’ll also tell Grandma and Granddad. They won’t be very pleased. That will give my thieving ex-mother something to think about.”

Ewan added, “Better still, Bell-End-Dickhead of Corporate Banking and the thieving vixen should make an offer on a sea-side property on the edge of a two-hundred-metre-high cliff and wait for the next storm.”

In a socket on the other side of the room lights started to flicker on the baby alarm. One of their Lordships was waking up and demanding attention.

Chapter 8

Early October 2015

Laura had now started her new job as Senior Radiographer and Advanced Nurse Practitioner at Strathcadden General Infirmary. Joby had started his new job as Research Director at Dunalastair Engineering. Much of the extra income was swallowed up by the fees for the twins' nursery. Bryony Kerr had an excellent reputation, but her fees were high. She had looked after both Aidan and Ewan when they were very little people. A person could not be much smaller than an eight-month infant, but Benjamin and Daniel were very placid and easy-going children, each of whom was quite content as long as he was fed at one end and cleaned at the other. Each did not really care who did it as long as it was done. Each loved to be the centre of attention, which he was there.

Joby had taken the boys to Edinburgh the previous Sunday. They had settled well into the flat. They always enjoyed each other's company. Ewan, Christian, and Aidan were not just brothers, they were close friends. And there was Jordan who was as inseparable from Ewan as Aidan was from his laptop. Joby was proud of his delightful sons. For someone who was so inept at mammalian reproduction, Joby had succeeded against all odds in bringing five delightful young males into the world. Two were pair-bonding with girlfriends, one was going steady with his boyfriend, and the other two were pair-bonding with their feet.

Once Benjamin and Daniel were put to bed in the evening, Brewster House was very quiet. They were by now sleeping the whole night. There was definitely a feeling of empty nest, even though at the bottom of the nest, there were still two small nestlings. It hadn't been that quiet for ages, since Mary and Joby had their quiet evenings on a Thursday. They had known that the next day, the house would be lively again and full of cheerful noise.

This time it would be quiet all the time until Christmas, except when the Little Lords Benjamin and Daniel demanded room-service. There would be no scampering of teen feet like so many excited puppies. *The Cloudburst* would no longer discharge itself noisily into *The Colossus* umpteen times a day to re-echo around the house. Nor would the cloakroom be occupied for half an hour while Ewan decided to sit on *The Venerable* to read a book and do his thinking.

There would be no cheerful banter in the kitchen, or joyful yells of delight as the boys bounced on the trampoline in the corner of the garden. Occasionally, Joby and Laura had gone out to the trampoline as well when no one was looking. A quarter of a century ago they had been care-free teens.

It was Charles Walker's first visit to Sunderland. He had travelled through the County of Tyne and Wear (a horrible construct of a London-based civil servant in the early Seventies) a good number of times, usually to go down to the London Fashion Week. He had also travelled extensively through Northern England to visit his suppliers. He enjoyed meeting his suppliers as much as his customers. He had a good eye for a good product that he would be happy to sell to his customers. He had a supplier in Newcastle, but there weren't any in Sunderland or elsewhere on the North Sea coast.

The reason for this visit was nothing to do with a good product. It was the opposite. Riverside Networking Solutions of Sunderland had caused a major networking problem during August. The Wannaspit Trojan had infected the Walker Bros network during an upgrade. It had downgraded the network to being unusable. The solution had had nothing to do with Riverside Networking Solutions. The network had been brought back to life and made fighting fit by the work of a diminutive

seventeen-year-old youth by the name of Liam Cosgrave (aka Woodmouse, or simply Mouse). Alexander Tanner, the proprietor of the said Riverside Networking Solutions, had taken a rather dim view of this, and carried out his threat to sue Walker Bros for forty-four thousand four hundred pounds (which was the fee payable for one year's maintenance) and twenty thousand for breach of contract by allowing an unauthorised person to access the system, thereby undermining their reputation.

This date at Sunderland County Court was going to be the away fixture for Walker Bros. The return fixture at home was going to be the following week at Buchanan Court of Sessions. Walker Bros were countersuing for damage done to the network, breach of contract, and compensation for all the extra work that had had to be carried out by Walker Bros staff.

Charles Walker would have far preferred to be back in Corscadden serving his customers instead of being the defendant in a County Court case. Derek Yeoman, who was with him, was very confident that Riverside Networking Solutions would be shot down in flames – metaphorically, of course. Liam Cosgrave was there, having been permitted by his department at university to attend as an expert witness. Copies of all the evidence had been submitted to the court, so that the District Judge, Her Honour Judith Wratten, could prepare for the case.

On the other side of the waiting room, the solicitor for the plaintiff had arrived. Josh Cudden was a young man; it was his first real case that he was going to do all on his own. A small man in his early forties with long hair done in a ponytail and an earring in his right ear arrived with a briefcase. He was not much bigger than Liam Cosgrave. Charles thought to himself how computer experts seemed to be small men, but he was careful not to say anything. Alexander Tanner looked flustered.

Soon after that, a court official came in and announced, “Do we have everyone for the case *Riverside Networking Solutions vs Walker Bros*? Please would the plaintiff come through to the court?”

Tanner and Cudden followed the official. There was what seemed an interminable wait before the official came back. Derek Yeoman, Charles Walker, and Liam Cosgrave followed the official. Her Honour, Judge Judith Wratten was in chambers. It was a spacious office with chairs arranged in front of a large desk behind which Her Honour was seated. Liam Cosgrave had seen courtroom dramas on the telly. He had been expecting a large courtroom with the beak up on a tall bench, and lots of flunkies in black batman capes rushing all over the place.

Her Honour stood up to greet them. There were the usual formalities before Her Honour spoke, “I have heard the submission of Riverside Networking Solutions. I now have to hear the submission by the defendants, Walker Bros of Corscadden, represented by Mr Derek Yeoman of Gordon Morton Solicitors of Corscadden in Scotland. Mr Cudden has represented Riverside Networking Solutions, and I have heard from the proprietor, Mr Alexander Tanner. So, Mr Yeoman, would you kindly outline the case for the defence?”

“Yes, Your Honour. I am representing Walker Bros whose premises are in the Scottish town of Corscadden. The company operates a large department store and is owned and managed by the family of Mr Charles Edward Walker who is present today as a witness. I also have Mr Liam Wade Cosgrave as an expert witness.”

Josh Cudden relaxed at the idea of Cosgrave being an expert witness; he was just a teenager who spent an awful lot of his time up in his bedroom kidding himself that he knew about computers.

Mr Yeoman continued, “The facts are that work on the computer network at my client’s premises was carried out during routine scheduled maintenance on the evening of Monday 10th August. This was carried out remotely by the plaintiff’s company. The result of this was that the network was infected with the WannaCry Trojan. When Walker Bros opened for business, all computers on the network were infected when my client, Mr Walker, sent a whole staff e-mail.

“I will be submitting evidence to the court that will prove gross negligence on behalf of Riverside Networking Solutions that is tantamount to a serious breach of contract. I will also demonstrate that my client paid for virus protection software which was never provided. I will outline how the situation was dealt with, and my expert witness will describe the remedial action that was taken. My client will also submit evidence on how the plaintiff’s company dealt with him as he tried to contact them for help.”

Mr Yeoman outlined the events of the upgrade, and the response of Riverside Networking Solutions. Mr Cudden interjected, “What evidence does my learned friend have that my clients behaved in the manner described in his submission?”

“I would be very happy to share this with my learned friend, if I may be permitted, Your Honour,” replied Mr Yeoman. Learned was not a term that he would have associated with his opposite number who looked as if he was a sixth-former on work experience. “The evidence here is a recording made on the Walker Bros telephone system. My client records all calls in and out for staff training purposes.”

The call reminded the district judge of a scene from Monty Python from when she was a teenager. She had found it funny when it was new, and forty years later, it still tickled her. This case had all the features of a good sketch. She had to keep a

grip on herself and succeeded in looking inscrutable. Alexander Tanner was not looking comfortable with the recording. His employees sounded like rank amateurs, and that was the best way of looking at it. He didn't come across that well, either.

Her Honour said, "Mr Walker, in preparation for the case, I have heard the conversations that you had with Mr Tanner's company. Could you outline how the problems that arose caused difficulties to your company?"

"Yes, Your Honour, my company's computer systems are vital for its daily operations. They record all sales, they monitor stock levels from which we know when to order, they collect data from our customers to help us to anticipate buying patterns and help us to predict the kinds of products that our customers want in the future. The botched upgrade caused all the data to be lost."

Mr Cudden interjected, "My client maintains that you have made all this up to avoid paying for the year's notice."

"No, that is not the case," Mr Walker replied. "I know next to nothing about computers. I was reporting to Mr Tanner what my computer expert was telling me. At my age, I wouldn't use terms like *Wannasip*. In over fifty years trading and running my company, I have never breached a contract."

"My client maintains that you refused to pay for that, and he never received payment for the work done on the upgrade. You are in breach of contract there, Mr Walker."

"That is not true. Out of good will, I paid the initial bill to your client. The cheque was cleared on the eighteenth of August. If you want evidence, I have the relevant accounts. I was also charged £100 per hour + VAT for the telephone call, which I paid. Again, it's in the accounts. I still object to being

referred to as an ‘old codger’, a ‘Scottish geezer’, ‘mate’, and a ‘fart’. As you heard, they said our system was from the ark.”

“Do you have the accounts?” asked the judge.

Mr Yeoman passed the accounts file to her. She scrutinised it carefully, before saying, “Mr Walker, please could you continue on how your company dealt with the failure of the computer network?”

“We have a back-up procedure in case this sort of thing happens. We have kept all the old tills with ledger books, and all staff are trained in manual sales processing. Fortunately, our telephone system, which is quite old-fashioned, is kept entirely separate from the computer network. We have an emergency supply of dockets for the credit-card payments. All of my staff worked long hours to carry out the cashing up procedure. We also have two back-up copies of our data at the end of each working day, one of which is stored off the premises. We are glad that we did this, because all the data that were on the server were destroyed by the Trojan.

“Our customer and supplier databases are on a stand-alone computer for data-security. If those data had been destroyed or hacked, we could be liable for millions in compensation, as well as massive fines.

“We were told by the plaintiff that the first time that they could come to sort things out was in late September. That would have been seven weeks without our computer network. That would have made life very difficult for us. That is why I asked my staff if they knew of anyone who could do it faster. And that is why Mr Cosgrave is here.”

Mr Yeoman spoke, “Mr Tanner, is there any reason why it would have taken you so long to get to Corscadden? Did you not

realise how vital my client's network was to the running of his business?"

Mr Tanner addressed the middle distance, "We never said that. My company is very professional. My employees would have jumped to it to help."

"I don't think your employees did, you know," Mr Yeoman replied. "I'll play the clip again."

"I think we know what's wrong."

"Are you going to sort it out?"

"We'll need to come up to your premises."

"When? I need it sorting out immediately. My network is a vital part of my business."

"I'll have a look in the diary. We're very busy at the moment. The earliest we can do it is Monday 21st September. Because you are so far out, there will be a £1000 call out fee per engineer. There will be three of us, and it will be £500 per machine..."

"WHAT? Do you mean to tell me that because of your company's incompetence, I am going to be hit with a bill for £53000?"

"We're not a charity, you know. It's going to be a lot of work, and it will take five days at least. In the meantime, you can write things down on bits of paper."

"Is Mr Tanner there? I need to speak to him."

"Sorry, mate. He's away at the moment. Can I give him a message?"

"Yes. I am struggling to remain polite and professional in the face of what could do irreparable damage to my company because of sloppy practice. I would like to talk to him as a matter of urgency. Therefore,

please would you be so kind as to ring him and ask me to ring me as a matter of urgency. My phone number is 01781 46 2525.”

“*Oh, a land line. How tweek!*”

“*Yes, it is a land line. It is perfectly good, and Mr Tanner and I will be able to have a perfectly good conversation on it. Good afternoon.*”

Mr Yeoman continued, “So Mr Tanner, is it professional for your employees to make fun of your clients’ hardware and software?”

Tanner stared into the middle distance. He looked like a naughty boy in front of the headmistress.

“*We have your conversation with my client, as well, Mr Tanner,*” said Mr Yeoman. “*Would you like me to play it to the court?*”

The next exchange was played over the sound system.

“*Good morning, may I speak to Mr Tanner?*”

“*What’s your name?*”

“*My name is Charles Walker of Walker Bros in Corscadden. I need to speak to Mr Tanner as a matter of urgency.*”

“*Alex, can you speak to this Scottish geezer? He’s the one I told you about with the system and software from the Ark.*”

“*Tell him to bugger off. I’m too busy!*”

“*I’m sorry, Mr Walker, Mr Tanner is in a meeting with an important client.*”

“*Well, I am an important client. I pay forty thousand a year to your company. I need to speak to Mr Tanner, and I need to speak to him now.*”

“*I have said that he is in an important meeting.*”

“He isn’t actually – he said, and I heard it, ‘Tell him to bugger off. I’m too busy.’ So will you kindly ask him to come to the telephone?”

“He won’t like it.”

“Well, I don’t like sitting here being told to bugger off. He is going to like it even less when I put things into the hands of my solicitor. So, for the third time of asking, will you please get Mr Tanner to answer the telephone to me? Please will you do it now?”

“Alex, you need to speak to the old codger. He says he’s going to get his solicitor. The old fart is going to have a seizure unless you do.”

“Oh shit! Shit! Twats like him want the whole fucking world but don’t want to pay for it. That man is so old hat he doesn’t open on a Sunday. That kit of his, it needs to be on the scrapheap!”

“Hello Mr Walker, how can I help you? You realise that I have had to break off an important meeting with one of my most important clients?”

“I am very sorry I have done this. However, I, too, am an important client of yours, and I am telling you now that I am an important ex-client of yours. I am telling you now that I am dismissing Riverside Networking Solutions from the contract you hold with Walker Bros of Corscadden.”

“You can’t do that!”

“I can. I have spoken to Mr Derek Yeoman of Gordon Morton Solicitors of Corscadden. I can also sue you for the damage that you have done to my company during the botched upgrade work you did on Monday to Tuesday last week.”

“You can’t do that. The work was done, wasn’t it? We did the work on Monday evening. It worked fine.”

“So fine that it infected my entire network with the Wannaspit ransomware.”

“That won’t have come from my employees. One of yours did it. Perhaps they opened an e-mail that they shouldn’t.”

“I am sorry Mr Tanner, but the network logs show that the Wannaspit was added to the network during the upgrade.”

“It can’t have. Kevin Bowcock did the work. It’s on the service sheet. He’s one of my best engineers. He would never have allowed anything like that to get mixed up with an upgrade.”

“He didn’t you know. He’s on holiday until the end of next week. The work was done by another of your employees called Marley.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I was told that Mr Bowcock was on holiday. He was off the week before last, last week, and next week. Surely you know when your key members of staff are on holiday?”

“If Mr Bowcock wasn’t here, the work shouldn’t have been done.”

“Well, it was, and it ruined my network. Do you have members of staff called Marley, Indo, and Milo?”

“Yes. What is that to you?”

“The fact that I overheard a conversation between Marley and Indo in which Marley called Indo a very rude word which I don’t use with my staff. Indo had forwarded an e-mail which had the Wannaspit ransomware.”

“How come you were listening in to conversations between members of my staff?”

“I couldn’t miss it. The phone was put on the desk, and I heard everything, including calling me an old Scots codger and a geezer. I would never tolerate any of my staff saying that about one of my customers. And I haven’t finished yet. I utterly object to being addressed as ‘mate’. I am NOT Milo’s mate. His demeanour was, to say the least, slovenly.”

“That can’t be right. I expect all my staff to be very professional with my customers.”

“Perhaps while the cat’s away, the mice come out to play. Mr Tanner, I am not satisfied with the urgency with which you are dealing with this. I do not consider a wait of six weeks to have you come up to fix my network as remotely acceptable. Nor do I accept a bill for £100 + VAT for being told I am an old codger, and to be addressed as ‘mate’.”

“We’re very busy and you are a long way away from us.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry. We got the work done locally – a friend of my grandsons, if you really want to know.”

“You’re not allowed to do that. You are in breach of contract. How did he get into the system?”

“He used the password.”

“He had no right to that.”

“He had every right. You don’t seem to understand that my network was non-functional last Tuesday. My staff had a lot of extra work to do. They work hard enough as it is, without all the extra work because your goons had destroyed my computer network. And you haven’t been maintaining it properly even before this happened.”

“What’s the evidence?”

“I’ll share the report that was written for me. You will understand it better than I do. I am a mere shopkeeper, not a computer expert. I have a list of what’s on our network. As well as the Wannaspit Trojan, there is...”

“You’re making it up!”

“How can I make this stuff up? I know little enough about computers as it is. By the way, your engineers think that my system is one step up from an abacus. Their words, not mine. What I do know is that security software has to be kept up to date. We have paid you to ensure that

it is, but our copy was three years out of date. Can you explain that to me please?"

"You have no right to allow a kid to access any network that we are responsible for. You are in breach of your contract. I will be speaking to my solicitor with a view to suing you."

"The point, Mr Tanner, is that this seventeen-year-old has repaired our system and it is fully functional, unlike the state it was left in for us on Tuesday morning. He had to reinstall everything, and he had five of my tech-savvy staff working with him. If I receive a solicitor's letter on your behalf, I guarantee you right now that I will countersue for compensation for putting my company at an unacceptable risk. Fortunately, we back up our data. We also have a back-up plan."

"Bully for you!"

"Mr Tanner, I really don't think you understand about customer service. If one of my customers is displeased with our service, we do everything to put it right to the customer's satisfaction. A satisfied customer may come back. A dissatisfied customer certainly will not. And we at Walker Bros are definitely in the latter category. I have found you very similar in your approach as your junior employees whose manner was akin to a cheap chav."

"Are you calling me a chav, Mr Walker?"

"No, I am not. I am simply observing that your attitude to customer service is, to say the least, rather lacking. To assure the future success of your business, you will need to work on that particular area. This is advice that I am giving you for free, with fifty-five years of experience. You are free to heed it or ignore it. I won't know as my company will have nothing more to do with yours. As I have said, I will confirm this in writing and will advise my solicitor so that he will be aware of the action you propose. Good morning."

"Not a professional way to deal with a client who has genuine reason to be dissatisfied with the performance of your company, is it?"

Tanner was looking decidedly uncomfortable. He had never seen the old Scottish geezer before and was genuinely surprised that a man in his seventies should still look so elegant. Given the circumstances, he did not want to meet him again; the feeling was quite mutual.

Mr Cudden asked, “My client has asked me to find out from my learned friend what the role of the friend of Mr Walker’s grandsons was. My client has also asked if the small boy who is with the defendants is that friend.”

Mr Yeoman replied, “I would confirm that fact, although I am sure that my witness would find the reference to him as a ‘small boy’ as quite offensive. He has demonstrated expertise in restarting the network. Mr Cosgrave has very kindly written a detailed technical report of what he found on the Walker Bros server and machines. I will, therefore, ask my witness to describe to the court the actions he took and what he found.”

And that is what Liam Cosgrave did. He recalled how he was called in by his friend, Ryan Fleetwood. At first, he thought it was a wind-up. Mr Walker was on the phone, and he went down to help. He had heard of the Wannaspit Trojan. He described how it was easy to identify and remove. It was a crude bit of malware which had been devised by a teenager up in his bedroom who had ended up before the beak. Any half-decent security software should have caught it. He confirmed that its source was the upgrade. He listed a whole menagerie of other malware that had been picked up in the absence of up-to-date security software. The security software had not been updated, even though Walker Bros had paid the subscription. This malware had slowed the network down and had made the network vulnerable to hackers. It could have compromised customer data. Liam had trained some of the tech-savvy employees to clean the hard drives, re-install the operating system, and reload the company software.

Her Honour said, “Thank you for your submission, Mr Cosgrave. I have also read your very comprehensive report. Now I don’t know much about computers, but it is clear that you have a considerable knowledge about the subject.”

“Thank you, My Lady. I have always been interested in computers. I did Advanced Higher in Computing, and I am doing it at university.”

Mr Tanner and Mr Cudden had a hushed conversation, and Mr Cudden said, “My client objects. He thinks that Mr Cosgrave is just a teenage kid who knows just enough about computers to be dangerous.”

“My learnèd friend should understand,” replied Mr Yeoman, “that the actions of Mr Cosgrave got my client’s computer network going again and restored its functionality. It works better now than it had done since the contract was taken out with Riverside Networking Solutions. Additionally, he installed the security software after my client purchased it on the company credit card. It’s there in the accounts. It took Mr Cosgrave and his team five days, working from early morning until late in the evening to get the network sorted.”

Tanner snorted, to which Mr Yeoman added, “My client was so pleased with Mr Cosgrave’s work, that he has asked him to do the maintenance when he is back from university.”

Tanner intervened, “That little boy has made it all up. I have been doing this stuff since before he was born. I knew more about computers at five than he ever did. He is hardly old enough to wipe his own arse, let alone tell me how to do my job! Do you realise that that little boy has committed a crime under the Computer Misuse Act 1990?”

Mr Yeoman was immediate in his reply, “Mr Cosgrave has not committed any crime at all. He was given full authorisation

by my client who owns the hardware and the licences to the software to take whatever action was necessary to restore it to a functional state.”

Her Honour was glaring at Mr Tanner. “I will not have interruptions like that in my court. Mr Tanner, you are to address the court through your solicitor, please. Mr Cosgrave, I apologise on behalf of the court.”

Tanner glared at Cosgrave. He did not like being outsmarted by teenagers. His knowledge and understanding of networking systems had been more than matched by that of the little boy. He knew full well that Cosgrave was giving the correct interpretation of what had been going on. It would require nothing short of a bloody miracle for this case to go in his company’s favour. He was going to kick Marley, Indo, and Milo up their arses when he got back to the office. There wouldn’t be much of an office by the time he had finished. His company certainly would be finished, especially as that old Scottish codger was countersuing. They would be taking him to the cleaners.

Josh Cudden tried hard for his client in the final statements, but Derek Yeoman’s final statement was excoriating. He described the actions of Riverside Networking Solutions as a comedy of errors and was scathing about how they had tried to fleece his client by claiming that payments had not been paid, payments that were made out of good will. Riverside Networking Solutions had, by their gross negligence, demonstrated that they were incapable of fulfilment of their side of the contract between them and Walker Bros. Therefore, Mr Walker had every right to dismiss them from the contract.

Her Honour Judge Wratten announced that the court would adjourn for luncheon, and that she would give her ruling as soon as they got back. Mr Yeoman took his client and expert witness to a restaurant in Sunderland town centre. Liam

Cosgrave had to show his proof-of-age card to prove that he was eighteen before he could have a glass of wine. There was an air of quiet confidence as they had their lunch, and both Charles Walker and Derek Yeoman were very grateful for all the hard work that Liam had put in. It had been very professional.

“If I ran my own company,” said Liam, “I would never allow any of my employees to talk to a client like they talked to you, Mr Walker.”

“I think that Mr Tanner runs a rather sloppy ship,” replied Charles Walker.

The day was going to go from bad to worse for Alexander Tanner. He had gone back to the office with Josh Cudden, who was trying to assure him that there was every chance that they would win. Tanner could not share his solicitor’s optimism. Cosgrave had been talking perfect sense, despite Tanner’s attempts to rubbish him. Tanner was depending on the success of this case to wring out sixty grand from Walker Bros. The bank was getting niggly about the overdraft. He and Kevin were up to scratch. He would be, as he was the boss. But he had picked up some right little imbeciles in the form of Marley, Indo, and Milo. They were as thick as mince and lazy as toads. He was looking for an excuse to get rid of them; several clients had complained about their attitude. Although he had tried to cover it up, he knew that the old Scots geezer was absolutely right. The trouble was that when the cats were away, the mice came out to play, and Indo had well and truly screwed up with the Wannaspit Trojan. They had antagonised a major client, a move that was not good for a struggling business. The failure to arrange security software for his major client had resulted from the bank refusing to authorise payment on the Riverside Networking Solutions credit card. He had hoped that the old Scottish geezer wouldn’t notice

the cover up. After all he knew nothing about computers and had hardware and software that was about when Tanner was a scrawny long-haired youth playing footy in short *Adidas* shorts.

When they went back to hear Her Honour's judgement, Alexander Tanner had a dire sense of foreboding. The phrase, "going bust" was to the front of his mind. The return fixture was next week up in Buchanan Court of Sessions. They were going to wipe the floor with him. Her Honour bowed to the court and sat down behind her desk. She had been busy during the previous ninety minutes.

"I have now completed my assessment of the case of *Riverside Networking Solutions vs Walker Bros*. My judgement is without prejudice to the further legal action that is to take place at the Buchanan Court of Sessions. I find in favour of the defendants, Walker Bros of Corscadden.

"It is clear to me that far from being in breach of contract, Walker Bros had every right to terminate the contract that they held with the plaintiff. The plaintiff's standard of service was well below the standard that should be rightly expected in a contract that is worth forty thousand pounds a year. It is obvious that the plaintiffs were not providing an adequate service to the defendants, and from the recorded telephone conversations that customer service was carried out in a very casual manner. The infection of the Walker Bros network by an easily identifiable malware should never have happened, and the report that I have read in preparation for this case demonstrates that clearly. I took the liberty of having the evidence reviewed by a networking expert before the case, and he described it as being 'spot-on' and a very well written report. I congratulate its author. Given the critical nature of the computer network to a large department store in the twenty-first century, it can be considered hardly surprising that Mr Walker would not wish his network to be out of action for six weeks. It is entirely reasonable to look to

another expert in computer services to get the network up and running as soon as possible. The fact that the expert was an seventeen-year-old is neither here nor there. Mr Cosgrave, I would like to thank you personally for all the time and help you have given to Mr Walker, and for your contribution to the case. Your work made my judgement much easier.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“I find it disturbing that the subscription to the security software was not updated when it had been paid for. To take money and not give the services paid for is tantamount to fraud. The plaintiff allowed the Walker Bros network to be exposed to a very large amount of malware, which could have led to such serious damage to the company that it could have had its future put in jeopardy. It is a mercy that Walker Bros had a back-up plan for an emergency such as this. The breach of contract was clearly in the plaintiff’s negligence towards the defendant.

“In contrast to the defendant’s case, the plaintiff’s case was weak and poorly presented. Mr Tanner, I suggest that your company needs to undergo a major shift in culture as regards its attitude towards its service to its customers. Covering up of mistakes and misdemeanours is not a viable business model. Mr Tanner, I would advise you not to show disrespect to the witnesses to a court case in the future, for when you do, you are showing disrespect to the court itself.

“I therefore order that the demand made by Riverside Networking Solutions be annulled forthwith. Additionally, I order that all expenses accrued by Gordon Morton Solicitors, their senior partner, Mr Yeoman, and their client, Mr Walker of Walker Bros, and those of the expert witness, Mr Cosgrave, should be borne by the plaintiff.”

With that, the court stood up, and Her Honour bowed to the court, and left.

The defendants left Sunderland feeling buoyed up that their case had been vindicated. There was a mild feeling of irritation that Riverside Networking Solutions had caused a lot of trouble in trying to sue them, in order to pull a fast one. Charles Walker would have much preferred to have spent the day serving his customers and tailoring their very expensive suits. Mr Yeoman felt sure that they would not turn up for the return fixture. Charles Walker didn't want to bleed them dry; that was not his style. He just wanted some redress for the extra work that his staff had been put to. Liam Cosgrave just wanted to get back to his hall of residence in Stirling.

Alexander Tanner had a sinking feeling as Mr Cudden gave him an estimate for the bill he was going to be hit with. It ran into five figures. Riverside Networking Solutions was not the flavour of the month at the bank. He would need to consider carefully what he was going to do. Close the operation down before it was closed down for him seemed to be the least bad option. He didn't like Sunderland and wanted to go back to the East Midlands where his friends and family lived.

When he got back to his premises, all the lights were out. This annoyed Tanner. Kevin Bowcock was out on a job at Beckton-on-Sower. But where were Marley, Milo, and Indo? They should have been holding the fort. Tanner unlocked the front door and hurled himself up the stairs. The place was empty. One of the monitors was showing a pornographic movie. It was the sort of thing that was best unwatched. How could people debase themselves to act out that kind of filth? Tanner often had suspected that when the cat was away, the mice came out to play. This confirmed it.

Therefore, he decided to act the cat and ambush the mice when they came back in. So, he locked the door, and, leaving the

lights off, he waited in his office, occupying himself not with mixed metaphors, but with filling out the P45 forms he was going to present to his prodigal sons. He certainly was not going to kill the fatted calf.

Tanner heard the back door being unlocked and the sound of young male voices. There was a certain amount of slurring, and the conversation had a content that was not only vulgar but was also demeaning to women. For all his faults, Tanner could never be accused of sexism. He allowed his employees to resume their seats to watch the porn movie. He heard cans of lager being opened. He allowed them to get comfortable, before creeping to the network room and switching on the light. The unison of their jump and their shocked expressions were the only things that gave him any sense of satisfaction that day.

Chapter 9

Tuesday 6th October 2015

“Right, you shower of imbeciles, get into my office, NOW!” Alexander Tanner yelled at his three errant employees. Sheepishly Milo, Marley, and Indo traipsed from the network room at Riverside Networking Solutions into their boss’s office. Their gait was not steady. Tanner turned off the computer, sparing himself any further sight of the juvenile filth that they were watching. He went into the kitchenette and poured the cans of lager down the sink. Tanner strode into his office where the three young men had made themselves comfortable.

“Who told you that you could sit down?” Tanner shouted. “Stand up. You three fuckwits have probably cost me my company. I pay you to come in here to sort out my customers’ computing problems. That is what I expected you to be doing when I came back from the court. Instead, what were you lot doing?”

“We just went for a couple in the pub over lunch,” said Marley with an air of offended innocence.

“At 10 o’clock, half an hour after I went out? I saw it on the CCTV,” Tanner retorted. “I saw that the phone was ringing as well. I have had five messages left by customers. What do you think they are going to do?”

“Ring tomorrow,” ventured Milo. “So why are you stressing about it?”

“They won’t ring tomorrow, you idiot!” Tanner yelled. He was revving up to do murder. “They will go somewhere else!”

“Don’t wet yourself about it, Alex,” said Indo. “They’ll get it done.”

“By someone else, you moron!” shouted Tanner. “I have spent months covering up for you lot. What have you managed

to do? You have pissed off a good number of my customers. They've gone elsewhere. You totally screwed up with that Wannaspit Trojan and fucked up the network of one of our best customers.”

“It was only that old Scots fart,” replied Indo who didn’t realise that he was in trouble. “You ought to have heard him, Alex. He sounded like something out of a Halloween story. XP network an’ all. I always said he was one step up from the abacus. It was a real scream!”

“So much of a scream, Indo, that he sacked us. That’s where I have been, trying to get money out of him to pay your wages!”

“How did you get on?”

“What do you think? We lost the case! It was because of you that we had the trouble in the first place. You ought to have heard your conversation with him. It was a disgrace. Call that customer service, because I don’t.”

“Well, you weren’t exactly polite about him, Alex,” said Marley.

“Yes, Marley, I was trying to cover up for you idiots. Now it’s backfired. You come back rat-arsed from the pub. You continue your binge drinking at work, and not content with that, you watch porn on my system. Marley, you should have been supervising these two properly. I have trusted you, but you have let them get away with murder. Marley, this is for you. Indo, this is for you. Milo, this is for you.”

With that, Tanner issued the three men with their P45s. “Give me your keys and ID badges, NOW... Pick up your coats and bags... Get out of these premises NOW! You’re FIRED!”

Tanner heard them traipse down the stairs and the front door slammed behind them. He picked up the phone to talk to Kevin Bowcock. At least he wasn't a complete idiot but telling him that the company was now in serious trouble was not going to be easy. Being his own boss was not half of what it was cracked up to be. He was in a profession for which there was considerable demand, and with his skills, he would soon find a job and be paid three times as much. He had not liked the North East of England and longed to go back to the East Midlands. He had felt homesick for some time. Perhaps that was why his eye was off the ball as far as employing Marley was concerned. The man was hippy lazy. As for Milo and Indo, he couldn't remember which barrel he had scraped them from.

He would find a business agent and put Riverside Networking Solutions up for sale. At least he owned the premises. Number 35, Wellesley Street, Sunderland, was not exactly prime real estate, but the sale would at least pay for the colossal bill that Forster and Partners were going to hit him for. It had been a truly bad day at the office. He would go home now. For the rest of the week, he would arrange the sale of Riverside Networking Solutions as a going concern which still had a bit of good will left from its shrinking customer base. Kevin Bowcock might well buy it.

That evening, Marley Dixon was arrested by the police in Newcastle for being drunk and incapable in the city centre. He didn't remember how he had got there from Sunderland but presumed he had managed to catch the Metro. He vaguely remembered that he had been sacked, which was confirmed by the presence of a P45 in his pocket. He just remembered that he had got separated from Milo and Indo when he went to a pub in the centre of Sunderland and a bouncer had thrown him out. Now he was spending the night in the slammer and would no

doubt be up before the beak for his troubles. And he had a hangover. He looked a complete mess and felt it too.

In the early hours of Wednesday morning, 7th October, Wellesley Street was rocked by a huge explosion. Number 35 Wellesley Street was destroyed in the blast, while 33 and 37 were wrecked in the subsequent fire. 31 and 39 were severely damaged. The premises opposite were also severely damaged and Number 42 caught fire. Two university students were blown out of their beds in a nearby flat and had to be taken to hospital with some injuries. Twenty parked cars were either destroyed or seriously damaged.

The cause was obvious. There was a pungent smell of petrol and gas. The confirmation of the cause was determined soon after the fire brigade had doused the flames. Two young men had been seen running away down the back alley just before the explosion. They had been picked up on CCTV. The police helicopter was by total coincidence flying over Sunderland on its way back from another job, and within minutes the young men were being tracked by the helicops.

Back in his flat, Alexander Tanner was having a bad night's sleep. It had been a thoroughly awful day capped by the fact he couldn't get to sleep. His business was on the brink of failure, and now he had had to sack three employees in whom he had invested a great deal of time, fruitlessly as it had turned out. Just as he had managed to get to sleep, the phone rang by his bed.

"Mr Tanner? I am ringing from the Northumbria Police in Sunderland," said the voice from the other end.

“What’s happened?” replied Tanner who had a dire sense of foreboding but was not in the state to string more than two words together.

“Are you the owner of 35, Wellesley Street?”

“Yes, I run my business from there.”

“I am afraid that there has been an explosion there, and we are carrying out an investigation into the causes.”

“Oh shit! I need to get down there at once.”

“No point. There’s nothing left. It’s taken out your neighbours as well. We would like to talk to you to help us with our investigation. We have sent a couple of officers to your home, and they should be arriving soon.”

Tanner was drowsy as he got dressed and wondered if the boiler had gone wrong. It had done so a couple of years ago and filled the premises with gas. The gas board had done urgent repairs and assured him that a production fault was responsible, and the new modified part would not allow that to happen again. He went through a mental list of who might have a sufficient grudge against him to blow up his premises. It could have been that Scots geezer, but somehow it didn’t fit. Although Walker Bros had wiped the floor with him yesterday, old Walker didn’t seem to be the vengeful type. It didn’t fit. The doorbell rang and two female constables came up the stairs to the flat.

“Good Morning, Mr Tanner. We are so sorry to disturb you in the small hours, but we are investigating a serious arson attack on your premises.”

“Arson? Are you sure it’s not an accident like a gas leak?”

“Afraid not. It’s definitely arson. The place stank of petrol, as well as gas. We think at first reckoning that whoever did this left the gas on and doused the place with petrol. Of

course we will get to the bottom of what caused it, once the place has cooled down. We think they let themselves in through the back door. It was blown off its frame, but it was unlocked.”

“Surely the alarm went off. I set it as I left the premises.”

“Who occupies the ground floor of the premises? Do you think they were up to something?”

“No way. A Mr Dalton runs an insurance brokerage from there. He’s a dead nice bloke. Pays his rent six months in advance. He wasn’t in yesterday. He visits his clients on a Tuesday. He rents the place off me, and uses it to talk to his clients, but he also does a lot of work from home. He has the place so that he keeps out of his wife’s hair. It can’t be him.”

“It does tally. We have spoken to Mr Dalton, and he says he was visiting clients as you said. A couple of clients have already corroborated that. Is there anyone else you can think of?”

Tanner went through a mental list of clients that Milo and Indo had pissed off. They might have fired him from their contracts, but they certainly would not fire his premises. The thought of Indo and Milo pissing off clients set him down another track. He said, “I had to let go three employees yesterday, Marley Dixon, Milo Forbes, and Indo McIntyre. I sacked them for being drunk at work and watching porn on my network. Milo and Indo were a couple of complete idiots; they ran rings around Marley. Marley was quite good until I took those two on. Still, I can’t imagine them doing it.”

“Mr Tanner, did you do it? Insurance job? Things getting tricky? Sorry, but these are questions we have to ask.”

Tanner could have erupted but decided that it would not be a wise course of action. “No,” he said, “why should I do that? Things are difficult, but I am selling the company and the premises. I would get far more for them intact and as a going

concern. As it is, I am going to get bugger-all for what is going to be a hole in the ground. Besides, I have been at home all evening. You can ask my neighbours. I came back in my car in the early evening. If I had done an insurance job as you suggest, my car would still be warm. You can go and check it.”

One of the constables went back down to check the car. It was cold. The other was talking on her radio to control. Two young men were seen running down the back-alley seconds before the explosion.

“Mr Tanner, you mentioned three names, Marley Dixon, Milo Forbes, and Indo McIntyre. You don’t think they were involved? Don’t you think that they could have a grudge if you had just sacked them?”

“I suppose so, but I gave them every chance.”

“I don’t think they were actually being that grateful. They clearly were taking the piss by irritating your customers, drinking at work, and watching porn. So, it is more than possible that they would have a grudge and have the last laugh by blowing up your premises.”

The radio crackled. The voice at the other end asked for an update on what the two constables had found. “We are with Mr Tanner,” replied the first constable. “He has given us three possible names. They are employees that he sacked yesterday afternoon. They will probably have a grudge. The names are Marley Dixon, Milo Forbes, and Indo McIntyre.”

The voice at Headquarters replied, “It can’t be Dixon. He’s in custody after being picked up in Newcastle city centre for being drunk and incapable. He’s nursing a hangover.”

“Typical,” said Tanner.

“Do you think he was in on the act, Mr Tanner?” asked the second constable.

“Not Marley. I don’t think he would have had the gumption.”

By the next morning, two twenty-year-old men had been arrested on suspicion of causing an explosion likely to endanger life and/or damage property, arson, and aggravated trespass. Naturally they denied any knowledge. Indo McIntyre dismissed as coincidence the fact that he had a key that fitted the back door to 35, Wellesley Street. He denied that he had bought a five-litre plastic petrol carrier from a local garage and filled it up, paying for it with a debit card. The staff at the garage had told the police that the man had told them that his car had run out of petrol, and he would be back to fill it up. The petrol can had been found in the back alley and carried his DNA.

Indo said that Marley had egged him and Milo on to do it and had opened the back door and turned off the alarm. Not a good story, as Marley was in the nick in Newcastle shaking off a very bad hangover. Milo said that Mr Tanner had paid them to do it as an insurance job, which didn’t fit that well with being sacked. The interviews were, for the investigating officers, a pushover. Neither Indo nor Milo was a particularly clever villain. Indo had form for assault, theft, and taking away a motor vehicle without consent. They couldn’t maintain the consistency of their false alibies or accusations, and it soon came out that the offences were committed as an act of vengeance against Alexander Tanner for dismissing them from his employment.

Milo Forbes and Indo McIntyre were charged later that day with causing an explosion likely to endanger life and/or damage property, arson, and aggravated trespass. On top of that, there were charges of negligently causing actual bodily harm to

Jonathan James Medlock and Joshua Leslie Adams. On Thursday 8th October, they appeared in front of Sunderland Magistrates and were remanded in custody.

Foster and Partners were instructed to settle out of court in the case of Walker Bros vs Riverside Networking Solutions to be heard in the Buchanan Court of Sessions. Alexander Tanner asked them to dispose of 35, Wellesley Street, as a piece of real estate, in reality a pile of about 35 tonnes of blackened red-brick rubble. The payment would just about cover the fees. The insurance company were reluctant to pay out as it was two of Mr Tanner's employees who had unlocked the premises and blown it up. Mr Tanner should have ensured that all keys had been returned.

On Thursday afternoon, Derek Yeoman rang Charles Walker to tell him that Riverside Networking Solutions no longer existed.

“Has Tanner gone out of business?” Charles Walker asked. “Would we have a claim on any of his assets?”

“It’s more than that. He sacked three of his staff on Tuesday,” replied Mr Yeoman. “Two of them went back to his premises during the early hours of Wednesday and fired the place. It was levelled to the ground, along with his neighbours.”

“Don’t tell me, Marley, Indo, and Milo.”

“Hole in one, Charles. Personally, I don’t think the return fixture is going to be worth it. Tanner is handing over what remains of his business, which is not much, to Fosters. We won’t get much out of him.”

“Derek, getting money out of Tanner is the least of my priorities. The point I wanted to make at the Court of Sessions was that he should not be seen to be getting away with underhand business practice.”

“Fosters have told me it was all getting too much for Tanner. As soon as he has cleared up the mess in Sunderland, he is going home to the Midlands to work for someone else. Being his own boss was not half what it was cracked up to be. As far as getting money out of Tanner, forget it. They are going to sell his hole in the ground and use the money for what he owes them.”

“I agree, Derek. I know they will find in our favour, but while we will win and they make an award, it will be just words. I would rather spend next Wednesday serving my customers than sitting about at Buchanan Court of Sessions.”

And that is what Charles did.

Chapter 10

Late October 2015

Tamsin Heady enjoyed her Skype conversations with Aidan Walker. They also did what not many young lovers did at the start of the Twenty-First Century; they wrote handwritten letters. They were smoochy, as one might expect, and each of them treasured them, putting the letters in a folder. Unlike other love letters, they contained handwritten excerpts of music. Tamsin was an accomplished pianist, and she was continuing to make good progress in composition. Aidy was a good keyboard player, but not quite at the level of Tamsin, but he had taught himself to compose music from about the age of twelve. The tone of the letters set the romantic nature of their relationship.

Tamsin had her room in College House, where she stayed every other week in order to do her morning and evening patrols. Like her predecessors she was punctilious in carrying out the duty. Every morning, she would bump into John the Jannie, who would always say, "Good morning, Miss Heady." She was sixteen, and he was sixty-one, but he always treated her with the same respect as he would the headmaster or the Chairman of the School Board. Jannie Brian was the same. It was getting dark now, and, as in previous years the morning and evening patrols were carried out with another prefect. The chances of either she or the Head Boy, Daniel Taylor, being set upon were low, but nobody wanted to take any chances.

During school, Tamsin was careful not to daydream about Aidan, however gorgeous he was. So, the admonition of "Heady, lassie, will ye no pay attention?" was never heard. It had happened to her once, in Mr Andrews' chemistry lesson in Secondary 4. He had been rabbiting on about electron donation, and she had wondered why anyone would want to donate an electron. Being the highly intelligent girl that she was, she had got

to grips with electron donation and scored highly in her Chemistry National 5.

During morning and evening patrol, she would spend much of the time imagining Aidy walking beside her hand in hand. Not everyone had a fashion model for their boyfriend, let alone one who was shy and gentle, and was from a family that knew about fashionable elegance. She had seen Mr Walker in Walker Bros many times. She had been told he was in his seventies, but he was still very elegant for someone of that age. Aidy would be as well. Aidy was so like his dad. Aidy's dad still looked young, and he was in his early forties. Tamsin had seen Aidy's dad in pictures when he was young. He was cute. She liked to imagine Aidy in his black running shorts, which revealed the full extent of his long smooth colt-like legs.

At half-term, she had been down to Edinburgh and stayed with Aidy, Ewan, Chris, and Jordan in their flat in Marchmont. On Friday afternoon, Aidy didn't have classes, so she had gone up to Arthur's Seat with him to watch for birds. Gemma had joined them on Friday evening. On the Saturday they had gone running and played badminton at The Pleasance. They had gone to a concert in the evening. Sunday had come too soon, and in the afternoon, she had to catch the train back to Maunder.

Several times they had sat together on the settee and cuddled. She had guided his hands onto her chest. Her boobs were small. She had fondled his bum before guiding his hands around her short denim skirt, for him to fondle her. She felt safe with Aidy. She had had unwelcome attention from boys who had tried it on. She had dealt with it effectively, but it still rankled. Such boys were, fortunately, rare in Caddie-land, and would soon get their come-uppance when they tried it on with one or two of the amazons who were in the Women's First Fifteen. If anyone had tried it on with her fellow prefect who rowed at five in the Women's First Eight, Shona McCartney, it would have been a

clear indication that the boy would be an incorrigible sex-pest. Most Caddie boys tended to think of girls in the nicest and most respectful possible way. A good number, like Danny, thought about boys instead. With Aidy, she felt totally safe. There was a deep and growing love and trust between her and Aidy.

Aidy was coming home to Brewster House on Friday where they were going to have a joint do for his granddad's retirement and his grandma's seventieth birthday. He had asked her to come. As she thought of Aidy (in his sports shorts or kilt), little thrills ran through her body. If she had tail feathers, they would have spread out. Instead, she had her short tartan skirt (Douglas Blue Modern), her long green socks with her green sweater, her grey and blue tie, and her navy-blue jacket, and the wind whipped about her bare thighs. She didn't mind; she was used to it. She was typical of people in Buchananshire, scrawny and lanky, but as tough as old boots.

As usual with the morning patrol, the school was just the same as when Tamsin had left it the evening before. Nobody had come to take it away. There were no Distant Caddies who had crept off the grounds for illicit liaisons, or to distil hooch.

As she was coming to the end of the morning patrol accompanied by Shona McCartney, Tamsin noticed a wheelbarrow and trug at the back of Greatorex House. She had seen it the evening before. John the Jannie had been clearing up leaves in the areas that his leaf-sucker couldn't reach. The grounds of Strathcadden Academy had a large number of trees and clearing up leaves seemed to be an endless job for the janitors and their team. A shape seemed to scuttle away which Tamsin caught in the corner of her eye before it had disappeared. There seemed to be a noise coming from the trug. She went over and found five kittens among the leaves. They seemed very small.

A minute later she and Shona were at the janitors' bothy at the side of College House. "Mr Murton," she called, "I have found this."

"I was wondering where I left that," replied John the Jannie. "Was it with the barrow?"

"Yes, sir. I left the barrow outside. But have a look inside the trug."

"Well, I never," exclaimed John. "Brian, come and have a look at this."

"They can't be more than four or five days old," said Brian.

The five kittens were tiny little scraps of life, and their eyes were hardly open. However, the dry leaves that were in the trug had prevented the little cats from getting too cold and the bothy was nice and warm, probably the warmest place in the entire school. Tamsin took a photo of the kittens on her mobile. It was going to be a little topic of conversation at prefects' briefing, and at lunchtime and teatime. Shona would have told everyone. Caddies loved animals and the grounds were a haven for all sorts of wildlife.

"Who put them in there?" Tamsin asked.

"I wouldn't know, Miss Heady," replied John. "But I have seen it before. Sometimes a mother cat realises she can't look after them and sometimes seems to know who might. I think they're in luck. An hour later, they might have been goners."

Tamsin held one of the kittens in her hands. It started to purr. She thought of her own cat at home who was strictly a house cat. Sophie had no interest in the outside; her territory was a small, detached house with large windows from which she could

watch the world go by, occasionally chirping at the birds that were gorging at the feeders. Shona was also holding one of the kittens.

“Will they be alright?” asked Shona. She was a tall and powerfully built young woman but still dissolved over a sight of a small helpless kitten or puppy.

“It will be touch and go, Miss McCartney,” replied John. “They are very young and vulnerable. But we will get in touch with the Cats’ Protection League as soon as we can. All we can do is keep them warm and snug, and feed them.”

The two girls went over to the canteen for breakfast. The talk was all about little cats. Tamsin went to Greatorex House having a quick pit stop before going to the morning briefing for her prefects.

Throughout the day, Tamsin kept on thinking about the little cats in their trug. She didn’t want any of the little ones to die. She wanted to check how they were, but she had a full-on day of duties as well as her lessons. There was hockey training in the afternoon. It was only in the evening that she was able to catch John the Jannie as she was doing her evening patrol.

“Good evening, Miss Heady, good evening, Miss McCartney,” he said.

“How are the little cats? Are they alright?” Tamsin asked. “I have been bursting to ask you all day.”

“They’re in the best hands possible. Mrs Salway came down in the morning and fed them with a syringe and special cat milk. I took them to the Cats’ Protection League in Cardean. They told us we had done all the right things, and they have volunteers who would hand rear them. They have every confidence that they will pull through.”

“How did they get there? Did someone dump them?”
Shona asked.

“I can tell you; it’s on the CCTV,” replied John.

It was just before dawn that a cat was caught on CCTV trotting over five times, each with a little form in her mouth. She dropped each into the trug that was beside the wheelbarrow, before trotting back to get the next one. The whole process took ten minutes, and she didn’t return.

“Why did she do that?”

“I mentioned it to the woman at the Cats’ Protection League. She thinks that the mother cat wasn’t well and had some kind of instinct that if she left them there, they would be looked after. We did find a dead mother cat behind College House. The SSPCA took her away to see what had happened to her.”

The two girls completed their evening patrol. They felt sad about the mother cat.

In their modest house in Maunder, Sophie the cat’s human servants, David and Anne Heady were thinking about empty nest syndrome. Tamsin had rarely been away from them from the time she was born. She was an only child, and very close to her parents. She wasn’t that far away, spending from Monday to Thursday every other week in Corscadden, less than ten minutes on the train. She would be back on a Friday. Now she was, in her words, pair bonding with the nephew of two sisters who were their closest friends, Jenny and Sarah Walker. (The two kept their maiden names for work purposes.)

A couple of weeks ago, a letter had arrived from Walker Bros:

Our father, Charles Walker, is retiring from Walker Bros at the end of this month on Friday 30th October 2015 at the age of 73. He decided on that date to coincide with the 70th birthday of our mother, Muriel Walker which is on Saturday 31st October. Dad has been involved with the family business for over 55 years, having started with his father in 1960. He has worked full-time at Walker Bros since 1963 and has led Walker Bros to expand into the thriving business that it is today.

While Dad is a skilful businessman of many years' experience, the bit of his job that he enjoys the most is meeting and serving our customers, many of whom he knows very well and counts as his friends. He also enjoys visiting his suppliers.

We have told Dad that we would arrange drinks and nibbles for him and our family in his office at the end of trading on the day of his retirement. However, we thought that it would be a lovely surprise for both Dad and Mum that we have a big send-off for them in the restaurant on the first floor. Therefore, we are inviting all our most loyal customers and suppliers to join us in expressing our thanks and admiration for all that Dad has done. We also want to thank our customers and suppliers who have supported us through not only the good times, but the lean times as well. We must not forget the work that Muriel has done in the back office as Company Secretary for many years.

We will be closing half an hour early on the afternoon of Friday 30th October, and we look forward to meeting you in the restaurant at 17.00. Please could you kindly let us know if you can attend? This will enable us to work out how many to cater for. Please don't tell Dad, as it is a surprise for him.

The reply from David and Anne Heady was, of course, obvious. Their company had supplied Walker Bros for twenty-five years, ever since they had started their furniture business in their very early twenties. Charles had not only bought much of their stock but also given freely of his experience in running a business. They still supplied most of the furniture sold by Walker

Bros. It was exquisitely made from solid hardwood (David loathed chipboard with a passion) and was built to last. It was pricey, but its quality made it good value. The fortunes of D A H Fine Cabinets mirrored those of Walker Bros. When the Synergy Consortium had bought out Walker Bros, they had struggled, and only just got by after laying off ten of their staff. When Walker Bros got back into business under the old management, D A H Fine Cabinets started to recover and prosper. Now they employed thirty cabinet makers and had a full order book.

David and Anne Heady were also regular customers at Walker Bros, for clothing, kitchen ware, and soft furnishing. They would definitely go.

A couple of days later, Anne got a phone call from Jenny. "We're trying to think of a ruse to keep Dad out of the way on Friday afternoon. You know that you have done the prototypes for your new range."

"Yes. You've seen them, haven't you?"

"Yes, but Dad was saying he wanted to take a closer look. You know what he's like. He wants to touch things, feel them, and try them out. Could you get him down to Mauder?"

"Of course. We'll show him the new prototypes, and he can have the works. We will also show him some of our new designs. They are on paper, but he knows what his customers want. How long do want us to keep him in for?"

"The whole afternoon, if you can."

"Certainly. Get him here for, say, half one. Send him up on the train. We'll bring him back on the pretext of picking up Tamsin from school. She's boarding that week. We'll bring her down for just after five. Get him to bring Muriel, so he doesn't think there's anything afoot."

And that is what they did.

Charles Walker always enjoyed an excuse to see a supplier as well as serving his customers. Muriel had come along as well. The prototypes of the new range were in the exhibition and sales area. D A H Fine Cabinets were always happy to supply to passing trade. With his usual eye for the finest detail, Charles Walker pored over the different items. As usual, they were exquisitely made. They would not just see use with the people who bought them, but also, they would become valuable pieces that were handed down to successive generations. That was the intention, anyway. David and Anne Heady took him upstairs to the office to show him some new designs. They were little more than sketches, with 3-D impressions on the computer. They were to be made of mahogany, with inlaid marquetry. These would be big ticket items. A marquetry expert was going to join them at the start of next month. Her craftsmanship was exceptional.

And now they were relaxing, having tea. It didn't matter at all to either Charles or Muriel that the tea was from office mugs rather than the finest bone china. The biscuits were home made by David who fancied himself as a dab hand with the baking.

“We'll miss you both,” said Anne as she sat back into her easy chair in the office.

“We'll miss you too,” said Charles. “I have always enjoyed meeting my suppliers as well as my customers. But I have to hand over the baton.”

“We're both getting on,” Muriel added. “I have been badgering Charles to do this for the last five years. Jenny and Sarah have been itching to take over for ages.”

“So, what are you going to do with all this time on your hands?” David asked.

“Get some sleep for a start.”

“And keep away from the shop,” said Muriel. “Jenny and Sarah don’t want you lingering like a bad smell. You know what you are like. You will end up sticking your nose into something. We’re thinking about a cruise next year.”

“I’m going to learn to fly,” said Charles. “Aidy and Eejay have a flight simulator. Eejay taught me how to fly on it, and I bought one for myself. I like putting myself into a little plane and pootling about from Cardean Aerodrome. Now I want to do it for real. I’ve already had my medical and have been cleared as fit. The doctor said he was amazed at how fit I was for my age.”

“It will keep you out of Jenny and Sarah’s hair,” said Muriel.

“Why didn’t Joby go into the company?” said David. He had known Joby at Corscadden Grammar School, and they had decamped together to the old Saint Oswald College when the end wall of the gym had collapsed. He remembered Joby as being a rather nerdy and dreamy boy and the teachers shouting, “Walker laddie, will ye no pay attention?”

“Joby is very intelligent. He knew far more when he was ten than I ever will,” said Charles. “He ended up as a professor, while I remained a shopkeeper. He tried to teach me Ohm’s Law, but I was still pretty clueless. But the business world would have eaten him alive.”

“You have been pretty good at being a shopkeeper,” commented Muriel.

“Jenny and Sarah have the business brains,” Charles continued. “There wasn’t much left for Joby, but he got into Physics. He knows everything about electricity, motors, and so on. He’s just been promoted to Research Director at Dunalastair

Engineering. All I know is that when you plug a motor in, it goes round and round.”

“Will Aidan go into the business?” asked David.

“No,” replied Charles. “Aidan and Ewan are very bright like their dad, but, again, the business world would eat them alive. You know what it’s like as well as I do. But Christian, my other grandson, is a different kettle of fish.”

“He does a lot in the restaurant.”

“Oh yes,” said Muriel. “He is well liked by the customers. When Jenny and Sarah finish, we’re hoping that he will take over. He will start from the bottom like the rest of us, but I reckon in another fifteen years, he will be running the show.”

“That’s Christian Salway, isn’t it?” said Anne. “How come he isn’t a Walker, but is still a grandson?”

“I could tell you about how he’s Laura’s son and that he’s my adopted step-grandson. You know that Joby and Laura married not long after we lost Mary. But there is a little more to it than meets the eye. Joby is his dad. I won’t go into detail, other than to say that Joby was a naughty boy.”

“What about your other grandsons?” David said. His memory of Joby was not of a young man who had it in him to be a naughty boy. Joby was the antithesis of a stud when he was a teenager. David knew who the randy ones were. How Joby had ended up bringing five boys into the world was beyond him. He and Anne would have loved to produce a little brother or sister for Tamsin, but they couldn’t. End of story.

“Laura tells me that Benjamin and Daniel are the spit of Christian when he was born. I can see them working in the business. There will be three Walker brothers running things. Muriel and I will be well into our dotage.”

“That’s a bit early, Charles,” said Muriel.

“Our Tamsin is going out with Aidan,” said Anne. “She calls it pair-bonding.”

“There’s plenty of it going on with our family,” replied Muriel. “Aidy is head over heels with Tamsin. She’s a lovely girl.”

“She is,” said David. “Like Aidy, she’s brighter than the pair of us put together. But I think the business world would tear her to pieces. She’s very innocent.”

“There’s a lot more pair-bonding as well,” said Charles. “Christian is head over heels with Gemma. Ewan has had a steady boyfriend, Jordan, for a couple of years now. He came out three years ago, to try to shock us. I knew he was gay when he was ten. Jordan and Ewan are inseparable. The four boys are sharing Joby’s flat in Marchmont.”

“Tamsin went over to Edinburgh at half term,” said Anne. “She’s going to do music at Edinburgh University. They were really impressed with her when she went over for an open day. That’s where she met Aidan. He’s a lovely lad.”

“He’s just like Tamsin, very innocent,” said Muriel. “He has a strong romantic streak, just like his brothers. I have heard Tamsin play several times. She’s fantastic. When she plays in the restaurant, the customers love it.”

“Aidan’s good at tinkling on the old ivories,” said Charles. “And Ewan is not bad either. But Tamsin is something else. Aidy got Grade VIII in July, but the feedback was that he would be a gifted amateur. Tamsin will be a pro.”

“That’s right,” said Anne. “I wouldn’t want her losing the delicacy of her touch by doing up screws all day.”

“We made our fiddles for the folk band,” said David. He showed them his instrument. He was as proud of it now as he was twenty years before when he first made it. “We’re looking forward to tomorrow evening.”

“We are too,” said Muriel.

It was now getting late as David and Anne Heady drove to Corscadden with Charles and Muriel in the back. They pulled into Strathcadden Academy and to College House. Tamsin was there waiting with her rucksack. She slipped in next to Muriel. They drove on to Walker Bros. Muriel and Charles got out of the car. Jenny and Sarah were there to meet them. “Change of plan, Dad. Follow us,” said Jenny.

The passage to the restaurant was dark, but as they approached, the lights went on and the doors were flung open with the precision that was normally expected for a head of state. And there they were, in the restaurant, many of Charles’ long standing and loyal customers, the staff, and his suppliers. David, Anne, and Tamsin Heady slipped through the entrance at the back of the restaurant. A cheer went up of “Happy Retirement!” There were banners proclaiming, “A Long and Happy Retirement to Charles and Muriel.”

Jenny and Sarah went to a podium that had been set up and Jenny said, “Thank you all for coming along this evening to celebrate the retirement of our mum and dad, Muriel and Charles. Dad has worked here for fifty-five years, longer if you take into account the years he spent as a teenager with our Granddad, Richard Walker. Muriel has been Company Secretary for forty years, ever since Dad took over the reins from Granddad, always in the background, but her contribution cannot be overstated.

“Dad describes himself as a ‘simple Scottish shopkeeper’, but under his watch, our company has gone from strength to strength. He salvaged it when The Synergy Consortium crashed it, rebuilding everything from the wreckage, and expanding. For a simple shopkeeper, he’s done pretty well, and is rightly recognised as one of Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil’s top businessmen, as well as being a master tailor. He is like a swan, all calm and serene, even though we know that he’s paddling furiously. Dad, it’s not just luck that has brought us here, it is your foresight and vision.

“Despite Dad’s awesome business record, the thing he likes doing the best is meeting and serving his customers, for without you, our customers, there would be no Walker Bros. And he likes to meet our suppliers, for without you, our suppliers, we wouldn’t have anything to sell to our customers. Dad has often got the ideas for things to sell through our customers. His knack has always been to know what the customers want, and to sell it to them at a reasonable price, making them feel that they have had good value for their hard-earned money.

“Dad has always said that his biggest asset is our staff. He has always been accessible to our team, and even the youngest members of staff have felt confident to suggest new ideas. And if they work, he takes them on. He leads by example and never expects anyone to do anything he wouldn’t do himself. And he has never been too proud to muck in with everyone else when something needs to be done. He has always stood by his staff through thick and thin, and our colleagues have always given 110%.

“Dad, Sarah and I have only once gone against your instructions, and that is now. We have had a little whip-round among our staff, customers, and suppliers. Please accept this as a token of our appreciation.”

Charles took the envelope and took out a card. Muriel's face lit up as she saw the tickets.

"Dad," said Sarah, "you and Mum are going on a river cruise along the Rhine. The plane leaves on Monday midday. We did it to make sure you don't come poking your nose in on Monday."

Charles turned to Muriel and said, "Were you in on this?"

Sarah said, "That's for us to know and you to wonder, Dad. Are you going to say something?"

There were calls of "Speech! Speech!"

Charles started, "Shopkeepers are meant to have the gift of the gab. That's how they can sell something to a customer that they never knew they wanted. But I really don't know what to say, other than thank you all. My daughters and their mother have kept this one totally secret from me, but believe me, I am really looking forward to the cruise with Muriel, the one I have loved for the last fifty years.

"I have been truly blessed over the last fifty-five years working for my father's and uncle's business. Dad and Uncle Raymond were not just partners in the business, nor just brothers, they were each other's best friend. And it showed in the way that they set up and ran the company. There were many of our colleagues who came to work for a week or two as a temporary job, who ended up working with us for decades.

"I had big shoes to fill when I took over from Dad. I could not have done it without my staff. They have formed a wonderful team who have supported me over the years. Sometimes they have given me earache. But without our team, for the team is not just mine, or Jenny's or Sarah's, it belongs to all of us, we could not have ridden out the storms that beset us

from time to time, or for that matter prospered when the going was smooth.

“Some people love their jobs, while others hate them. I am very grateful indeed that I fit into the first category. I have enjoyed my last days here every bit as much as I did my first. Our company is an exciting place to work at. No two days are the same. Sometimes the hundred and one thousand different admin tasks and paperwork are incredibly tedious, but I have made it a rule for myself that I always go out to serve our customers. That is what we are here for. Our customers enjoy coming back. They have told me that time and time again. And I have to thank our team for making shopping at Walker Bros such a pleasurable experience. Many of my customers are not just customers, they have become my friends. And many colleagues say the same. And it would be remiss of me not to thank all our team, from the oldest to the youngest for all the hard work they have put in over the years.

“I must thank my suppliers too, who, like my customers, are not just business associates, but have also become my friends. Although I don’t see my suppliers as much as my customers, I still get the same pleasure in meeting them. Indeed, today, I had a very pleasurable afternoon in Mauder looking at a new range of furniture. It was a joy to look at, feel and to treasure. Of course we will stock it. It won’t be cheap, but I am sure that the pieces will be handed down with joy to the next generations.”

Jenny and Sarah smiled at each other. Their ruse had been entirely successful.

“So now I am handing over the baton to my daughters, Jenny and Sarah. I know that they will keep the company in as good heart as they have it now. Finally, I would like to thank you all for coming. The restaurant staff have excelled themselves, as they always do. So, tuck in and enjoy the evening.”

There was applause, and the guests did precisely what Charles had invited them to do. It was a very pleasurable evening for Charles and Muriel, even if there was a tinge of sadness. Charles might no longer be serving his customers, but still, he and Muriel would have the joy of friendship of a wide range of people, young and old. That would mean everything to him. And he would still keep his hand in by tailoring expensive bespoke suits and Highland Regalia each of which would show off his outstanding craftsmanship of a master tailor.

Chapter 11

Saturday 31st October 2015

The retirement do at Walker Bros had gone on until the middle of the evening. Muriel and Charles Walker got back to Laurieston Villa at about nine. They were tired, having spent the last three hours talking almost non-stop to the customers, suppliers, and staff. Ironically, they were hungry. Neither had had much from the very sumptuous buffet and they had been on their feet all evening. So, Muriel rustled up a quick salad which they ate in the kitchen. It had been a lovely evening, but both had a sense of melancholy. This was not surprising as their retirement was a major turning point in their lives.

Charles would genuinely miss being at work serving his customers and meeting his suppliers. That is what he had set out to do all those years ago. The fact that he was regarded as one of Buchananshire's leading businessmen was just a bit of icing on the cake. His cake had been the service of his customers, running his team, and dealing with his suppliers. And a wonderful cake it had been too. Now the plate was licked clean, so to speak. Charles had thoroughly enjoyed the last fifty years, except the bit where The Synergy Consortium had crashed the business. But he had successfully risen to the challenge to rebuild it, despite the Union Scottish Bank trying to fleece him in the process. As he had got Walker Bros back on its feet, he had set about his job with a renewed vigour.

Muriel had been company secretary for many years, working around the fact that she was a busy mother to three children. Her children had flown the nest years ago, but they were roosting in nearby trees. Jenny and Sarah had not been able to have children, so it was Joby who had provided the grandchildren. This had not been the way they thought it would happen, as Joby was, in present parlance, a nerd. However, he had been netted by a close friend of Sarah's. That was so sad the

way that Mary had passed away so suddenly. They were grandparents to two boys. Now they were grandparents to five. Yes, Joby had been a naughty boy, but he had done the right thing, and Laura was a lovely woman. Mary would never have wanted Joby to be on his own, and Laura was absolutely right for him. To have both a mother and a father meant everything to Christian. Charles was happy that the business would continue in the family when Jenny and Sarah retired. Christian was a hard-working and serious young man, and the company would be in good hands. It was far too early to say whether Benjamin and Daniel would follow their brother into the business, but Laura often commented that in both character and looks, the two were the very spit of their older brother.

They talked over their thoughts over a delicious coffee in the drawing room. The wood stove was belting out the heat. Jim and Margaret next door were going to look after things and feed the fish. Poppy would be staying with Joby and Laura up at Brewster House. Germany in the middle of autumn would be stunning. Muriel was a fluent speaker, and Charles wasn't bad, although he had got a bit rusty lately.

It would have been natural for a well-off family like the Walkers to hold a major family celebration at the Glenclawe Hotel. If Charles' retirement and Muriel's seventieth birthday did not count as such, what would? Unfortunately, Mr and Mrs Campbell, the proprietors, had long planned to carry out major work to refurbish the downstairs of the hotel. After all, November was the best time to do it as it tended to be quiet before the Christmas rush. Instead, they brought the luxury and exquisite service, for which they were rightly famous, over to Corscadden. The best place to do it was on the lawn at Brewster House.

The marquee was not just a large tent. It was decidedly superior, with a carpeted floor, interior walls, double skinned windows, a full heating system, and a power supply from a generator placed on the drive. At the back there was a fully fitted kitchen. At the other end there were facilities for the guests. The marquee was connected to the house by a covered way, so that the guests could walk in the dry. This would be welcome, as the weather could get quite wild in Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil at that time of the year.

As far as the hotel staff were concerned, it was all hands to the pump. It was going to be one of the bigger dos of the year, and the Walkers had paid them handsomely. Brewster House had been roped into service, and supplies had been stored in the cellar, the utility room, the dining room and anywhere else they could be squeezed into. The kitchen had also been taken over. Guests could use the drawing room and the games room if they wanted somewhere quiet. Jamie and Lorna Campbell had given the Walkers strict instructions that they were not to do a thing but just enjoy the event.

Now it was Saturday and the staff from Glenclawe had arrived in a coach that had been hired. All the family were assembling with friends. The kitchen had been taken over to provide coffee and biscuits for the guests who were arriving early. Many of Charles' more distant friends had arrived by train and were now staying at the Crown Hotel in the town centre. Others were staying at Brewster House, Laurieston Villa, and with Jenny and Sarah. Imogen Salway had mucked in as well, putting up a couple of the guests in her townhouse in Adam Place.

Aidan, Christian, and Ewan had come back home on Friday evening, with Gemma and Jordan. Tamsin stayed overnight on both Friday and Saturday. On the Saturday

morning, all of the youngsters went on a short run to keep their fitness up. Aidan, Ewan, and Christian were competing with the Harries, while Jordan was playing with the badminton team. Aidan and Christian hung back to keep Tamsin and Gemma company, while Ewan and Jordan went ahead.

All six of the young people liked to dress up for posh occasions. All had kilts (including the girls), shirts and jumpers and knee-length socks. Each had carefully co-ordinated himself or herself, but with the six of them, there was a rainbow of colours. Like all young people of the time, many a selfie was taken. Each looked a picture, and together they formed many pictures. They looked like a fashion parade for Walker Bros. And why not? They were only young once.

Unlike other big family gatherings in previous months, Christian did not have to marshal his troops. Jamie and Lorna Campbell had seen to it all. Their part was to be sociable and enjoy it and take time out to pair-bond as Tamsin put it.

Shortly before midday Charles and Muriel arrived, ready to meet their guests. Charles looked splendid in his full Highland Regalia. Muriel always looked elegant. They were greeted enthusiastically by their grandchildren. Charles and Muriel considered their grandsons' girlfriends and boyfriend as their grandchildren as well. If there were tails, they would have been wagging enthusiastically. Christian had organised his brothers to club together to get Grandma and Granddad a present. Gemma, Tamsin, and Jordan had joined in as well. "Open it, Grandma," said Aidan.

"Granddad and I aren't sure whether we should open any presents now, or later."

"Open them now," said Christian. "We'll display them in the dining room."

Muriel opened the large parcel. The grandchildren had bought a large framed original water colour of the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens, to which Charles and Muriel had been regular visitors for many years. Muriel and Charles wanted to hug all their grandchildren at once. Joby and Laura came down. "Happy birthday, Mum," he said and hugged his mother. He always had been a mummy's boy. "Dad, Jenny and Sarah are bringing you a little present from us all."

"I'm looking forward to that," said Charles.

Laura had Benjamin and Daniel with her. They were, as always, alert and enjoying being centre of attention. Both Gemma and Tamsin thought about laying eggs in nests. Jenny and Uncle Simon arrived, followed by Sarah and Uncle Jonathan. Actually, Simon and Jonathan arrived a minute later as they were carrying a heavy box from the car. Jenny and Sarah had a couple of smaller boxes. They both hugged their mother and said, "Happy birthday, Mum."

"You're all spoiling me," said Muriel, as she opened the packet which contained a matching brooch, earrings, and a necklace of the finest pearls. "That is so beautiful. I am being spoiled today."

"You deserve it, Mum."

Charles was, by now opening the large and heavy box. It contained hefty castings and a large electric motor.

"This will keep you from under Mum's feet," said Sarah.

"What is it?" Charles asked.

"Think about what Joby has in his workshop," said Sarah handing a second box to her father. It contained a number of woodturning chisels of various shapes. Joby was unpacking the

box and assembling the jigsaw of parts to reveal a good quality lathe. A third box contained a scroll chuck.

“You’re all definitely dead set on keeping me out of the shop.”

“We’ll chain you to the lathe, Dad.”

Other guests arrived, and the bay window in the dining room started to take on the appearance of the happy couple’s display of birthday presents. Christian had used all his artistic skills to make the display a work of art in its own right. If the gifts had been set out in the window display of Walker Bros, customers would be flocking in.

Christian and the twins’ grandparents arrived. They had both bought a new outfit for the occasion. In the time they had been in Corscadden, they had been welcomed into the Walker family and the wider community. And they too had adopted Ewan and Aidan as their grandchildren as well. Like Charles, Brian was interested in aeroplanes and had bought Charles a paperweight that contained a miniature Cessna 172. For Muriel, they bought a book about gardening.

Aunt Imogen arrived and made a beeline for her sister. “My, my, glam puss,” she said, “you do look dolled up.”

“I’m glad Mum and Dad could make it,” said Laura. Brian had been the on-call janitor that weekend, and Brenda was going to be doing weekend shifts on the buses. John had been glad to swap as he had a wedding to go to the following weekend. Brenda had managed to do a swap with another colleague at the garage.

Christian and his brothers had not seen Imogen for a while. She had been very busy at work. And when she wasn’t at work, she had been hard at it doing up her new house in Adam Place.

Towards the early afternoon, Richard and Bethan Fairbairn arrived in their Volkswagen Passat, driven by Uncle Alex. Although they were the grandparents of Aidan and Ewan, they had also adopted Christian as their grandson. They had heard about Joby and Laura being a naughty boy and girl all those years ago. Their feisty daughter had been just the same when she was twenty, although it had been a brave boy who went to bed with Scary Mary back in the late Nineteen Eighties. Yet she had been a gentle mother to the two sensitive boys that were their grandsons. Mary's passing away so suddenly and unexpectedly still had the power to hurt them as much as it did to Joby. They couldn't criticise him for finding Laura who clearly adored him. Charles and Muriel had also done much to help them through their loss.

Lunch was served in the dining room. The sandwiches were made from artisan bread, not the miserable steam-baked fare that most caterers would be satisfied with. There were quiches, vol-au-vents and other classic light buffet fare. Aidy and Tamsin delighted the guests on the grand piano in the drawing room with solos and duets. Ewan didn't get left out either, for he was handy on the ivories as well. He met his friends up in the noisy room above the garage so that they could rehearse for the evening's music. Chris and Gemma relaxed and let the afternoon flow past them.

Gradually more guests arrived and the pile of presents on display in the bay window of the dining room grew. It was amazing what people managed to buy for a wealthy couple in their seventies who seemed to have everything.

At the other end of the age range, Benjamin and Daniel had every baby need attended to. Each was warm after his bath and was now snuggly in the nursery among his bed-time companions. Both were tired after being so much at the centre of attention and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

At 7 prompt, the guests wandered out to the marquee on the flat grass that was the tennis court. It hadn't been used as such for two years, but the boys had badgered their father sufficiently to get him to promise to set it up for next summer.

The service was spot on. The guests were shown to their seats quickly without being rushed. Joby, who had been appointed master of ceremonies, stood up and tapped the table with a gavel that he had turned on his lathe for the occasion. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "thank you all for coming tonight to help our family enjoy a double celebration, my mother's seventieth birthday, and my father's retirement after over half a century's service in our family's business. So, without further ado, please could we stand while Dad offers thanks? Dad?"

"Thank you, Lord, for the joy of family and friends. We also thank you for the lovely food and the time we will enjoy this evening. Amen"

It was short but heart-felt. For a committed Christian like Charles Walker, it would be unthinkable to do otherwise, even if a good number of his guests were not religious. It was his party, and he would pray if he wanted to.

Alex Fairbairn found himself sitting next to Imogen Salway. Imogen said to him, "You look very like Ewan."

"No wonder," Alex replied, "he is my nephew. My sister was his mother. Everyone says he's a younger version of me. How do you know the family?"

"My sister is Laura," Imogen replied, "Joby's new wife. She's Christian's mum."

"How did that come about? I have asked my Mum and Dad, but they change the subject. It's like I'm a teenager, not thirty-five."

Imogen told Alex the story, starting with a conference at York University, old farts going on about Type 4 diesels, and a party in rather poor taste. Joby had been issued with a defective product that was meant to stop things like that from happening but look what had happened. What had happened was a stunningly good-looking nineteen-year-old youth with long blond hair on the next table who was holding hands under the table and playing footsie with his girlfriend. Alex listened about how his step-nephew had had a none-too-easy start in life, not least because of his grandparents being held in a virtual religious prison run by an extreme American pastor who was now in a real-life prison on remand for a long litany of crime including theft, fraud, money laundering, firearm offences and people trafficking.

Alex told Imogen about his temporary job as a public sector accountant in the Borders. He had been working on the South Coast of England, about as far south as one could get without falling off into the English Channel. He had been made redundant, and his partner almost immediately turned her back on him, kicked him out of the house, and paired up with another boyfriend. At the age of thirty-two, he was a boomerang kid. Having stayed down south when his parents moved back to the Borders, one day he pointed his car north with a full tank of diesel and drove to the Borders without stopping.

The evening for Imogen and Alex went very quickly. They were still chatting when David and Anne Heady and their friends started playing their instruments for the post-prandial Ceilidh. After the ceilidh, the guests were entertained by Ewan and his friends in their boyband. The music was folksy with an element of rock. The lyrics were the usual teenage angst stuff about a boy falling in love with a girl, but she's not really interested, and it's breaking his heart. It was totally unrepresentative of any of the boys' true experience; they were all openly gay.

Imogen and Alex slinked off into the house where Aidan and Tamsin were tinkling the ivories. It was warm and peaceful. Imogen told Alex about how she had come to Corscadden when her job had folded and how she had managed to sell her house quickly – it had been featured on a programme called *Rustic Refugees* on the telly. She had bought a large townhouse in the town centre for less than what she had got for her small cottage in Clinton Muncey.

Late in the evening the guests started to wander home, including Imogen. Their next date was to be in Edinburgh at a nationally famous eatery that had made its name in the production of wonderful salads. Imogen and Alex would spend the afternoon together before staying in a city-centre hotel.

“Well, well, Laura,” said Joby as they went up to bed that evening, “your matchmaking seems to have worked tonight. There’s something happening between Imm and Alex.”

Chapter 12

November 2015

The evidence that there had been a large family party at Brewster House was quickly obliterated. By late Sunday morning the marquee was empty, and the contents were on their way back to Buchanan. Jamie and Lorna Campbell and their team had worked into the small hours to clear everything away. The only evidence of the party was a few hangovers. By the end of Sunday, the lawn was a lawn again. Brewster House was back to being a spacious family home. The house was quiet, as the boys had gone back to Edinburgh. They all had nine o'clock lectures the following morning. Tamsin had not migrated so far – Maunder was ten kilometres on the train. The memories of her lovely weekend with Aidy were fresh. If she had feathers, they would be puffed up. At least this week Danny had morning patrol, and he did it with his boyfriend.

Charles and Muriel left Corscadden on Sunday evening after dropping Poppy off to stay with Joby. Joby and Laura were given detailed instructions on what they had to do with Poppy. They were to return her in exactly the same condition as they had received her. They were not to make her fat but ensure she had plenty of exercise. Late on Monday morning, they took off from Edinburgh Airport for Frankfurt-am-Main for their cruise on the Rhine.

For Jenny and Sarah, it would be strange for them both not to have Dad about the place. Of course he would be there to give advice, but now, if he came in at all, it would be as a customer. At least he would be guaranteed first-class service, but all customers should have that as a matter of course. They were on their own now, and they knew what to do – get on with it.

Getting on with it was what Tamsin Heady did at Strathcadden Academy. In idle moments, which were not very frequent, she would think of Aidy. They would talk regularly on Skype, and each conversation made her love Aidy even more. Theirs was an innocent romance, like Chris and Gemma's. And that was the way she liked it. A gentle young woman, Tamsin hated the rows that were central to gritty stories favoured by the television producers. Yes, her life would make very boring television, but it gave her the freedom to be Tamsin. And being Tamsin meant that, as far as she was concerned, it was cool to put her whole heart into her studies. Boorish and boring were those who thought it was cool to do the minimum or less to get by.

Tamsin had tried social media but had experienced things at the hands of the trolls. The politest things that had been said about her were that she was a swot. When some extreme material had landed in her inbox, she showed it to her father who had a fit and two officers from Police Scotland had inspected it. Tamsin had closed her account, swearing (with a fair number of oaths) that she would never do social media again. Caddies were a nosy lot and there was plenty of gossip to be had. There was a rich vein stemming from her going out with Aidan Walker.

It was now the middle of November, and it was a “dreich” period in every sense of the word. Being over two hundred and fifty metres above sea level, Corscadden could experience some very unpleasant weather in the autumn. Added to that, the mornings were getting noticeably darker by the day. Tamsin was, unusually, on her own that Wednesday morning to do her morning patrol. The previous day she had got a new LED torch from John the Jannie, and it gave a reassuring beam that was as powerful as any car headlight. “Good morning, sir,” she said as she met John the Jannie.

“Good morning, Miss Heady,” was John's reply, always respectful to the head girl. Tamsin headed off into the murk. It

was not only misty, but also there was a steady rain, with some sleet. The snow line was not much above three hundred metres. It was only just above freezing, and Tamsin was glad to have several layers. Her thighs, though, were bare under her kilt, but she was used to it. She normally walked clockwise around the grounds. On this occasion she decided to do it the other way round. There was no particular reason for doing so, just for a bit of variety.

She walked past the sports centre, towards the athletics track. It was murky, so that she could only just make out the brooding shape of the old cricket pavilion which now had covered tiers of seating in front of it. Something seemed not right. Could it possibly be Distant Caddies slinking back after distilling illicit hooch? No, only Oswaldians did that. But something had caught her eye. Tamsin saw a shapeless form sprawled out under a row of seats. She shone her torch at it and could clearly see that it looked human. It certainly hadn't been there when she had done the patrol last evening. On one evening patrol a couple of weeks ago, she had caught a couple of Distant Caddies having an illicit cig. The boys thought they were well hidden in the dark but had given themselves away with their glowing cigarette ends. For their troubles they had got a detention and a firm telling off from their house leader.

But anyone would need to have a pretty desperate craving for a cig to be out there on this cold and dank morning. Tamsin had goosebumps all over. She knew that it was her fur standing up on end to make her look bigger. She could pretend that she hadn't seen it and walk on. But that was not her. She had to investigate. Thankfully she had the two-way radio.

“Alpha three to base,” she called.

“Come in alpha three,” replied the familiar voice of John the Jannie.

“Mr Murton, there is something suspicious on the seating of the athletics pavilion.”

“I am coming straight away, Miss Heady. Don’t touch it until I come.”

With her heart in her mouth, Tamsin approached the shape. She kept the beam of the torch on it. It did not move, but Tamsin could hear noises that sounded like moans. The shape was wearing a red sweatshirt. Tamsin could tell that it was in a foetal position. It was covered in mud. She could see two torches coming through the gloom, and presently John the Jannie and Mr Mitchell were there. The headmaster was unusually early that morning. He had some work that needed doing to prepare for staff reviews and just happened to be talking to John the Jannie when the two-way radio had crackled into life.

Now they were with the shape. They rolled the shape over. Tamsin immediately saw that it was Francesca Muirhead, a Distant Caddie who was in Secondary Four and was a weekly boarder in Dibben House.

“Frankie,” she called, “can you hear me? What are you doing here? Why have you got into this state?”

“She needs to go to hospital at once,” said John the Jannie, getting out his mobile and dialling 112. “I need an ambulance to Strathcadden Academy...Suspected hypothermia.”

The girl was trembling from the cold, but not strongly. Her breathing was shallow, and she could not say anything. Tamsin put her coat over her. She knelt down next to Francesca, and said “Frankie, it’s me, Tamsin. John the Jannie is here, and Mr Mitchell. What’s going on?”

Francesca tried to reply but it was just a mumble. A warble came from her mobile which was next to her. Another moan came. It was intended to be a shout but barely struggled

from her lips. The screen had lit up and there was a call-out that said, “Frankie, there is a loaded south-bound iron-ore train that goes through Mauder Tunnel at 07.30. As you will still be there, place your neck on the rail just beyond the tunnel mouth. Satan has a devil just for you.”

Tamsin let out a cry and passed the mobile to Mr Mitchell. The ambulance siren could be heard in the distance. John the Jannie had told Jannie Brian to wait for the ambulance at the gates and guide it to the athletics pavilion. Mr Mitchell looked aghast at the call out. There were stacks of them below. Each contained a message of unspeakable vileness. He immediately put any thoughts about the reviews out of his mind. Compared to this, they were trivial. A student had been subject to a campaign of harassment that was nothing short of heinous. Heady had mentioned to him during the Friday meeting with the head boy and head girl that she was worried about Muirhead. However Heady had not got down to the bottom of what was wrong, and Muirhead seemed to be coping.

Tamsin Heady tried to keep it together but failed. She burst into tears. Frankie was a lovely girl, a talented singer and played in the orchestra. There she was now in this cold and bleak place. There were blue lights flashing next to College House and the ambulance was making its way round the path. If she had done the patrol in the way she normally did, she would not have spotted Frankie at all. The first time anyone would have noticed would have been at morning registration. Frankie was in enough trouble as it was. Tamsin was convinced that she would have had it. Mr Mitchell put his hand on her shoulder.

“You couldn’t have done more, lass,” he said.

Distant Caddies were starting to go down to the canteen. Blue light ambulances at the athletics pavilion didn’t happen very often at this time of the morning. There would be a lot of gossip,

all of which would be utterly uninformed. Tamsin pulled herself together and was going to bring this up at the prefects' briefing that morning.

Francesca Muirhead was placed on a stretcher and loaded into the ambulance. Several nosy Caddies gawped at her until Tamsin Heady, John the Jannie, and Mr Mitchell shooed them off. As the ambulance drove off to the Strathie, Mr Mitchell walked back to College House. He had a charger for this kind of phone in his office. The battery was getting low, but with the charger, the phone would be kept going so that it would reveal all the bile that it contained. He was going to get to the bottom of this. If any Caddie was responsible for this, he would ensure that the Regional education board would put the wretch through the wringer.

Tamsin Heady had to force herself to eat something for breakfast. She met Daniel Taylor and told him what she had found. He looked horrified and couldn't think of anything to say beyond the most obvious. Of course, he would help her and Mr Mitchell to get to the bottom of it. Tamsin felt depressed that such depravity could pollute the Caddie community; she was proud of her school and the lovely atmosphere that normally pervaded the place. This was a miasma every bit as repulsive as the stench that came from the wheelie bins on a hot summer's day.

Now she was in the common room in Greatorex House. Normally the prefects would greet her and Danny with a cheery "Hi, Tamsin, Hi Danny." But, as one put it, Tamsin had the same look that Mrs Horsefall had when she was about to give a whole year bollocking in an assembly. Mrs Horsefall could silence a group of noisy Secondary Four boys with just a single glare. Tamsin said, "Good morning, all. This morning, while I was doing the morning patrol, I found Frankie Muirhead from Secondary Four lying on the athletics pavilion seating. She was

soaked and covered in mud. As some of you saw, she was taken to the Strathie in an ambulance. She has hypothermia. I tried to talk to her, but she couldn't say anything. Her mobile rang and a message came. It was filth, to say the least. I won't say what it says, but it was horrible. There were lots of other messages. Mr Mitchell has got the phone, and he has told me that he will get to the bottom of this.

"I didn't think that we Caddies could stoop to this sort of thing. Mr Mitchell will find out who was responsible, and he has assured me that he will take the hardest possible action. Please could you keep an ear open for anything that is said about this? Danny and I need to know for our Friday meeting with Mr Mitchell. Don't promise not to snitch. The people who did this are not fit to be Caddies.

"I'll also share this with you. I did my patrol in the opposite direction to the way I normally do. Big deal. But if I had done it the way I normally do, I would never have seen Frankie. She would still be out there. The ambulance driver said that she would not have survived much longer."

There was a sense of shock among the prefects. Francesca Muirhead was well-liked in the school, and this kind of bullying had been going on under their noses, and they had not suspected a thing.

The same could be said for the staff when Mr Mitchell said very much the same sort of thing at the morning staff briefing. He also told them that the staff reviews would be postponed for a week, so that he could get down to the bottom of this miserable incident. In the meantime, members of staff were instructed to tell their tutor groups that abusing and trolling other students on their mobile phones was harassment and would be dealt with severely. The Region's policy was that any pupil

found to have committed such an offence would be referred to the Regional Education Board, with their ultimate sanction being the removal of the pupil from the school. Police would be involved.

After staff briefing, Keith Mitchell went back to his office and continued to look at the filth that Muirhead had been subjected to. It wasn't just classroom banter that had got out of hand. These messages were malicious and had content as foul as anything he had seen in thirty-five years of teaching. He got the computer technician to transfer all of the messages to a file which he appropriately named *Bile*. There were several hundred of them. It had been going on for no more than five weeks, so there were roughly ten a day. It was going to make for unpleasant reading.

Mitchell felt sick. This filth had stained the reputation of Strathcadden as a school that truly cared for its students. One of his charges had been subjected to such continuous and malicious harassment that it had amounted to torture. No wonder she had had a major melt down. But when did she leave Dibben House? The answer to that was easy. The security cameras had picked her up leaving through the student entrance. This was bolted at night but not locked – a fire safety precaution. Although there were fire escapes, these were alarmed. If they were being used for real, nobody would take any notice of the din, but unauthorised use would raise the dead. She had left soon after eleven on Tuesday evening, after the house leader, Mike Glenn, had done his evening round. How come her roommate had not raised the alarm?

Mitchell had had plenty of experience in the sleuthing of student misdemeanours. Most were pretty straight-forward. Most student villains gave themselves away. There were a few that were adept at telling lies, but usually someone else would drop them in it. This one was going to be that bit harder, because

none of the trolls was that stupid as to give his or her real name. They had names like *Yelloebelly5*. His best hope was that some nosy Caddie would pick up some gossip and pass it on. Out of all the schools he had taught at, Caddies were the nosiest and the ones that gossiped most and knew each other's business intimately. After all, the Great Drone Flight actually required very little effort on his part to crack. Julian Rowley and his mates had been well and truly dropped in it.

The first thing to do was to talk to Mr and Mrs Muirhead. They were due soon. They certainly would not be happy that some of his charges had ended up putting their Francesca in hospital. Mitchell would have to eat a good portion of humble pie to stop them from taking the school and the Region to the cleaners. He had also alerted Margot Gledhill. Once was unfortunate, twice was getting careless, but three times could be construed by some as decidedly negligent. Mrs Gledhill was going to attend a meeting of the Leadership Team at lunchtime.

Mrs Laidlaw, the secretary, came through to tell the headmaster that Mr and Mrs Muirhead had arrived. She ushered them in. Mr Mitchell started his hors d'oeuvre, "Please take a seat. I am so sorry for what has happened..."

He didn't dare think about what would have been the outcome if Heady had done her patrol the way she normally did it. She would have missed Muirhead, and the place would have been crawling with coppers, and he would have been in deeper shit than he was now. Fortunately, Mr and Mrs Muirhead seemed to be very understanding.

"Who found her?" Mr Muirhead asked.

"Tamsin Heady, our Head Girl. She does a morning patrol, something that has been carried on from when this place was an independent school."

“Do you have any idea what she was doing there?”

“I am not sure at the moment, but I am following up some material that we found on her mobile. It is rather distressing. The mobile is here...”

Just to reinforce its role as the villain in the drama, the mobile warbled again. Another message had arrived from *Yelloebelly5*. This had an image from what was clearly a Caddie. The kilt (Douglas Grey Modern) raised up his right leg was a dead give-away. “I will reveal more,” was the caption. Under the pictures there was a crude and degrading demand for similarly disgusting images of Francesca. The three adults sat bolt upright with a mixture of shock and disgust on their faces. Clearly *Yelloebelly5* lived up to his name. He had a sufficient streak of yellow that stopped him revealing his face. However, there was a piece of evidence that *Yelloebelly5* could not erase, a distinct pair of pigment spots that were on his lower right thigh.

“This could be a police matter, I am afraid,” said Mr Mitchell. “It seems to be sexting and is a criminal act.”

“Thank God that Francesca didn’t see this,” Mrs Muirhead said.

“I can assure you, Mr and Mrs Muirhead, I will get down to the very bottom of this. There is a student in this school who is the culprit. I will push for the council to remove the child from the school. Could I ask some things that may be helpful to my investigation? I will call the police, and I am sure they will support you as well.”

“Yes, please do.”

“Has Francesca shown any signs of being distressed at home?”

“She has been rather withdrawn for the last few weeks. She has spent quite a bit of time in her room. She hasn’t been doing her music practice very much. We have asked if she was alright, and she assured us she was. No wonder with this filth.”

“Just before I call the police, could I assure you that the school will look after Francesca and support her through this difficult time?”

“I know you will.”

Mitchell picked up the telephone on his desk and was quickly through to the local control room of Police Scotland. This had never been good but was getting worse by the minute. Maybe *Yelloebelly5* would send another of his loathsome missives while the police were there.

And he did. As far as the image was concerned to the officers, *Yelloebelly5*’s location was not clear. The background could have been a teenage boy’s room anywhere. They had had a lot of complaints about sexting. This photograph was on the borderline of sexting, but since no exposure had been made, the police said it would be unlikely to convince a children’s court. They would note what had happened, but unless they had other hard evidence, the chances of nailing *Yelloebelly5* were rather low. They did take a copy of the messages to investigate whether there were features in common with other complaints. “Please could you continue your investigation, Mr Mitchell?” said one of the officers. “If you find anything out, please let us know.”

At lunchtime, Mr Mitchell had an emergency meeting with his leadership team. Margot Gledhill was there. While the safeguarding of students from predatory adults was her major concern, she was finding that across the Buchanan and the Kyle of Tonsil Region, the safeguarding of vulnerable students from

other students was becoming a problem, as in many of Scotland's schools. Keith Mitchell looked depressed throughout the meeting. He reported how he was determined to get to the bottom of all of this, and that his first place to look was in the school. "...There is one thing I would like to see banned, and that is social media. But the genie is out of the bottle. And a very few Americans are getting very rich on it," he observed gloomily.

He stunned the gathering. "I have kept this to myself for a long time. As headmaster I have to carry the can for everything that happens, good or bad, within this school. I am fifty-eight now, but there have been times I have felt that I am eighty-five. Recently there have been a number of serious cases. On their own, they can be considered as unfortunate. But, when they come one after another, it seems careless. This morning, I had to read through some of the most repulsive comments that I have ever seen in thirty-five years of teaching. It has crystallised what I have been thinking over the last few weeks.

"Although I have not let on, I do have health issues that have been brought on by the intensity of the work that I have been doing. I have discussed these at length with my doctor. My long-term health has been put at risk. I have therefore decided to retire at the end of the summer term. I have spoken to the Chairman of Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Education Board and the Chairman of the School Board this morning. I am confirming it in writing. Clearly, I don't want anyone to know, and I want no fuss made. Andy, as my depute, I would like you to take over as headmaster until a suitable person is found. I have included this in my letter, and, no doubt, Charles Walker will approve this. Andy, will you take over from me in August?"

"It's a shock Keith, but I will, as long as I have the support of everyone in this room."

Everyone nodded.

“So, Keith, what are you going to do in your retirement?”

“Diana and I are going to go back to Yorkshire. That’s where our families are. We like Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil, but we are both homesick.”

Chapter 13

Late November 2015

After doing her evening patrol, Tamsin Heady had her supper in the canteen with other distant and weekly Caddies. She rang the Strathie. Francesca still needed treatment for hypothermia and was in intensive care. No, it wasn't a case of putting her into a hot bath, nor sitting her next to a fan heater; it had to be done carefully. Her parents were seeing her this evening. She should be fit enough to see visitors tomorrow, and they hoped that she would be discharged on Friday. So, Tamsin settled down in her room in College House to do her homework, listening to music on her smart phone, as she did it. Later that evening, her friend and fellow prefect, Shona McCartney, toddled up to her room from Edwards House. It was a good excuse to get the kettle on and the *Hob-Nobs* out.

“How's Frankie?” Shona asked.

“She's in intensive care.”

Shona looked shocked. “What do you mean – intensive care?” she spluttered.

“Just that,” replied Tamsin, who had felt just the same shock an hour and a half before. “They explained that they had to warm her up very carefully. They can't just chuck her in a hot bath. She is responding well to treatment, and her mum and dad are seeing her tonight. They are going to keep her in tomorrow. I'm going to see her tomorrow evening. She'll be going home on Friday. Do you want to come as well?”

“Thank God for that,” said Shona.

“Agreed – I am still thankful that I did my patrol the other way round. I would never have seen her if I had gone clockwise. She wouldn't have made it. The Strathie told me that

she was on the edge. Another hour or two, the outcome would not be so good.”

At that point, Tamsin’s eyes filled with tears. And so did Shona’s. Shona may have been a tall and athletic young woman, but she was still a teen girl. The two girls cuddled. They needed each other.

“We’ll go to the Strathie tomorrow night,” said Tamsin.
“Have you picked anything up about what people are saying?”

“Craigie Boy caught Jules Rowley texting in his lesson. There was a real rumpus about it. Rowley wouldn’t hand it over. There was a stand-off. Finally, he gave Mr Farjeon the phone.”

“I heard something about it. Wasn’t he the pilot in the Great Drone Flight? It sounds like he had something to hide.”

“Dr Carter has the phone.”

The next day at the prefects’ briefing, little snippets gleaned from nosy Caddies seemed to have a common theme. Julian Rowley had been doing quite a lot of texting, and a few of his mates had joined in. Tamsin made a mental note, which she wrote down later. Currently it was all gossip, something that Caddies were adept at. Tamsin told her gathering that there really needed to be some harder evidence than simple gossip to report to Mr Mitchell. The headmaster was tough but fair. He would not discipline a pupil on mere hearsay.

More little snippets came the prefects’ way. As she did her duties, Tamsin picked up little bits of chatter. The incident had caused something of a stir in the student body at Strathcadden Academy. There was a lot of background noise, most as meaningless as the commotion made by a flock of small birds in a bush before they flitted to the feeder to gorge. Twitter

was an appropriate name for it. Tamsin had been a target for trolls, and she agreed wholeheartedly with the Prime Minister's assessment, "*Too many tweets make a twit; too many twits make a twat.*"

Tamsin was a very peaceable girl, and the thought of violence was an anathema. But if she could get hold of the twat who had done this to Frankie, she would wring his or her bloody neck. Shona would help as well. Julian Rowley seemed to be a common theme in all the snippets. Rowley was trouble. He was an arrogant kid who had been to an independent school south of the Border. He still had the boys' public-school attitude. He was loud. He was disliked by the girls who thought of him as sexist. He had a gang who were under his thumb. He enjoyed the attention they gave him. He satisfied his craving for being hard by confrontations with teachers and pupils alike. He had given her a gob full on a couple of occasions. Some mothers did 'ave 'em.

While Tamsin was on lunchtime duty, a chance event happened to satisfy her that Julian Rowley was well within the frame. She was walking behind a group of Secondary Four boys who were mouthing off loudly. She dropped back a bit, but still within earshot. One of the boys was shooting off that he had just got a text from Jules. He read it out. "Keep pressing the bitch. *Yelloebelly5.*"

More little snippets were coming her way throughout the day. She had her weekly meeting with the headmaster on Friday morning. She and Danny took it as seriously as Mr Mitchell, who would not take any other appointments at that time. If a big dick from the council turned up at the time of the head of schools' meetings, that big dick would have to wait. Mitchell had missed a couple of the meetings for doctors' appointments, but Andy McEwan had done them instead. Fortunately, Tamsin had an excellent memory as far as what people said to each other, and in a private study period she wrote everything down. She would

type it up later to e-mail to Mr Mitchell. She would have a copy on the computer.

That evening, she did a patrol swap with Danny. He owed her one from last week. As soon as school was finished, she and Shona went down Dennistoun Avenue with other Caddies who were making their way to the station. They went down Cluny Road to the outskirts of the town where the Strathcadden General Infirmary was sited. Frankie was now on a general ward. Shona and Tamsin had cards from the staff, her classmates in S4CJF, and the prefects.

Frankie was in a side-ward on her own. The three girls hugged in tearful excitement. Frankie said, “I’m going home tomorrow. I’m not going to be a distant Caddie anymore.”

“You’re not leaving, are you?” said Shona. She was very close to Frankie.

“No. I’m going to be a day-Caddie. Mum and Dad are going to rent out their house in Dallennan Head and move down here. It’s closer to Dad’s office. They’ll rent a house here. Mum’s still going to be working away from home, but Dad has got another job so he’s not travelling all the time.”

“Frankie, we’ve all been worried about you,” said Tamsin.
“What has been going on?”

“I tried to tough it out,” Frankie replied, telling how she had slipped out at night. She had wanted to get away from things. She had ended up at Rowallan Country Park but turned back. When she got back to Dibben House, she found that the student entrance had been locked. She thought of going to Mr Glenn but decided against. He would not have been best pleased to be letting in a bedraggled student in the early hours. So, she went to the athletics pavilion. It least it was dry there.

“What set you off to go into melt down?” Shona asked.

The beans were spilled. It had all started when Julian Rowley had made an insultingly sexist comment, which was infantile and vulgar. He fancied her and wanted...

Not surprisingly, Francesca made a complaint to her form tutor, Miss Fraser, and Rowley found himself on a Stage 2 disciplinary with Dr Carter, the house leader for Edwards House. He was grounded as well as having a house leader's detention. He had also had a one-to-one with Mr McEwan, in which he was given a final warning. After that the horrible texts started to arrive, slowly at first, but more frequently as other trolls got in on the act.

“It just seems too much of a coincidence,” said Tamsin. “How did he get your social media addresses, if it was Jules?”

“I have no idea.”

“Who do you share a room with?”

“Ellie Houghton. She’s alright, but sometimes we don’t see eye to eye. But she wouldn’t know my mobile number. I haven’t given it to her. She’s not on my social media friends. I don’t want to see that mobile again. I feel safe without it. But I hate to think what’s going on to it at the moment.”

“Mr Mitchell will pick everything up,” said Tamsin. “He’s promised he’s going to get to the bottom of this.”

“People will think I snitched to Mr Mitchell,” said Frankie.

“No, they won’t. You’ve told me. Frankie, do you want it sorted out?”

“Of course, Tamsin.”

“Mr Mitchell will sort it out. I can help him. Do you mind if I tell Mr Mitchell about it? I am meeting with him tomorrow morning.”

“Tell him everything. I want whoever did this to be nailed. I think it’s Jules. He hates me and the feeling is mutual.”

The next morning, Mr Mitchell had read Tamsin’s e-mail. He had asked the computer guys to check Julian Rowley’s e-mail account. This seemed to have a lot that was interesting, and he was sure that he had found the smoking gun. Although Rowley had deleted his e-mails to his friends, there was an archive to which every e-mail sent was copied. There was one e-mail that was sent to several other students in Secondary Three and Four that had contained Muirhead’s social media accounts. How the hell had he got hold of them?

Mr Mitchell had his meeting with the Head Boy and Head Girl. A lot of snippets from nosy Caddies were pointing the finger at Rowley. The thing that would nail it for sure would be to see Rowley in shorts and see if there were the distinct pigment spots on his lower right thigh. It would link him to the message with the photograph. He was NOT going to summon Rowley and order him to lift his kilt.

There were a number of other names and that would need to be investigated. This was definitely one of the biggest cans of worms Mitchell had come across, and he would need to sleuth slowly and carefully. Fortunately, Secondary Four had PE after break and it would be his opportunity to look for the smoking gun. Mitchell wandered casually down to the sports centre, on the pretext that he was just wandering about seeing what was happening on his patch. He often did it; it was part of his duties. The teachers were used to it. He would poke his head round the door and that was about it. So, when he appeared in the sports

centre in Secondary 4 PE, nobody paid any attention. But Mr Mitchell did. There was Master Rowley awaiting his turn for a badminton game. And there were the distinctive pigment spots on his lower right thigh. This simple bit of sleuthing satisfied him beyond reasonable doubt that Julian Rowley was indeed *Yelloebelly*⁵.

Now who else was in Rowley's little gang? An e-mail from the IT technicians gave a list of unauthorised visits to social media sites. It was all slotting into place. The thing to do was to get Rowley out of the way. Rowley would be on a suspension until the disciplinary hearing. He was on a Stage 3, which meant referral to the Regional Education Board. In this case it was the only option should the evidence be able to be proved beyond all reasonable doubt. It was something that Mitchell was not looking forward to. Caddies were a very biddable lot, but Rowley was the exception that proved the rule. He had been trouble since he arrived at the place two years ago. In thirty-five years of teaching, Mr Mitchell had come across many hard nuts. The vast majority of these were rough diamonds. Get them on your side and they would be very loyal to you. He had taught a very small number of pupils whom he considered truly evil. One or two had proved that by going on to commit crimes that put them in the slammer for a good long stretch.

Mrs Laidlaw came in with Rowley's phone, saying, "Nick Carter has just given this to me. Craig Farjeon took it off Rowley yesterday."

Mr Mitchell was not looking forward to speaking to Mr and Mrs Rowley. Calls like this were neither easy nor pleasant; at least the Rowleys would not be completely taken off guard.

The call was not just difficult; it was hellish.

"You are going to do what?" shouted Mr Rowley.

“I have to involve the Regional Education Board in this one,” Mitchell replied. “Julian is on a Stage 3 disciplinary.”

“What do you mean?”

“Julian has sent messages to another student in my school, the like of which I have never seen in thirty-five years as a teacher.”

“How do you know it’s Jules? He tells me you’ve all been picking on him ever since he did that prank with a drone.”

“It was rather more than a prank, Mr Rowley. It was a safeguarding incident, as I explained at the time.”

“You rather over-reacted by involving the region, if you ask me, Mr Mitchell.”

“It was my duty to do so. If I hadn’t, I could be taken to court for gross negligence. I would have had the book thrown at me until kingdom come.”

The conversation drifted in this manner until Mr Rowley threatened to sue Strathcadden Academy and Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council for every penny they had. He slammed the phone down.

“And a very happy Christmas to you!” said Mitchell as he put the phone down. He was looking forward to his retirement. Andrew McEwan came in. “I have just been on the phone to Mr Rowley. He can’t take it that his precious little Julian has been harassing with malicious communications and that we have to get the Council involved.”

“Well, Keith,” replied Mr McEwan, “he will have to like it or lump it.”

For Keith Mitchell, it was not going to be an easy meeting. Margot Gledhill would be there as well. There would

be a scene for sure. Master Rowley was a very good actor and could make a crisis out of a drama. If necessary, the cops might have to be called.

It all started off quietly enough. A runner was sent to fetch Rowley from his History lesson. He was told to sit on the settee with the leather seat outside the office. Rowley had heard about the tales of boys sitting there awaiting chastisement from Dr Cowan. Like everyone else, he was glad that that didn't happen anymore. Like all bullies, he was a coward when his own bacon was in danger. There seemed to be an awful lot of people in Mr Mitchell's study. He felt uneasy. Those messages he had sent to Muirhead were just a bit of fun; he didn't mean it. Why couldn't she take it on the chin like a man, turn the other cheek and so on? He thought of his father's view of such situations which involved the adversary kicking him in the balls when nobody was looking. He didn't want that.

Instead, the bitch had gone off in a paddy. It wasn't his fault. Even if Muirhead did not kick him in the nuts, he suspected (rightly) there were plenty of other girls who would have done it for her. If truth be known, every single Caddie would have wanted to join in. There would have been little left of his manhood.

"Rowley, come in, lad," said Mr Mitchell. He was not smiling.

There were a lot of people in the study: Mr Mitchell, Mr McEwan, Mrs Horsefall, and a woman that Rowley didn't know (it was Mrs Gledhill from the Region). None of them looked very pleased to see him. He wanted Dad and Mum.

"Now, my lad," said Mitchell, "does *Yelloebelly5* sound familiar to you?"

"No, sir."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir, of course I am.”

“It seems strange to us,” said Mr McEwan. “You have been using the school computer systems to send out social media messages using an account called *Yelloebelly5*.”

“Not me.”

“Here’s a chance for you to show us you aren’t associated with *Yelloebelly5*. Log on to your social media accounts and show us.”

“Why should I?” Rowley replied petulantly.

“Because Mr Mitchell and I have strong evidence from the school’s computer records that you have been logging in regularly into *Yelloebelly5*.”

“No comment, Mr McEwan.”

Mrs Horsefall joined in. “Rowley, I have been looking at what we have got off Muirhead’s mobile. The messages received by Muirhead coincide completely with your activity. So will you please give us access to your social media accounts?”

“You can bloody whistle for it, Mrs Horsefall.”

“You realise, Rowley, that you need to cooperate with this meeting. You are facing a serious disciplinary procedure, and your rudeness and bad manners are not helping your case one little bit. Clearly you have something to hide. If, as you say, you have not done anything, you would be willing to share your pages to exonerate yourself.”

The Mr Mitchell got out the image. It had been printed out onto a sheet of A4 and included the insulting messages that had accompanied it. “Do you know this lad, Rowley?” he said. “He does seem to be a Caddie.”

“No.”

“Actually, I think you do. You have known him for nearly sixteen years.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I think you know what I mean, lad. You are the one who sent this message to Francesca Muirhead.”

“You’re picking on me, Mr Mitchell,” Rowley replied with a squawk of offended innocence. “Typical of you. You’ve had it in for me since Mr Stanton wrote to you.”

“No, Rowley, you’ve got it wrong. Mr Stanton has never written to me.” In this, Mitchell was being quite truthful, although he had rung Mr Stanton last year in the wake of the Great Drone Flight. Mr Stanton had told him that Rowley was trouble from the day he had entered Kelverford School, and that his parents thought that the Sun shone from... He had asked Rowley to leave after he had shone a laser at the eyes of a teacher. After a considerable time interviewing him in which he denied everything, Rowley’s game was given away by the fact that his clenching of the device between his buttocks had turned it on. The bit about the Sun shining had proved to be rather more than a metaphor.

“That’s not me, Mr Mitchell,” Rowley continued. “I can prove it. Give me my phone back, which you don’t have the right to have. I’m going to phone my dad, and he will sue you.”

“Rowley, laddie,” said Mr McEwan, “you can prove to us that you didn’t do it.”

“You can’t prove that I did it, Mr McEwan. How are you going to prove it?”

“The two pigment spots on your lower right thigh. They are there.”

The pigment spots were present and correct. Rowley pulled his kilt down to cover them up.

“I’ll get Dad to sue you,” Rowley continued. “Are you going to put it on a porn site?”

“I wouldn’t bother wasting your Dad’s money, Master Rowley,” said Mrs Gledhill. “We have dealt with you exactly in the way we have been trained.”

“I didn’t do owt!” Rowley replied with a squawk of offended innocence, one which Mr Mitchell had heard with monotonous regularity in his thirty-five years of teaching Mathematics. The expression revealed Rowley’s Yorkshire roots, and he was clearly a child who confused Yorkshire plain speaking for Yorkshire plain bad manners. When he was at school, Mitchell had tried that one on, and his French teacher had given him a clip round the ear.

“So, what is this picture meant to do?”

“It was just a bit of fun, Mr Mitchell.”

“Fun? Fun to include the words *I want to...*” Mitchell read the message in full. Its content was as threatening as it was vile and humiliating.

“It’s just bloke talk. You must do it. Or are you gay?”

“It’s not the talk that any of the blokes here use, Rowley,” snapped Mitchell. “As for the word gay, that is none of your business.”

“Muirhead was a gay bitch.”

“Rowley, my lad,” said Mitchell, “you don’t seem to understand the nature of this meeting. This is a preliminary interview before a Stage 3 disciplinary.”

“I want my dad. Give me my phone and I’ll tell my dad to start suing the whole fucking lot of you.”

“No, Master Rowley,” said Mrs Gledhill. “It is being used as evidence. It will be returned to you at the end of the disciplinary process. I am going to ring your parents now to tell them that we are conducting an interview for a major disciplinary meeting. Mr Mitchell, please could I have a contact number for Mr or Mrs Rowley?”

Mrs Gledhill rang the number. The resulting conversation led her to the conclusion that Rowley was a chip off the old block. Rowley interjected, “Dad, sue them! They’re all perverts. Mr Mitchell is a paedophile.”

“That, Master Rowley, is slander. Mr Mitchell is quite within his rights to take you to court,” said Mrs Horsefall.

Mrs Gledhill continued to explain to Mr Rowley that the school was not only within its rights to involve the Region about a case of sustained and systematic harassment, but it was also its duty. No, she could not agree that it was an over-reaction. Yes, Julian had accidentally revealed distinctive pigment spots on his lower right thigh. The pigment spots had revealed an exact match. It had all been witnessed. The school was totally right to get an official of the Regional Council to witness the check.

In the background, Julian Rowley was using language that was as foul as a sewer. Additionally, he was threatening to go to the tabloids. As Mrs Gledhill put the phone down, she wanted to put the little NED¹ (a term she had learned in her previous existence as a copper in Lanarkshire) over her knee and give him a damned good hiding. When her granddad was a copper, that was exactly what he would have done. Mrs Gledhill restrained

¹ NED – “Non-Educated Delinquent”, Scottish police slang for a young hoodlum.

herself. She had a good career with Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council, and she didn't want to ruin it now.

Mr Mitchell was thinking that Rowley would have been quietened with six of the best. It was the first time he had ever thought like that in his entire teaching career. Perhaps he had conjured up the ghost of Dr Cowan.

“Rowley,” said Mr Mitchell, “I am going to wrap things up. I am suspending you from school immediately. You will be suspended for five school days. A week on Monday, there will be a full meeting of the Regional Education Board’s Student Disciplinary Panel. It will be discussing what future, if any, you will have at this school. I do not like having to do this; it’s the least pleasant part of my job. Most times I have had to do this, students have been very contrite. You, on the contrary, have been arrogant and insulting throughout this meeting. What you have said has been recorded and may be used as evidence in next Monday’s meeting.”

Ten days later, the Corscadden Schools Board’s Disciplinary Panel met with the Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council Education Board at County Headquarters to consider the action to be taken against Julian Rowley². This action was considered to be so serious that the Chairman of the Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council Education Board, Janice Noonan, and the Director of Education, Colin Buchan, were present, as well as the Council’s Chief Legal Officer, James Mullen. Mr and Mrs Rowley were present with their solicitor, Ms

² South of the Border, the head teacher and a panel of governors can decide to remove a pupil from a school. In Scotland, such a decision can only be taken by the Local Education Authority, and only if a pupil’s continued presence is deemed to be prejudicial to the good order and discipline of a school or the educational well-being of other pupils in the school. While a School Board can have a say, it does not have legal powers to expel a pupil. Such action can only be taken by the local authority.

Jackson. They looked glum, while their son was still wondering what the fuss was all about.

Gradually more people filed in so that the large seminar room was full of very important and highly paid people. Mr Rowley looked decidedly crest-fallen, since Ms Jackson had been through in detail all of Julian's messaging on social media. It made repulsive reading. Mr and Mrs Rowley had had a flaming row about it, and now Mr Rowley was under strict orders to keep his big trap shut. He had opened it a lot with Mr Mitchell but now knew that he had been totally out of order. That's what Ms Jackson had told him. Nor was she impressed when Julian had said that it was only meant to be a bit of fun. Her reply was that if it got to a Children's Court, it was anything but fun, and they would not take kindly to it.

Despite the best efforts of his parents, Julian Rowley decided that attack was the best form of defence and entered the room like a spitting cat. When he saw Daniel Taylor and Tamsin Heady in the room, he hissed, "What's that gay boy doing here? And that bimbo? Who do they think they are?"

"And who do you think you are, Master Rowley?" was Mrs Noonan's riposte. "May I remind you that the purpose of this meeting is deadly serious? Its outcome may have a life-changing consequence for you, and, I am bound to say, not for the better. You will not speak unless you are asked to. Any further comments like that will inevitably have a negative influence on our deliberations. If you continue to behave in a contemptuous manner, you will be removed from this room, and the proceedings will continue without you. Clearly, we want to hear from you, but only when you are asked. Do you get the message?"

The message was reinforced by glares from both his parents, and Julian Rowley slumped in his chair. So, he tried the

tactic of ignoring it, so that it would go away – just like a Sunday. If he ignored Sunday long enough, it would eventually morph into Monday. However, it did not go away. Instead, he involuntarily picked up a lot of material that was not at all complimentary about him. The submissions were from the teachers who were always picking on him. Their lessons were boring, so why shouldn't he chat to his friends, or doodle on the benches? Dr Cuthbert was a pompous old fart. Craigie Boy had banned him from practical work in Physics. It had been fun watching the resistance wire melt and set a page of an exercise book on fire. Mr Farjeon had gone into orbit and that had increased his street-cred. Why should he do Mrs Erskine's detention for having his mobile out in a test? He couldn't do the test without it. When Mr Farjeon had taken his mobile off him while he was texting, it was the pits, and he had said so. Craigie Boy had given it to Dr Carter who had passed it to the headmaster who had threatened to call the fuzz. Mr Farjeon was a pretentious prick. As for Miss McPherson, the RE teacher, it was all hocus-pocus and nobody with half a brain could believe in that stuff.

It was a genuine shock to Julian Rowley when he heard what fellow Caddies thought of him. He had always thought that his behaviour had attracted admiration from his peers. They had always thought he was so funny and daring, so they told him. They looked up to him. He liked to be looked up to. However, his delusion of street-cred was popped like a balloon when student statements were read out. Caddies were heartily fed up with him. This ran contrary to his narcissistic view of himself. His mates who had helped him now had dissociated themselves from him. They had made long statements to Mr Mitchell that dropped him well and truly in it. It was bad enough that the teachers had said things about him, but those who were meant to be his mates had betrayed him.

After all it was only boy banter. Dad had told him about the boy banter they used to have when he was at school in the early nineteen eighties. It was just a bit of fun. When a boy to whom it was aimed had jumped out in front of a train, there had been a bit of a rumpus. Dad had been quizzed by the headmistress. He wasn't the ringleader. He was given the rounds of the cookhouse by the headmistress. It was a shame, and Dad had felt a bit guilty afterwards, but surely the boy could have given back as good as he got. Julian did not know that his father had later felt so bad about his part in his late classmate's demise that he had sought counselling about it. Nor did he know that his mother had taken his father to task for bragging about his idiot escapades at school. Still, Julian Rowley thought it was the best defence.

“Boy banter, Julian Rowley?” said Mr Buchan. “Is that what you use to justify bullying another student and suggesting how she could put her head under a train as it came out of Mauder Tunnel?”

Julian Rowley rightly concluded that the initially kindly looking Mr Buchan was not very pleased with him. Julian Rowley stuck to his defence. At the start, it was a lame duck. After it had been shot down in flames by everyone in the room, it was a dead duck. The best thing that Julian could do was to stop quacking.

There was further discussion that covered things that Julian Rowley had done which he ought not to have done, and things that he had left undone that he ought to have done. There was a lot of further material brought out, none of which was complimentary. It was painful and embarrassing for his parents who sat through it stoically. That Mr Rowley had remonstrated with the headmaster was also noted in a rather unfavourable light. A recording had been made – it was council policy that calls were randomly monitored for staff training purposes. It did not sound

good. Ms Jackson had told Mr Rowley that an action at law would have very little chance of success.

“Is it appropriate that a meeting as serious as this is attended by two students, Mr Mitchell?” said Mr Rowley who had disobeyed his wife’s orders to keep his trap shut. “Who are they to decide what should be done?”

“I can assure you, Mr Rowley,” replied Mr Mitchell, “that Daniel Taylor and Tamsin Heady will have no part in the decision-making process. They are here as part of the ‘Student Voice’ that is policy in all of the seven secondary schools in Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council.”

“Student Voice?” snapped Mr Rowley. “I haven’t heard anything so daft in my whole life. In my day, pupils damned well did as they were told.”

“The vast majority of our students do just that, Mr Rowley,” said Mr Buchan. “I think we have moved on a long way since the dark days when I was at school. Unfortunately, your son is one exception, which is why we are here today.”

Julian Rowley’s case was not helped further by a number of homophobic remarks he made when the head boy presented his submission. There were more degrading and sexist comments that Master Rowley had made, when the head girl gave hers.

There was an intermission in the proceedings while Mrs Noonan and her board went out to consider their decision. It was not long in coming and the decision had been unanimous. Mr Buchan delivered the verdict and sounded rather judicial as he did so.

“Julian Charles Rowley,” he started, “your record is not good. Indeed, it’s so bad that we have considered expulsion. The Law puts the onus on us to decide whether your continued presence in the school is prejudicial to good order and discipline

in the school, and whether the educational welfare of pupils within the school is likely to be harmed. In this case, both such criteria would seem to have been met.

“Mr Rowley, we also have to consider how supportive the parents are in ensuring compliance with school discipline. In this case, we are satisfied that your attitude towards our employee, the Headmaster, was not supportive to that aim.”

Julian Rowley muttered some obscenities.

“Master Rowley,” Mrs Noonan interjected, “please will you be quiet, otherwise you will be removed from the room.”

A security man had slipped in at the back of the room. Julian Rowley, a puny boy with an outsized ego, looked around and concluded wisely that this man was not to be messed with.

Mr Buchan continued, “There are a number of incidents that have happened over the past year or so, that have ranged from low level disruption in class, smoking, texting, and deliberate disobedience and disrespect to staff and school rules, right up to a serious incident in which a drone was flown into the boys’ lavatories, the material from which ended up on the net. The material was not only voyeuristic but was also designed to harass and humiliate students in Secondary Six. As both students whose faces were shown were over eighteen, we considered it unlikely that a charge of voyeurism of minors could be sustained. Mr Mitchell and Mr McEwan chose to deal with the matter internally, after the two students concerned were gracious enough to agree not to take the matter further.

“I should have thought that for most students, that should have been a sufficient shot across the bows to make them think a little bit before engaging in anything else so stupid. However, Julian Rowley, you have chosen neither to take advice, nor to accept the mentoring that has been offered over the last

few months. Your behaviour has continued to be prejudicial to the good order of Strathcadden Academy. The main reason for this meeting has been your gratuitous harassment of Francesca Muirhead, whose impact statement we have considered. The text messages have been as foul as anything that I have ever seen, and you organised a concerted campaign of bullying.

“In this meeting, we have seen for ourselves how Julian Rowley’s attitude has been contemptuous of the process and individuals who have made contributions towards it. In many interjections made on social media, you have been contemptuous of the school, describing it as ‘a concentration camp’ and ‘Colditz in kilts’. You have been scathing about Scotland as a nation and described the people of this area as ‘scrawny inbreds’. None of us would wish to make infantile ripostes to these tweets. They are indicative, though, of the lack of respect that you have had toward what has been done for you. A second chance was given, but, Julian Rowley, you have chosen to repudiate it.

“Now, Julian Rowley is a student that the council has accepted from South of the Border under the special arrangements that were put in place when Strathcadden Academy was founded in 1988. In such a case, the legal contract between the parents and the Council is very similar in law to that between parents and an independent school. Therefore, the council would have no obligation whatsoever to move Julian Rowley to another council high school. Therefore, the duty would be now on Mr and Mrs Rowley to make alternative arrangements for their son’s education.

“Julian Rowley, the policy of the council is that no pupil is expelled from our schools, unless all possible avenues of support have been completely exhausted. We do believe that there is still a chance that we can support you to achieve your potential at Strathcadden Academy. Therefore, we have now come to a decision concerning your education within a school controlled by

Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council. We have decided that you are to be suspended from Strathcadden Academy for a period from now until the end of the Autumn Term. A decision to suspend a pupil for such a long period is not one that is taken lightly.

“On your return, Rowley, you will be required to work in isolation, and as a boarding pupil, you will be required to remain on the school premises. I want you and your parents to be fully aware that if there is any repeat of bad behaviour, boarding provision will be withdrawn immediately and permanently. This means one of two things. Either your parents will need to move to the Corscadden area, or our obligations to you will cease, and your parents will need to find alternative provision.

“Now, Julian Rowley, we have reviewed all your text messages to Francesca Muirhead. As they constitute the offence of Sending Malicious Communications, they have been passed to Police Scotland. They have been forwarded to the Children’s Reporter. You may be called in for interview.”

Mr Rowley’s face was as black as thunder. In a low rumbling voice, he said, “Mr Buchan, is this not an overreaction to what is just a bit of boy banter and a stupid prank?”

“No, Mr Rowley. The drone incident was a dangerous and illegal thing to do. The propellers were exposed and could have easily taken an eye out or caused other cut injuries. Mr Mitchell gave Julian a second chance. Malicious harassment is something that the Council takes a very dim view of. This harassment of another student is as serious as anything I have ever seen not only as Director of Education, but also in my previous role as the Principal of Inverluker High School.”

“Would you re-allocate Julian to another school?”

“No. Your contract with Strathcadden Academy was the same as that of a parent of a pupil at an independent school. So, Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council would have no obligation towards you. Besides, Strathcadden Academy is one of seven secondary schools we have here, the closest being Cardean Junior High School. You come from South of the Border, so you would have to make your own arrangements. I want you to realise that this is what will happen should there be any repeat of this kind of behaviour.”

“Don’t you realise that Julian’s mother and I have to work away from home? That’s why we have him boarding. Don’t you understand the effect that will have on our careers? We can’t have him at home on his own.”

“You will have to adjust your careers to take that into account, I am afraid.”

“Mr Buchan, you are impossible!” Mr Rowley’s voice was rising to a blare. But Mrs Rowley snapped, “Stuart, stop it at once! You are making a vulgar spectacle of yourself.”

Surprisingly, Stuart Rowley stopped making a vulgar spectacle of himself at once. Jane Rowley was going to have a lot to say to both her menfolk. But the journey to the south would give her plenty of time to do so.

“A chip off the old block,” was Mrs Noonan’s summary as the meeting broke up.

Julian Rowley was not missed by other Caddies. His toxic masculinity, homophobia and misogyny were anathema to the gentle tolerance and acceptance that was so characteristic of the Corscadden community. Francesca Muirhead was identified as a student at risk, and she received much counselling and mentoring. Tamsin Heady played a major part in it.

Chapter 14

Early December 2015

While Julian Rowley was about to face up to the consequences of his misdemeanours, Kathryn Chetwynd and Rupert Bell-Dick had just extricated themselves from a tricky legal situation of their own. The former Mrs Melhuish had scraped together enough money from her former marital home to make a contribution for the ludicrously high price for a minimalist barn conversion in North Sussex. It had been hoped that if they had paid the asking price, it would enable them to live mortgage-free. It was not to be; they were gazumped. Well, two could play at that game, and Rupert gazumped back. This resulted in a contracts race which necessitated that the Bell-Dicks had to take out a very large bridging loan, as the solicitors were still working in the Eighteenth Century.

Rupert had had to sell his Bentley sports utility vehicle at a fraction of the enormous price he had paid for it. He got more for the personalised number plate that went with it. And that was to pay for the legal fees and stamp duty. But their plans had been derailed further by the rather petty insistence from the divorce courts that the money made from the sale of the Melhuish family home should be split evenly between Kathryn and her ex-husband, Stephen. She demurred for a while, trying to buy time while Stephen was abroad – the further away he was the better. Although he was on the other side of the world, his legal team was not. Annoyingly, his letters could be e-mailed to his lawyers in about the same time as it took Kathryn to walk across the kitchen. There was also the court's insistence (equally petty in Kathryn's opinion) that the Melhuish family heirlooms should be returned to their rightful owner.

There was also a small matter of her removal of a good number of items, of value, belonging to her ex-son, Sebastian Jordan Stephen Melhuish, in contravention of the Theft Act

1978. She was advised that her defence that the items were her property that was on loan to her son would not stand up in a court of law. So reluctantly she conceded payment, on condition that she never saw Stephen again, and that Sebastian should never attempt to contact his mother for the rest of her life. As far as Stephen and Sebastian were concerned, that was acceptable. If Sebastian (or Jordan to his friends) never saw his ex-mother again, it would be too soon.

For Kathryn and Rupert, the result of this was that the bridging loan cost them an arm and a leg in interest. They had to apply for a mortgage. Although it was for only twenty percent of the value of the property, it would be for five hundred thousand pounds. The monthly repayments were thousands per month and would take a large chunk from their salaries. It had been their intention that Kathryn could go part-time and have time to spend on her horses. Now she would have to continue to work full time for the next twenty odd years. She and Rupert would be in their late sixties or even seventies by the time they retired. If Rupert or she were let go, it didn't bear thinking about. Damn those other people who had forced them into a contracts race. Somehow the small and minimalist barn conversion was not quite as attractive as when Pippa had cooed so lovingly about it when they were on *Rustic Refugees*. There were also rumours in the village about massive housing developments, but nobody knew for sure.

When Stephen Melhuish returned from the Far East, he had some good news. Firstly, he was going to get a promotion as Assistant Director of Engineering at the Regional Office in Edinburgh. The good thing about this was that he did not have to fly all over the world all the time. Instead, he could work two days at home and be in the office three times a week. The office was on the southern outskirts of Edinburgh, so it was an hour and a half in the car from the Borders. This would be nothing

compared with eighteen-hour flights in a large aluminium tube, seated next to an obese American who seemed to occupy not only his own seat, but also half the seats either side of him.

Now that Kathryn had paid him for his share of the house, he could afford a small place for himself and Jordan somewhere in the Borders. Additionally, the Ombudsman had found in Stephen's favour as regarded the dispute he had had with Speak Easy, his mobile phone provider. Speak Easy had been hit with a multi-million pound fine, and ordered to compensate, and to readjust (at their expense) the credit records of thousands of their mistreated customers.

A second piece of good news reached Stephen when he arrived at Acrefair House. Clematis Cottage, the one he had rented until his tenancy had terminated in the summer, was still on the market. The successful bidder had not been able to complete. There had been a long legal wrangle concerning breaches of contract. Although the court had found in their favour, and awarded them considerable damages, Mr and Mrs Carney were still out of pocket. The purchaser had simply disappeared; the name used was an alias. This time the house was put back on the market in November for a fixed price sale. There had not been much interest, and the Carneys were keen to sell. A price reduction brought the price within the range that Stephen Melhuish was interested in. His offer was accepted, and the Conclusion of Missives (completion) would occur at the end of January. Furthermore, Mr and Mrs Carney granted him access to the property to do the place up. Although it was a comfortable house, certain aspects were dated, and he decided to invest some money in refurbishment. In the meantime, he would stay at Acrefair House. It had been a peaceful retreat when Kathryn had so unceremoniously dumped him.

34, Adam Place was a townhouse in a pleasant terrace in the town centre of Corscadden. Built in the late Georgian era, it was modestly spacious. Outside, its front façade was built from yellow sandstone, and there was a small front garden. Its front door was painted dark blue and its brass fittings glinted. Inside, the entrance hall led to a living room at the front and a family room at the back, which had glorious views over the town and westwards down Strathcadden. The kitchen, utility room, and a wet room were downstairs on the lower ground floor, and there were views over the small garden which ran downhill to the backs of Riverside Terrace. Upstairs there were two bedrooms on the first floor, with a large family bathroom. There were a further couple of rooms in the roof space.

It was a small version of the grand gentlemen's townhouses that were to be found in Edinburgh's New Town.

It had always been a surprise to Imogen Salway that she had been able to buy this place mortgage-free on the proceeds of the sale of her small but perfectly formed cottage in Clinton Muncey. It was a house that had tugged on her heartstrings within ten seconds of going through the front door. It was more than big enough for her, and her furniture from her cottage was rapidly swallowed up with room to spare. So, she sniffed about the local antique shops and drove hard bargains with the owners. She also managed to obtain lovely antiques at knock-down prices at Watson's, the auctioneers in Corscadden. A steady supply of beautiful oak pieces had streamed in, courtesy of her brother-in-law who looked for any excuse to use his noisy big boy's toys in the garage at Brewster House.

At first Imogen had rattled around the big house like a pea in a drum and she had wanted to share it with someone. Mum and Dad would come over from time to time. In November, she had arranged a date with an eligible bachelor, Alexander Richard Fairbairn. He was, at age 36, six years younger

than her. Their first tryst was in a nationally famous salad bar in Edinburgh New Town, with a follow up tryst in a country house hotel in the Borders. A tip-off from Imogen had also led to Alex's application for a permanent job in accountancy at Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council Finance Department. On Wednesday 2nd December 2015 he was appointed to start after the New Year. He would be groomed to take on a senior role on successful completion of advanced professional examinations.

Alex was by now spending the weekends in Adam Place with his girlfriend, arriving on a Friday evening and motoring back to The Borders early on a Monday morning, before the A825 road started to get clogged up with workaday traffic that made travelling along it such a grind. This only lasted a couple of weeks as Alex had leave owing to him. Therefore, he could have a couple of weeks off, before his commute to Buchanan. The council offices were not far from Buchanan station, which made the commute easy.

Imm wanted to keep her growing romance with Alex secret from Laura's tribe. She knew that her sister would give her twenty questions. Laura had told her that Chris was coming back on the Saturday before Christmas and was doing Tuesday to Thursday of that week. For Imm, Monday would be an ideal time for a nice little trip into Walker Bros with Alex to do some late Christmas shopping, i.e. most of it. They would have a quiet lunch in the restaurant. It was a pleasant place to eat. If you could get the right table, there were wonderful views over Corscadden Bridge and west down Strathcadden. Train enthusiasts liked to get the table at the far end as they could get wonderful views of the trains passing through Corscadden Station.

Alex and Imm were lucky; the table with the most stunning views became available just as they came in. The table

was low and there were easy chairs looking out of the bay window. In the old days, the full-length windows opened out onto a balcony. In the summer this had a range of pot plants. For safety, the doors were unlocked only for maintenance. Imm and Alex waited. They were holding hands.

Almost immediately a willing young waitress, Caitlin, cleared the table and made it ready before they sat down. She brought them the menu. Alex liked the way the young staff dressed, in their jackets, jumpers, shirts, ties, kilts, knee-length socks and black shoes. They looked so professional and acted it.

Both gazed out of the window to take in the wonderful view. The snow line was just over three hundred metres, which was pretty well on the outskirts of the town. They then perused the menu. The choice was fabulous. On an occasion like this, nothing but the best would do.

Unknown to them a skinny long-haired blond appeared to take the order at the next table. Christian Salway looked over towards the window while his customers pondered their order. He watched discretely. Nosing at other customers was not to his normal standards of silver service, but he indulged this peccadillo for a few seconds until his customers had finally made up their minds. And he jumped to it to take their order.

As he served each meal Chris took a second off-task to see what his aunt and step-uncle were up to. Meanwhile, Caitlin attended to serving her customers with the professionalism that was the norm at Walker Bros.

“Mum,” said Chris that evening when Laura got back from work at the Strathie, “Aunt Imm and Uncle Alex were in together at Walker Bros.”

“I’m sure there’s something up between them,” Laura replied. “Imm goes all coy when I mention anything about Uncle Alex.”

“Well, there is. They were up in the restaurant at what we call the love-bird table. Uncle Alex ordered our top line dishes, and he paid for lunch. They shared everything and they were stealing kisses all the time. They had a good snog at the end of the meal.”

“Did you serve them?”

“No Caitlin did. I served customers on nearby tables. They were carrying on like you and Dad.”

“A bit like the pot calling the kettle black, I would say. You ought to see you and Gemma. There are plenty of lovebirds in this house, what with Aidy and Tamsin.”

“We’re young, Mum. Imm’s even older than you and Dad.”

“We are young at heart,” Laura replied loftily. “Dad’s not much older than seventeen, and that’s on a good day going downhill with the wind behind him. Uncle Alex is just the same. I never knew you were nosy, anyway, Chris.”

“I was a Caddie, Mum. I was only there eighteen months, but I picked up the habits.”

When Christian reported on what he had seen to his half-brothers, they were similarly intrigued. Chris was not one to gossip. It was not a Caddie trait that he had shown up to now, but it seemed that he could do it as well as anyone.

Christian’s true brothers were there as well. However, they had not reached their first Christmas, and that kind of thing was not on their radar. Little games for ten-month infants were. Both boys could do a pretty mean peek-a-boo.

Later that evening, Imogen rang her sister to get an idea for their father's Christmas present.

"So, what's this with you and Alex?" Laura wasn't interested in the present as much as the gossip. Imogen should have known; she was as nosy as the next person, and had gossip to a fine art. She had cut her teeth at the Sir William Kenyon High School in Fotheringham. As far as being nosy and gossiping was concerned, the pupils there were second to none.

"Nothing at all." Imogen was trying to demur, with little success.

"Oh, I think there is."

"How do you know?"

"Our Chris told me. He says you were at the love-bird table. Caitlin served you."

"We never saw him."

"No. He was very discreet. He was serving other customers but got a good idea of what you were up to. I never knew you had a romantic streak."

"You said he wasn't at work today."

"He got called in first thing this morning. A couple of staff were off sick."

"You can't talk, Glam puss, the way you and Joby are all over each other."

"Seriously, Imm, why don't you and I meet up for coffee at Walker Bros with Alex? I know Alex well. He really would suit you. I am off on Wednesday. Alex is off and you are too.

I'll come without the boys. Chris will be at work, and will be too busy to stick his nose in."

And they did.

Chapter 15

Thursday 17th December 2015

The County of North Sussex has many picture-postcard villages that evoke nostalgia for the past. It conjures up a longing for a rural idyll so sought after by residents of the wealthier parts of Southern England. The village of Wapplesfield is one such. Originally a farming community, it had become more gentrified over the past fifty years. It was a slow process to start with, but over more recent years, city types had moved out from London in large numbers, using the profits from the sales of tiny houses and flats to buy rural homes at exorbitant prices. Inhabitants of the village, whose families had been there for generations, could not afford to buy even the smallest houses. They would have had to spend a lifetime saving even for the deposit. Even so the price would have risen yet again to be out of reach.

Those one-time inhabitants of Wapplesfield who had sold up used to be able just about to manage to buy small houses in the nearby town of Laineshurst. However, that option had now gone since the Millennium. Even two-bedroom terraced houses near the station were commanding prices in excess of four hundred thousand pounds. These were narrow, having a living room that was not much wider than a hallway. The stairs were so steep that it was not safe to come down facing forward; people would have to reverse down the steps, as if coming down from a tractor. Beyond a tight galley kitchen, there would be a shower room, as the space would not accommodate a bath. Upstairs there would be a small front bedroom, and a box room at the back.

There were people who did ordinary jobs for normal pay, but most of them had to commute for hours a day to get to Laineshurst. Those very few who did not commute had to pay extortionate rents. It was cleansing by social class.

Not that Rupert Bell-Dick or his partner, Kathryn Chetwynd, cared one jot: indeed, they fully approved. If they thought about people on low salaries at all, they would do so with utter contempt. Such people were to be considered as having failed. They were the little people who used National Health Service doctors and hospitals. They were the little people who sent their children to state schools. Bell-Dick and Chetwynd were very aware of their superior social status and were pleased that they had moved to a village that had the right kind of people.

Glebelands Farm had been a working farm in the Marton Family for at least two hundred years. However, Alan Marton had recently found it more profitable to rent out his fields as paddocks for horses for the very well-heeled. His daughter had set up a livery yard. All-in-all, it was far less hard work and far more profitable than having to get up at five o'clock in the morning of a stormy day to get the cows in for milking.

A year later, Mr Marton had sold his barns to a developer. The barns were converted into minimalist contemporary properties for the wealthiest kind of London commuter. The development was called Glebelands Barns, and each was given a twee rustic sounding name. Windhover Barn had been recently sold to Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn's Bank, and Kathryn Chetwynd, Chartered Accountant. The new owners of Windhover Barn liked the name but had no idea that a windhover was a kestrel. Likewise, their neighbours in Ringdove barn did not know that their property was named after a woodpigeon. There were also Throstle Barn, Mavis Barn, Shufflegling Barn, Pianet Barn, and Horn Coot Barn³.

Sir Gerald Barton QC was a senior partner in the London legal practice of Boult & Tanner LLP. It was a sufficiently large practice to have many city financial institutions on its books. Its

³ Named after the song-thrush, blackbird, dunnock, magpie, and long-eared owl.

eye-watering fees enabled Sir Gerald and his partners to earn eye-watering remuneration. Thus, Sir Gerald and his wife, Lady Lucinda, could afford the eye-watering price for The Rectory in the village centre of Wapplesfield. Barton had almost immediately had the bells of St John's Church silenced, including the clock chimes. The small congregation could not afford to contest the injunction that he had applied for. After four hundred years of ringing out, the bells fell silent.

Soon after that, the vicar was retired and the parish church was downgraded to occasional use, having one service a month. Not that Sir Gerald or Lady Lucinda minded. They had not darkened the door of a church for many years, except for Christmas, funerals, weddings, and baptisms.

There were social events in the Village Hall, a ramshackle place in need of a considerable amount of money spending on it. Appeals for its upkeep tended to fall on politely deaf ears. A dwindling number of people looked after it. It was not that the residents were actively hostile, but they were working all hours in London. They were leaving the house at 6 o'clock to commute from Laineshurst to London and not catching the train home until the early evening. By the time they got home, it was time for a bath, followed by dinner, and bed. The whole process was repeated the next day. On top of that, their mortgage repayments were so large that at the end of the month, there was not much left over.

An invitation to a drinks party at The Rectory was just the ticket for Rupert and Kathryn, as the right sort of people would be there. Events in the Village Hall were really not their kind of thing; they despised common yokels. Also, the hall was as cold as charity inside and had a musty smell of damp and decay. A drawing room in a large former rectory with like-minded people was far more attractive.

And so it proved.

“Rupert darling! Kathryn darling! Mwah! Mwah!” was a greeting that was repeated a number of times. The word “mwah” was heard many times over that evening as more guests arrived. The drink flowed freely and the table in the dining room groaned under its burden of nibbles. There were enough of these for the greedier of the guests to make several visits. Rupert was one such. Kathryn nibbled delicately to show that she had upper-class airs and graces. Mentally she was working out how much extra time she would have to spend in the gym to burn off all those extra calories.

Snippets of conversation drifted across the drawing room:

“Oh Anabel, aren’t school fees terrible...?”

“How’s Zara at Roedean...? Darling, you must be so thrilled she got nine A* s at GCSE.”

“You saw Rupert’s companion at the office...”

“Those new people who moved into Glebelands Barns... Do you know how much they paid for it...? Two and a half million... I am not joking... There’s one born every minute.”

“Nigel bought a top-of-the-range Range Rover... It cost 75 k... He isn’t very happy though... It spends half its time in the garage... Last time it broke down on the M25... I told him to think with his head next time.”

“Charlie got into Charterhouse for next term... Henry is doing frightfully well... He’s applying for Oxford...”

“Darling, you must be thrilled... I always said your boys were so bright...”

“Zara is going skiing on the day after Boxing Day... It’s in Canada... Switzerland is so passé... God no; she’s going with the school... It’s so expensive.”

“Nigel and I had a wonderful month in the Seychelles... I put him on a diet when we got back...”

“Did you know that Alan Marton is putting Glebelands Farmhouse up for sale...? I looked in the estate agent in Laineshurst. They are asking 1.5 for it... It needs a lot doing... It’s a mucky old place.”

“Someone said that he’s going to sell off the farmland as well... They say that the farm is worth 15 to a developer...”

“Fifteen thousand grand?”

“I don’t like that... Our garden looks over his fields... We bought our house for the views. We paid 900 for it. I hate to think how its value will fall if they put houses there...”

“They won’t give it planning permission...”

“The developers will go to the minister...”

“Good Lord, man, they must be stopped...”

“Cyrus went up to Cambridge this term...”

“Johanna’s in her second year... She got a two-one in her Tripos...”

“I have been appointed the senior partner *ab hinc... Lebra lege...*”

And so it went on. The more wine that was consumed, the more the social one-upmanship increased. Kathryn felt uneasy about the clips she earwigged about the farmer selling the farmhouse and his land. The barns were a short distance away from the farmhouse. The tatty state of the farmhouse was cutely

rustic. When they made their offer on Windhover Barn, they had looked at the other barns as well as inspecting the neighbours. Glebelands Farmhouse was set a hundred metres down what had been a farm track to the barns. It was now a superior avenue covered with brick paviours. The farmhouse garden was hidden from the avenue by a tall fence and a taller hedge of Leyland Cypress. While it could keep eyes out, the hedge could not keep in the sounds of a good number of free-range poultry.

It was probably all rumour; these things got blown out of all proportion at drinks parties. For Kathryn, this was so much better than the oh-so-boring Stephen and that drip of a son of his. Sebastian was no longer hers and getting rid of them both had been so worth it.

Rupert had made a number of visits to the buffet in the dining room. He had heard of the Yorkshire expression, “reet-pogged”. He preferred the term “decidedly replete”, which was more appropriate to his status of Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn’s Bank. It also occurred to him that he was well over the legal limit for driving, and that he had better sober up before he drove down to Laineshurst Station the next morning. Well, if he wasn’t, Kathryn could take him, and he would clear his hangover on the train to Town.

As they walked down the avenue to the Barns, both heard a scratching and rustling sound on the fence. A large rat dropped down in front of them and scurried away towards the Barns. It was followed by a second and a third.

“Rupert! Do something!” Kathryn screamed.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Just do something. Look what they’re doing now!”

Two rats quickly performed an act that they did naturally before disappearing in front of Mavis Barn. It was like a bucket of cold water being poured over Rupert's and Kathryn's warm glow of smug self-satisfaction. Not that the rats knew anything about moving in the right sort of social circles in a particularly exclusive part of Southern England. Their only interest was the abundant supply of poultry food that lay on the ground behind Glebelands Farmhouse – and ensuring the next generation of little rats that would become big rats.

Once back in Windhover Barn, Rupert slammed the front door hard shut to emphasise that it would be a very silly little rat to follow them in.

“Rupert, we haven’t used the cinema room since we have been here,” said Kathryn. “You have always been so busy.”

“Of course,” Rupert replied. They went to the cinema room on the mezzanine floor and at his command, the large screen television rose from its stand and flickered into life. Kathryn was impressed, but thought it should say, “Nice to be of service.”

Soon Rupert had searched through *Netflix* and found a film that seemed sufficiently mindless for one who was replete both on food and wine.

Halfway through, Kathryn announced she was going to bed, as she had to be in Portsmouth at nine the next morning for a whole company meeting.

“Katy, I thought you could take me to the station for the seven thirty-four,” said Rupert, who had filled a glass with wine.

“Rupe, if you want me to take you to the station, you’ll have to be up at half past five. At seven thirty I’ll be on the A3 waiting to get onto Portsea Island.”

“OK, if I’m not up, I’ll get there myself,” Rupert replied. He did not fancy standing on a cold station waiting for the first train. Although he travelled First Class, it was not always guaranteed that he would get a seat on that train. Since he was a senior member of staff, nobody minded if he arrived at work after nine. Attendance at eight o’clock was just for the minions. He would have this glass, and that would be it. A few hours in bed, he would be right as rain.

Rupert had a slightly disturbed night. He had had to visit the en-suite twice, and now he was starting a hangover. He had been vaguely aware of Katy moving about. She had shaken him, but he had stirred and gone back to sleep. He looked at the clock; it was nearly seven. He cursed as it was going to be a rush to get the train. At that time, it could also be difficult to get a parking place at the station.

Rupert decided to skip breakfast. He could get a coffee on the train. Time was getting short as he dressed and made his way to the car. He found it a bit hard to focus; perhaps he shouldn’t have had that last glass of wine. The Porsche bellowed into life. He was going to have to clog it to the station. Damn those tufty club⁴ types who insisted on speed limits. The road to Laineshurst was straight, but the speed limit was fifty miles an hour. For Rupert, speed limits were for the little people. He had a very expensive motor car with a personalised number that was worth even more.

Rupert considered himself the only safe driver; everyone else was an incompetent idiot who really should not have been on the road. If they couldn’t drive at a reasonable speed, they should not be driving at all. Lorries and buses should be banned.

⁴ The Tufty Club was introduced in the early 1960s by the Royal Society of the Prevention of Accidents to promote road safety among young children. Its emblem was a red squirrel character called Tufty. In the nineteen eighties highly paid young finance professionals used “Tufty Club” as a pejorative term to describe peers and others who drove their cars in accordance with motoring law. Rupert was one such.

As he pulled out of the avenue to Glebelands Barns, a car had to pull up sharp. The driver blew his horn in annoyance. Rupert returned a V-sign, before racing off. He was going over double the speed limit by the time he got out of the village. He was not going to miss the train. He overtook a couple of cars on the bends, barging in when someone else was rash enough to want to come the other way. Then there was the straight bit. Unfortunately, there were several cars whose drivers were rather pettily obeying the speed limit. He put the car down into third and floored the accelerator. He was now not far off double the speed limit, diving back into the traffic as a bus came the other way, and back out again. By the time he got into sixth gear, he was not far off the entrance to the station carpark. He had not noticed a van that was parked in a lay-by on the opposite side of the road.

Unfortunately for him, the traffic-cops had noticed Rupert, and were very interested in him. A quick message was passed to another traffic cop in a patrol car. It pulled up just as Rupert had parked the Porsche. The seven thirty-four was pulling into the station. It was, for once, on time.

“Good morning, sir. In a hurry, are we?”

“I’ve got a bloody train to catch. Can’t you see?”

The second traffic cop was getting out of the patrol car.

“Of course I can, sir. But I have to deal with this one. Do you realise that your speed was ninety-eight miles an hour? My mates in the Safety Van watched what you were up to. One of the best for ages. We might put it up on You-Tube.”

“Look! I haven’t the bloody time to waste with you! My train is there. I want to get on it, and you are stopping me. I’ve got far more important things to be doing.”

“Have you been drinking, sir?”

“Of course I haven’t. Now you have made me miss my train! Don’t you realise I have an important meeting to get to? Haven’t you anything better to do?”

“Just doing our duty, sir. Do you mind blowing into this?” The traffic cop got out a yellow device with a display screen. He inserted a fresh mouthpiece. “Take a deep breath, sir... Keep blowing... Stop now...”

Both officers looked at the display, and gave their verdict, “You are well over the limit, sir. Please give us your car keys and sit in our car.”

“This is preposterous,” Rupert snapped. “Don’t you realise that I am Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn’s Bank? I was earning more when I was twenty-one than you two ever will in a life time. I know influential people, you know. You should be arresting criminals.”

“They all say that. As for criminals, we are arresting one now.”

“Criminal? Me? I will sue you for that.”

“Yes, sir, driving with 50 micrograms of alcohol per hundred millilitres of breath is a criminal offence. So is driving at ninety-eight miles per hour in a fifty speed limit. I am arresting you on suspicion of drunken driving and a serious speeding offence. You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Please get into the car.”

And that was what Rupert Bell-Dick did while loudly protesting his outrage. There were the formalities:

“Your full name, sir?”

“David Rupert Roderick Bell-Dick.”

“Your date of birth, Mr Bell-Dick?”

“I have been put forward for a Knighthood, if you please.”

“Don’t care what you have been put forward for, sir. I just want your date of birth.”

“23rd April 1963.”

“Address, sir?”

“Windhover Barn, 3, Glebelands Barns, Wapplesfield.”

“Do you understand the reasons for your arrest?”

“Of course I do, you bloody idiots! But I shall be taking this to the highest level.”

“Of course, sir,” replied Constable Hicks. “We hear that all the time. Now we are going to take you down to the station to take a sample.”

“We’re at the station at the moment. And I have got a bloody train to catch. I have an important meeting at the bank. So, can I get out and catch the next train? I am late enough as it is.”

“No, not this station, sir. We are taking you down to the police station as we need to take a sample. The police doctor is coming down. I think you’re in luck, sir. We don’t have any guests at the moment. You would find our regular guests rather low types. By the way, who you know cuts little ice with the law.”

It was after ten o’clock before Rupert Bell-Dick was released on police bail. He was in a stinking temper. However, he did have the choice of seats in First-Class. It was his first

opportunity to ring work, and he told them that he had been delayed.

Constables Hicks and Norton had now written up their reports and there would be a lot of mileage in the canteen to get out of the latest villain they had nicked. Bell-Dick was typical of those who drove expensive cars. His personalised number was worth money that would pay two coppers for a year. Obedience to traffic laws was just for the little people.

“You’re here now,” said the receptionist at Glynn’s Bank. “The MD wants to see you in his office as soon as you get in.”

Sir Clive Brooklands was normally a jovial man, but that was not the expression he had at the moment. Nor was he going to come rushing up to hug his team member who had gone so astray that morning.

“Rupert, what the bloody hell have you been playing at?” Sir Clive demanded. “This was an important meeting with our best clients. They are none-too-impressed. Neither am I, to be frank. So where were you?”

“I was delayed, Clive. I rang up to tell you,” said Rupert defensively. “Didn’t you get the message?”

“Of course I did! It was a bit vague, wasn’t it? You normally have good reasons. So, what were the reasons for this?”

“I was delayed.”

“How? Why?”

“I’d rather not go into it.”

“You don’t have to. The North Sussex Constabulary contacted us. You’ve been done for drunk driving and a serious speeding offence. Explanation, please.”

“They had no bloody right to do that! If you really want to know, I was getting down to the station. There were all these little people who seem to...”

“Drive at the speed limit?”

“What’s the fuss about that?”

“You were arrested for drunk driving. Don’t you realise that you will lose your licence for a year at least? Probably more. How are you going to get to our clients? On the bus?”

“I’ll get a chauffeur. There are plenty of agencies who supply chauffeurs. It can go on expenses.”

“Like hell it will. We’re quite happy to pay for mileage, but we are not going to pay for your chauffeur.”

“The bank has done it for others, Clive. I have signed off several in the last year,” Rupert replied with a sense of grievance.

“Not for drunken and reckless driving. Think about the tabloid headlines: *Personal Chauffeur for Legless Top Banker.*”

“Come on, Clive, it would be 20 k for a year, small change for the bank. If these bloody tufty club members weren’t on the road, I wouldn’t have been caught. You must have had one or two for the road in your time.”

“Rupert, I don’t believe I’m hearing this! For your information, my niece was killed by a drunken driver. That is one thing I don’t do, and I have no sympathy whatever with those who jump behind the wheel after having too many.”

“Oh, how vanilla, Clive,” snapped Rupert. “Anyway, I am going to plead not guilty to both offences. You have a direct line to the Chairman, and he plays golf with the Chief Constable. Get him to lean on the Chief and get those goons back on the beat.”

“Rupert, I don’t reckon that will get very far. You know as well as I do that you have form. If this was something minor, I’m sure that the Chairman could do something, but with your record, the Chief Constable will tell him to take a running jump, golf partner or no golf partner.”

“Just a suggestion, Clive...” Rupert started to stand up.

“I haven’t finished yet, Rupert. You missed the meeting and that disappointed our clients. I am most disappointed with you. You are going to have to be at your most apologetic to them if they are to come back to us. A satisfied client may return. A pissed-off client certainly will not. This is not a situation that will enhance your further career progression, Rupert, and there may be implications for your bonus which still has to go before the Board. So, I suggest that you go off and attempt to redeem the situation.”

Redeeming the situation was easier said than done. Rupert’s temper was getting fouler by the minute. He did not like getting a dressing down from above, so he took it out on the staff in his section. The first thing he did was to order all Christmas decorations to be taken down. He reduced several staff to tears and one went off with stress. He cancelled the staff party for the end of the day. Leave between Christmas and New Year was cancelled. He initiated formal disciplinary action on a junior employee who had made a couple of trifling errors. He dismissed an unpaid intern. Vindictive and petty, but it made him feel he was a dynamic manager. He had always been like that. At school, he had got into trouble with the headmaster which earned him a “six-up”. He beat up two smaller pupils and was suspended for two weeks. It took a large donation from the Bell-Dick Foundation to ensure he was kept on the school roll.

The train home was late leaving and got later and later as it headed towards Laineshurst. When he got there at the end, he realised he had to go to the police station to pick up his car keys. The police, rather pettily in his opinion, asked him to take a breath test before he got the keys to the Porsche. And the desk sergeant rather cheekily gave him a copy of the Highway Code and reminded him of the speed limits.

Now he was back at the station. The Porsche was just where he had left it, except there was something stuck to the windscreen, and a large notice on the driver's side door. In large letters it read "STOP! Do not move. For release, ring 0112-335 2976." And on the driver's side front wheel was fixed a large yellow wheel clamp.

His day could not have got any worse. But it had. It was just as well that the station staff had gone home, otherwise he would have added an assault charge to the list of his woes. Instead, he got out his mobile and rang the number to have the clamp removed.

"F W T Parking Services, Mylie speaking. Can I help you?" came the dead-pan voice of the call-centre operative. Her voice sounded as if the last thing she wanted to do was to help yet another irate motorist. She was only doing this job, which she hated, on minimum wage to earn a few extra pounds to help with the extortionate rent on her flat.

"You have clamped my car," Rupert shouted. "I want it released, and I want it released now."

"You will need to give me the vehicle details: make, model, registration number, and location."

"Porsche 911 GTS, RBD1, Laineshurst Station."

"And your name, address, landline, and mobile?"

“Do you want my waist and inside leg measurement while we’re here?”

The sarcasm was lost on the operative. After giving more details, Rupert was on the boil again. “Why have you put this bloody thing on my car anyway?”

“I’ll look it up on the system... Got it... You hadn’t bought a parking ticket for today.”

“I have a permit, you idiot!”

“Don’t get hoity-toity with me. The computer says that there was no permit visible. They always take a picture. It’s a posh car, isn’t it, but there is no sign of a permit.”

“For the second time, I have got a bloody permit!” Rupert shouted. He went around the front of the car. The operative was right. There was no sign of it. He opened the near-side door. The permit was in the passenger foot-well; during a particularly fierce bout of acceleration, the laws of physics had deposited it there. “I have got it here; permit number PE23545, expiry date 31st March 2016.”

“It wasn’t on display. Our attendants don’t put boots on cars for no reason at all.”

“Boots? It’s a clamp! Your minions will get my boot up their backsides if I could get my hands on them!”

“That is what a boot is; it’s a car clamp. We call them boots in this company.”

“I don’t care if it’s called a ballet shoe. Your imbeciles bloody-well did in this case! I want this clamp removed and I want it removed now!”

“Sir, if you want your car released,” said the operative, “please will you stop shouting at me. I’m only doing my job.”

Rupert wanted to scream. He was not used to being challenged by little minions. However, a quick assessment suggested that a further explosion from him would result in the operative putting the phone down on him, and the Porsche would stay where it was over the weekend. There might not be much left of it by then.

“Alright, what do you want me to do now?”

“I will need your credit card details. There is a charge you know. Let me look it up... Unpaid railway parking - £50; Clamping Charge - £45; Clamp hire charge - £70 a day; Clamp removal - £65; Administration charge - £150... Now that adds up to £590. There is VAT on top at 20 %, so that makes a grand total of £708.”

“What do you mean, £708?”

“Just as I have said. Now you need to give me your credit or debit card details.”

“This is highway robbery!” Rupert grumbled and handed over his credit card details. When he had finished, he said, “Can you now release my car?”

“Of course; the payment has gone through. I will book you in for Monday.”

“What? Monday? Are you joking?”

“No, I am not joking. That’s the first day we can do. Our attendants have gone home now. They won’t be back at work until Monday. The first time they can do is 14.30.”

“I don’t believe it! By the way, the daily charge for this station is £12.50. Why is it £50?”

“Unpaid parking charge for today, £12.50. Advance payment for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday makes £37.50. Total £50.”

“Do you mean to tell me that as well as not getting my car back until Monday, I am being charged parking fees? I suppose you are charging me four days hire for the clamp.”

“Yes.”

“I am at work on Monday. I get back late on a Monday!”

“You have until Monday at midnight to remove the vehicle. If it’s still there on Tuesday, it will be towed away at a cost of £500, plus £100 a day, plus VAT.”

“You really know how to rip people off!”

The carpark at Laineshurst Station was a dismal place on a dark and windy mid-December evening. It was starting to rain. Rupert retreated into the station building. The ticket office in the old days would have had a fire burning in the hearth to give passengers a welcome feeling. There was no such nowadays. Instead, there was a single fluorescent light fitting that made the whole place darker. A roving ticket inspector had established himself at the exit. No, he knew nothing about the goons who had clamped Rupert’s car. He had come on shift at five that evening and did a couple of hours at different stations before he went home on the last train.

Rupert dialled the landline to get Kathryn. No reply. He then rang her mobile. At least there was an answer this time.

“Rupe, I’m still on the M3. It’s a carpark... Accident – probably some idiot on his mobile. We’re moving... I won’t be back for another couple of hours... Shit! You won’t believe it. A copper has just clocked me on my mobile. Six fucking points!”

Finally, Rupert got a taxi back to Wapplesfield. Windhover Barn felt cold. The heating had not come on, even though he had switched it on through his mobile app. He wanted that Friday to end. At least he had the Range-Rover. However, reliability was not its strong point. At a push, there was Katy's Merc.

Three hours later Katy came in, in a bad temper that was even more thundering than Rupert's. Rupert was rash enough to suggest that Katy should have taken him down to the station that morning and none of this would have happened. Katy was not in the least bit impressed.

Rupert slept in the spare bedroom.

Chapter 16

Christmas Week 2015

Aidan Walker was spending a good number of hours in the noisy room behind Brewster House. It had started when he, Chris, and Eejay had arrived back from Edinburgh. Above the garage the boys had set up a computerised recording studio using a second-hand mixing desk and a couple of Dad's old computers. There were several old but functional keyboards that could be connected to one of the computers. Three of the keyboards were placed on oak shelves made by their father to resemble the manuals on a church organ. The computer had software that had all the stops that any church or concert organist would want. As Joby knew his stuff about electronics, he had made a pedal keyboard that went under the table.

It had all started with a call on Aidy's mobile as Aidy and Chris were coming home on the train. It was Tamsin, "Aidy, what are you doing on Wednesday?"

"Isn't that the Christmas Concert?" Aidy replied.

"Yes. We have a crisis. Ben Tollick has had to pull out. He had an accident playing footy this afternoon. They took him to the Strathie. He broke his left arm and has sprained his ankle. Mr Struther is here."

"Hello, Aidan," said Mr Struther. It still felt kind of strange that Mr Struther was using his first name. It had been less than eighteen months before that he had still been "Walker". He liked Mr Struther but didn't consider it at all proper to call him Peter. "We need you to play for us, now that Tollick is out of action."

"Doesn't he have an understudy?"

“No. I did think of that and have auditioned, but I think they will struggle to get up to speed for Wednesday. You will be able to do it standing on your head.”

“When are the rehearsals?”

“Monday and Tuesday after school. Can you help us?”

“Of course. But I’ll need the music.”

“I’ll sort it out now.”

“Can you give it to Jannie Brian? I’m on the train back from uni. We’ll call in and collect it on our way up from the station.”

“I can’t thank you enough. I’ll pass you back to Miss Heady. She can talk you through it all.”

And Tamsin did so. It was also an excuse for her to spend time with her boyfriend over Saturday and Sunday to get him up to speed with his parts and his solo performances. She had given the family a preview of her solo piano pieces in the drawing room at Brewster House.

Back at home, Aidan had a pile of musical scores by his keyboards which Ben had annotated. On his laptop was a series of video-clips with all the pieces that had an organ part. He played along with the disembodied orchestra. It reminded him of a concert performed in Edinburgh when Dad was a kid. The concert organ in the Usher Hall was unplayable, so the organist used Saint Mary’s Cathedral’s instrument and was connected with her fellow musicians by a two-way link. It all worked well.

Aidy was worried that if he came in so late into the rehearsals, he would upset the dynamics of the orchestra, so he wanted to be as prepared as possible. It took Aidy a few goes to get together with the orchestra. He tended to be a bit faster than them but soon got the pace of it. He wanted everything to be top

notch, especially for Tamsin. On Monday and Tuesday evenings, his efforts had paid off. The rehearsals were not perfect; they never are. But at least he had not caused any of the trip-ups.

Late on Wednesday afternoon Aidan found himself in the Old Chapel doing some last-minute practice for his solo pieces. The finale for the concert was going to be *The Fairytale of New York*, a piece that had the challenge of multiple time signatures. In the original track these varied from an easy pace to decidedly fast, and the tune's characteristic was folksy. Aidy knew the lyrics well, some of which were not very nice.

As he sat at the console, he remembered how, two years before, the cantankerous old instrument had given him a hard time. As a result of a bequest from his late mother, the instrument had been completely restored and now was a joy to play. Even so, due to pre-performance nerves, he had made an exit to the little room at the end of the corridor next to the chapel. Last time he had been in that corridor, the Dragon had given him a large mouthful of verbal, before having a set-to with Mr Mitchell and Mr McEwan. The further the Dragon was away, the better. If he never met her again, it would be too soon.

When Aidan returned to the Old Chapel, Tamsin was waiting at the organ console. The two held hands for a moment before Tamsin said, “You’ll be fine Aidy. The Dragon isn’t around.”

The Dragon’s behaviour had made its way firmly into the canon of Caddie lore. Tamsin then said, “Now give us a little tinkle.” And she watched on adoringly as her boyfriend’s hands scurried over the keys.

“Now you give me a little tinkle,” said Aidy. They went over to the grand piano and Tamsin’s hands didn’t just scurry. They raced across the keys with grace and delicacy. Aidy was transported to a concert hall and imagined himself listening to a

top pianist. Instead, he was on a blue plastic chair sitting in a school theatre and assembly hall converted from an old public school chapel, listening to a lanky sixteen year old girl dressed in a blue blazer, pale blue shirt, grey and blue tie, green jumper, a slightly short tartan kilt-like skirt (Douglas blue modern), knee-length green socks with a yellow band at the top, and black shoes.

By now John the Jannie and Jannie Brian were arranging the chairs and placing programmes on each one. Each programme had a sticker that stated: *We are most grateful to Aidan Walker, a recent student at this school, who has stood in at short notice to be our organist. We wish Ben Tollick a speedy recovery.*

“See, Aidy, you’re famous,” said Tamsin with her characteristic gentle smile. Then Mr Struther came in, and soon more Caddies were pouring in, the choir and the orchestra. Aidy and Tamsin settled at their respective keyboards.

The rehearsal was not that brilliant. There were many pre-performance nerves, and not just from the students. Mr Struther was infinitely patient and calming. Aidy thought about Michelin Woman during these hiatuses. Although he had not performed in a Christmas concert while Miss Bryant was head of music, he had heard about the hissy fits thrown when she was rehearsing. Aidy was a Wee Caddie in Secondary Two when the Dragon had last done a Christmas concert. Not that she was the first or last musician to have a hissy fit. Tamsin had told him about a young Johann Bach calling one of his orchestra “a prick of a bassoonist”.

One of Tamsin’s acts was to conduct a male voice choir from the staff and Secondary Five and Six. This had been Craigie Boy’s idea, but it had been a scratch affair. Mr Farjeon was a good singer, but others needed their talent to be developed further. As their choir-mistress, Tamsin found it hard work at times. She did not refer to Mr Harland as a “prick of a tenor”,

although sorely tempted at times. It did help her to develop considerable skills at keeping her mouth shut. As a Wee Caddie, she had frequently heard Miss Bryant's performance as a conductor and did not want to follow her example.

Then the Caddies went over to the canteen. For Aidy it was strange to be invited up to the staffroom. As a Caddie it was the holy-of-holies into which no student had ever stepped. Aidy had thought that all the teachers engaged solely in earnest academic conversations. In reality it was an untidy room with piles of exercise books, unwashed coffee cups, knives and forks from the canteen, a number of down-at-heel computers, randomly distributed bags, and old newspapers. Notices hung untidily from pin-boards. The conversations were not earnest at all. They consisted of the footy, what had been bought in the Christmas sales, soap operas, and so on – just like workmates anywhere.

If the Common Room in Greatorex House had been left in that state, Dr Cuthbert would have had a fit.

In the staff work room, the tables had been cleared, and the various piles of exercise books and A4 lined paper had been placed on the tables by the windows. There was a large buffet spread ready for the staff musicians to devour. Aidan was still nervous, as he was before any performance. He did not feel like eating much and the last thing he wanted to do in the middle of his performance was to have to rush to the little room at the end of the corridor by the Old Chapel. Various members of staff asked how he was and made a fuss of him. He appreciated that and was happy to tell them all about uni. Mr Farjeon, Miss Birch, and several others wandered about the buffet when the others had finished. There would not be much left. The Eighteenth-Century composer Handel was known for his gluttony; he would not have got a look in.

In the student canteen, there was a lot of banter about Tamsin snogging with Aidan Walker. It would form a good deal of Caddie gossip for a number of weeks. If she were a bower bird, Aidy was making a wonderful bower for her. She was going to lay her eggs in his nest and had made no secret of it. Not for her was the daily black grouse lek in Greatorex House; Secondary Five and Six boys could pop and hiss as much as they liked.

The Old Chapel was full to standing. As always, the people of Corscadden were a cultured lot, especially as the event was free. This time the music was in perfect harmony. Tamsin wasn't worried about her prick of a tenor. The orchestra kept in time and the musicians were able to cover up for each other so that the audience weren't aware of any imperfection. Bach may have noticed his prick of a bassoonist or any other instrumentalist, but Bach was long since dead. Tamsin had a standing ovation for her piano solo. Aidy was pleased with his performance. There was an encore, followed by the bows. Mr Struther brought Tamsin out. Aidan didn't miss out as he was the guest artist.

Now the stage lights were dimmed, and the house lights were up. As the audience filed out of the Old Chapel, Aidan was still at the console of the organ. He had turned it off, but was looking at the plaque which read, *"In grateful and loving memory of Mary Claire Bethan Walker (1965 – 2014), a warm friend of Strathcadden Academy"*. Two years ago, Mum was still alive and so full of energy. Yes, she was tired but had been working flat out for weeks. He loved Laura, who had made Dad so happy, and had brought Christian to be his half-brother. However, they could not replace Mum. It was thanks to Mum and her encouragement that he had become a skilful keyboard artist. Now he was sitting at this massive instrument and had shared his love for keyboard music to nearly nine-hundred people. It had

been standing room only. He missed Mum. She would have been so proud of him. Unnoticed by everyone, tears welled up in his eyes.

Unnoticed by everyone except Tamsin, who slipped onto the organ bench and snuggled up to him. "My baby, what's up?" she asked.

"Doing this made me think of Mum. It was only two years ago."

Tamsin put her arm around him and caressed his face. It was just the way that Mum had when he was upset as a little boy. Yes, Aidy was a nineteen-year-old student in his second year at uni, but the loss of his mother still had the power to hurt. Time would heal, but it would take time. He buried his face into Tamsin's chest. She ruffled his hair.

"I'm here, Aidy. I'm here for you. I'll help you. I love you, my baby."

Trite and sentimental though these phrases may have sounded, Aidy treasured what Tamsin had said. He looked at her. His eyes still had tears in them. "Tammie, I love you. Will you be mine?"

Tamsin's eyes were wide. Aidy may have been two and a half years older than her, but he still looked so young. He would have still passed for a Caddie. He was so sensitive and so loving. She wanted to hold him tight and not let go. She continued to caress her boyfriend, and they kissed. Their legs intertwined. This became one of those many moments that they would cherish for many years. They didn't want it to finish.

But finish it must. Eejay was looking for his brother and came up bounding onto the young couple like a large puppy.

Dr Cowan's portrait still had the small rip on the end of his hooter, and he glared at Walker and Heady. Their little snog on the organ bench had certainly convinced him that young men had gone soft in the intervening eleven decades. As for girls in the school, well that was beyond the pale. He would have given Walker six of the best and personally marched him across the assault course and sent him skinny-dipping in the Cadden. Ewan gave the portrait his customary glare, and muttered, "Henry Cowan, you are a complete bastard."

Aidy had by now pulled himself together. Chris and Gemma rushed up to congratulate him and Tamsin for their performances. Joby and Laura followed them. Then there were David and Anne Heady, who were so proud of their daughter.

Peter Struther had congratulated his artists and now was basking in the delights of all the plaudits. It had all been worth those weeks when the unison had been somewhat ragged.

As they walked home to Brewster House, Chris said to Aidy, "Well, well, two love birds behind the organ – in front of Dr Cowan as well. That was as good a snog as any. You are a dark horse, Aidy."

"No Chris," said Aidy. Normally he would have laughed it off, but tonight he felt emotionally drained. "Two years ago, our first mum was still alive. There's a plaque on the organ. It still hurts."

Christian Salway had demonstrated his genetic relationship to the Walker family by putting his foot well and truly in it. As he seemed to possess most of the sense in the family, he didn't do it often.

"Aidy, I am sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

“Tammie was helping me through it. Anyway, Tammie says I’m not a dark horse; I’m her bower bird⁵.”

Three years before, Christian would have had forebodings about Christmas. During his first sixteen years, he was the only child of a single mother who was trying to juggle her responsibility as a mother with the demands of training and developing a career as a radiographer. Despite the support given by Christian’s aunt Imogen, and his great grandparents, Fred and Vi Hayward, money could be tight at times. The rent on their small flat in a vast and soulless housing estate outside the town of Beckton-on-Sower was extortionate. There were times when Chris and his mother had to choose between eating and heating. From the age of ten he had had a part-time job despite the fact it was against the law. Christmas was a particularly difficult time, as his grandparents were imprisoned in a fundamentalist “Christian” sect that paid little heed to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, but a lot towards the personal gain of a rather repulsive American pastor.

Xmas in Beckton-on-Sower was round after round a hedonistic and excessive indulgence. People would pour into large and characterless pubs run by the big chains. It was all about getting the largest amount of booze down as many throats in the shortest amount of time possible. Xmas dinner, such as it was for many families on the Barlby Chadwick estate, consisted of piles of dry turkey with all the trimmings, heat-in-the-oven roast potatoes, sachets of gravy and bread sauce, and a stodgy Christmas pudding smothered with a gloopy cornflower sauce. With the excessive food was unlimited booze – cheap wine from the dregs of the wine-lake and mass-produced beer in tin cans.

⁵ A bower bird is a tropical songbird. The male is brightly coloured. He builds a thatched structure and decorates it with brightly coloured objects to attract a female. Tamsin Heady was a keen student of birds.

There was a race to stuff as much of this down as possible before *Mary Poppins* or *The Sound of Music* came on the telly. It was estimated that in seven out of ten families in the Beckton area, Xmas ended up in a family row. Some were massive and could well spill into violence. Police leave was cancelled and the nicks in Beckton and Carlsborough were bunged full by the time the day was finished. The magistrates' courts in both towns were busy until the spring.

In the week after Xmas, the bin lorries were extra busy removing all the bottles and cans for recycling. It was the best of times for the recycling plants. Even given the fact that all the lorries were on the road, a lot of rubbish was not picked up, so the local rats had a field day.

Once things had settled down after New Year, the hangovers turned from literal to metaphorical as envelopes containing credit-card bills for the excessive consumption started to arrive. The most profitable enterprises in Sowerland were payday loan companies. Other very busy organisations included the debt advice bureaux.

Both Christian and his mother could not fit in to the self-indulgence, being a family who had to choose between eating and heating. Xmas day was a fearsome day for them. They were regarded as aloof because Laura Salway had been brought up to be polite and had insisted on good manners in her son. They were easy targets for drunken hoodlums, many of whom were Christian's schoolmates from the Grange School in Beckton. They had not been much better at Beckton Sixth Form College. And it was one of his "mates" there who nearly killed him by spiking his drink with ketamine and some other shit whose name he had forgotten.

Then two years ago, Laura and Chris had fled the mayhem of the unlovely Sowerland Conurbation, and Chris had

landed as a “waif and stray” in the unique school that was Strathcadden Academy. And for the first time in his life, Christian was to experience what a true family Christmas was like.

In this family there was the joyous harmony of what Christmas should be like, and he felt part of it. Later Chris was to find out that he was indeed a part of it as the result of a one-night stand after a student party of very poor taste. His friends Aidy and Eejay were actually his half-brothers, and Mum had married their recently widowed father. Not their father, but his father.

Christian had become reconciled to his grandparents who had rejected him as a child. That poisonous pastor who had imprisoned them was now doing time. A lot of it – the litany of offences had put him in the slammer for twenty-five years and there was a more complex case being worked on that would give him another fifteen years at least. Christian had forgiven his grandparents. It was not a timid and pathetic act either. It had to be something that was done as a daily act of the will. It required strength. He would never forget what had been done; he could not change the past. What made it a lot easier was that his grandparents had undergone a religious detox and were becoming the fun people that Mum and Aunt Imm said they used to be. His great-grandparents, Fred and Vi Hayward were thrilled to get their daughter back. They were almost in their eighties but had plenty of life left in them. They were looking to move to the Buchananshire area, in order to “keep an eye on our Brenda”.

Having sworn that he would never darken the door of a school again, Christian had thrived at Strathcadden Academy and gained high grades in his Highers and Advanced Highers, as well as being Head Boy and being a champion cross-country runner. Not to mention that despite his skinny build, he had become a competitive rower. Now Christian was at uni in Edinburgh sharing his father’s flat with Aidan, Ewan, and Ewan’s boyfriend Jordan. The four of them were Harries (members of the Hare

and Hounds, the Edinburgh University cross-country running team).

Christian was being groomed to work at Walker Bros, the department store in the town centre that was owned by the Walker Family Trust and currently managed by Dad's sisters. He was already taking on responsibility, and when Aunts Sarah and Jenny retired, the business would be his responsibility, and his alone. Theirs would be big shoes to fill.

Christian was a serious and thoughtful young man. Although physically young looking for his age (at nineteen, he looked no more than seventeen), Christian had the emotional maturity of a thirty-year-old. He had experienced the school of hard knocks, sometimes literally. That was something Aidy and Eejay had not faced. Nor did he want them to. The rejection of Jordan by his ex-mother was disgraceful. Chris, Aidy, and Eejay had supported Jordan so that he was able to work through things. Chris now had Gemma as his girlfriend; each secretly had their eye out for each other during their last year as Caddies. Now Aidy was going out with Tamsin, a girl with an amazing musical talent for whom the phrase "sweet little sixteen" was written.

Christian now looked forward to Christmas with his family. He now had his two parents, two sets of grandparents, two half-brothers, and now two twin brothers who were very little people about to have their first Christmas. When Christian said that his ghosts of Christmas past had now turned into the angels of Christmas future, he meant it. When he said that he had found his home, he meant it too. Christmas for Christian was not a sentimental Victorian self-indulgence; it was a new beginning to be cherished every year. He was truly thankful for everything from the bottom of his heart. And he meant it.

Family Christmases in Brewster House were large scale affairs. This year it would be particularly so. There were two sets of grandparents, Christian's great-grand parents, Aidy's and Eejay's grandparents, as well as the rest of the Walker Tribe. Aunt Imogen and Uncle Alex would be there too. It was definitely a lot of mouths to feed. But who better to rise to the challenge than Chris and his half-brothers? Chris' true brothers were at the stage of crawling about and cruising using the furniture, so were not in a position to follow instructions from their big brother.

Before they did anything else, Chris, Aidy, and Eejay did their morning constitutional up Corr Hill – it was just a light training run, 5 k followed by a quick shower in the wet room. It would be hot in the kitchen, so it would be shorts and T-shirts. Finally, they would dress up for Christmas dinner. Jackets, lambs-wool sweaters and kilts would ensure their elegance. Their grandfather would be in full Highland Regalia.

When the Walker tribe and others started to arrive in the middle of the afternoon, Chris ordered his mum and dad to keep the rabble in the drawing room and well tanked up with wine. The idea of his mum and dad meant a great deal to him. The kitchen was strictly out of bounds.

Chris had been a little mischievous in that he had seated Aunt Imm and Uncle Alex together. He had seen the pair snogging at the love-bird table at work. Why should Caitlin have all the fun? Since time immemorial, the antics of lovebirds had never gone unnoticed in the staffroom that was behind the scenes. Chris had found out how nosy Caddies were at school. Although highly professional on the shop floor, the staff of Walker Bros were adept at gossip behind the scenes. Most of the staff who worked at Walker Bros were, after all, Caddies with a few or more years added on. Those who weren't quickly picked up the idea. Caitlin had milked it for all she could get.

Nor did Chris forget the silver service. His half-brothers were re-familiarised on the elegance that was required. Mr and Mrs Campbell had taught him well at the Hermitage Country House Hotel back in Tanswold.

As everyone filed into the dining room, Aunt Imm and Uncle Alex were absent. Chris went through to the drawing room. He peered round the door. They were still there, and Uncle Alex appeared to be kneeling. Chris immediately stepped back. In a place like the Walker Bros restaurant, it paid to be discrete. A flush from *The Colossus* upstairs and Laura was coming downstairs with Chris' two baby brothers. They weren't going to miss out on the fun, not that they knew what Christmas was.

As Chris followed his mother into the dining room, the drawing room door opened, and Aunt Imm and Uncle Alex came through. There seemed to be an air of something important that had just happened. As Chris choreographed the silver service with Aidy and Eejay, he discreetly watched what his aunt and Aidy's uncle were up to. Dewy-eyed was definitely in it. Some people might have been appalled, but not the Walker tribe. All of them were good at pair-bonding. Chris wanted Gemma there with him, but her family were away until after Hogmanay. Sweet nothings on the mobile would have to do.

At the end of the meal, Muriel Walker gave her usual gracious few words as matriarch, thanking everyone for the wonderful cruise down the Rhine, and how she and Charles were both enjoying their retirement. Then something unusual happened. Uncle Alex got up on his hind legs and said, "I would like to take this opportunity to make an important announcement to all of you. You will have noticed that Imogen and I were a bit late in. We stayed behind in the drawing room. I proposed to Imogen, and she has said 'yes'?"

“My, my Glam puss,” said Laura, “you haven’t hung around, have you? Congratulations. Here’s to the happy couple.”

“Did he go down on bended knee?” Brenda asked.

“Of course, just like Dad did with you.”

And Jordan was enjoying a quieter Christmas at Acrefair House with Dad and his grandma and granddad. However, he had not been forgotten by the Walker family. They had bought him a brown leather kilt, and a light brown sweater made from alpaca wool. And he was wearing them, and he felt great. Like the Walkers, he wore his kilt as a true Scotsman. And any kilt-wearing Scotsman would attest to the sense of freedom it gave, even on a cold day.

What a contrast it was that this lovely family had welcomed him as their own over the past three years or so, ever since his ex-mother had ditched him and his dad for the Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking. He had heard that they had to pay an exorbitant sum in a bidding war for that thatched barn conversion. From what he had seen of it, it was not a home. It had been minimally furnished as was the fashion in the design magazines. Even when his ex-mother was his real mother, their house was not a home at all. It was carefully maintained so that it was spotlessly clean and nothing was allowed to be out of place. Woe betide anyone who left anything even a centimetre in the wrong spot. It would be the same where she was now. Jordan knew that the area she lived now was excruciatingly expensive. The last thing he wanted to do was to be up his own arse like his ex-mother and her ilk, with all their airs and graces. His ex-mother had dumped him and Dad in a public and humiliating manner.

They were appropriate metaphors. For he had settled himself in the newly refurbished and contemporary bathroom at Acrefair House. His kilt was hung neatly on the towel rail. His ex-mother and her vile partner were as far away from him as it was possible to get. To describe them as turds seemed to be fitting. But that didn't seem enough. Jordan would not be able to flush them from his memory. Only a running jump on their part from the top of a sheer cliff at least two hundred metres high would satisfy him.

After going back downstairs, he thought of Ewan. He felt so blessed that Ewan was his boyfriend. He loved Ewan. Ewan was such a lovely young man, not just in his looks – he was more than pretty – but also his lovely, gentle and thoughtful personality. He remembered back to his eighteenth birthday in his room in Baxter House. They had discussed a particularly challenging bit of Advanced Highers homework after which they had what they called a private moment in which they had caressed each other as fondly as any lovers. Jordan thought of Ewan's youthful face and long colt-like legs which made him such a good runner. And there was the walk along the Strathcadden skyline. There was nothing sordid about their intimacy; both youths were asexual, and they would keep it that way. Jordan was well and truly in love.

Like Ewan, Jordan was scared of women. He loved his grandma, but he too had been terrified of Ms Bryant, and he admired the way Ewan had stood up to her and called her the biggest sexist insult to women that he had ever met. He smiled as he recalled the resulting screech that had shaken Fenton House. There were few Caddies that disagreed with Ewan in his assessment of Ms Bryant. The girls tended to rule the roost at Strathcadden Academy as they had done at Barrowcliffe. While he had some of the quieter girls as friends and they felt very safe with him, as a quiet, gentle and rather shy same sex attracted man,

he felt much more at ease with quiet boys. And Ewan meant so much to him. That the vixen that was his ex-mother and that fat-cat bearded and shaven-headed Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking didn't approve mattered not one jot – as long as they found the two hundred metre cliff to jump off.

In another month, it would be Jordan's nineteenth birthday, and he would celebrate it with Ewan. And another month after that, it would be Eejay's eighteenth birthday, and the Walker family would have a big bash. Sooner than that was Hogmanay, which he and Dad would be celebrating in Corscadden. And Jordan had that fuzzy feeling of excitement that he always did when he thought of his boyfriend.

Chapter 17

February 2016

Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Banking, was not a happy bunny. There were several reasons for this. The most immediate was the summons from the Magistrate's Court in Etteringden, the County Town of North Sussex, to answer charges of speeding, dangerous driving, and driving with excessive alcohol.

At ten o'clock in the morning of Wednesday 10th February 2016, David Rupert Roderick Bell-Dick was in the dock to plead not guilty to all the charges. The prosecution case was presented showing evidence of the defendant's breath test being over the limit. This was supported by the blood test. The video from the safety camera van was shown to the court. The Porsche 911 GTS, registration number RBD 1, was clearly shown barging in and out of the line of traffic. Several horns were sounded, to which the driver of the said Porsche replied with two-fingered salutes. Two of these incidents were recorded on dash-cams, and the files were passed to the police by the outraged motorists. The conversation at Laineshurst Station was reproduced, as was the interview at the police station. Finally, Mr Bell-Dick's driving record was presented. It was a long and sorry litany of road traffic offences that went back many years.

Rupert Bell-Dick was represented by Jason Redmarshall of Milldale and Partners LLP. He used them for all his legal affairs, and they had managed to get him out of a number of scrapes. However, on this occasion they had provided Mr Redmarshall who was newly qualified. It made Rupert think that they didn't rate his defence that much. The defence was that Rupert Bell-Dick was not driving the car at all. Somebody else had borrowed it and that he was furious that this person had abused his trust by driving the car in this way. Additionally, this

action was malicious, driven by jealousy on the part of the constables because they were mere coppers and he had earned the money to buy this motor car and its distinctive number plate. As for being over the limit, that was impossible as he had had his last glass of wine at eleven thirty the previous evening. There was an impassioned plea that if he were convicted, his standing in the Conservative Party would be diminished.

Rupert Bell-Dick's defence did not impress the magistrates. In subsequent years it was used in magistrates' training seminars on pitiful defences that ranked with the school pupil's failure to hand in homework being excused by, "The dog ate it."

Rupert Bell-Dick was fined £5000, with costs and surcharges that amounted to another £15000. Milldale and Partners LLP were a very expensive firm who did a lot of legal work for the Conservative Party. As well as the fine, Mr Bell-Dick was disqualified from driving for eighteen months and ordered to take an extended driving test. He also received a severe dressing down from the Chairman, who told him that this was one of the worst cases that she had ever dealt with.

Rupert Bell-Dick left the court in a thunderously bad temper. After being handed the notice of the sentence of the court, he hurled himself out of the building and towards the Porsche. His driving was so aggressive that he quickly attracted the attention of a road traffic patrol. The members of the Tufty Club (the motorists who were obeying the law of the road) made him see red. He put his foot down and didn't stop until he got back to Windhover Barn. Eighteen month driving ban! That would not exactly enhance his prospects for selection to stand for the Laine Valley constituency. He would have to go by train to fulfil his campaign schedule for the official Brexit campaign, or ride in the big red Brexit bus. Boris would not be very pleased. There could be consequences.

More immediate consequences were being revealed by the presence of two BMW police motorcycles that had come up Glebelands Barns Avenue with blue lights flashing. Not very pleased were Constables Jackson and Merriman each of whom got off his machine and removed his helmet.

“In a hurry are we, Sir? Urgent medical supplies? If so, you’ve taken the wrong turn for the Laineshurst Surgery. Some speed that motor of yours can do, Sir. You outpaced our patrol car, but it’s only a Skoda. Solid and reliable, but not quite up to outrunning a Porsche. That’s why we came in. These flat twins can pack a fair punch and give your Porsche a good run for your money.”

“If you have just come up here to exchange small talk about my car, I’ve got better things to do,” Rupert replied grumpily. “If you don’t mind, I am going into my house, and you can get off my premises.”

“No, Sir, we haven’t come up to exchange small talk; we want some big talk. We don’t like riding at the speed we have just done, but we are trained to do so and will do so when we have to do our duty. May we see your licence?”

“I haven’t got it,” Rupert replied. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have got important work to do. I am going into the house. Now hop it.”

“Like explaining why you were driving at almost double the speed limit? May we come in with you? Or shall we arrest you out here and take you in for questioning?”

“I suppose you better had then, although you are wasting your time. You should be out fighting criminals instead of badgering decent people like me.”

“For your information, Sir, driving at double the speed limit is a criminal offence. When we get in, please could you get your licence?”

Rupert went into the study area of the open-plan main room. He got out his driving licence. The litany of offences made the officers raise their eyebrows. They then radioed to headquarters with the licence details.

“Well, well, Mr Bell-Dick, you seem to have quite a lot of interesting stuff on your licence. And that doesn’t include the disqualification this morning. The list is about to get longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Driving while disqualified and furious driving for a kick off. We don’t see code DD90 very often.”

“I have the right to take my car home.”

“No, Sir, I am afraid you don’t. The disqualification takes place immediately. You might have got away with it if you had driven sensibly, but your driving made you stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Why aren’t you two chasing criminals?”

“We are, Sir. Motoring offences like these are criminal convictions. Driving when disqualified is a criminal conviction. If you hurt someone or cause damage, you can end up going to prison. You already have a criminal record.”

“What for? This is outrageous. I am a top banker, and I am an active member of the Conservative Party. I know enough people to have you pounding the beat.”

“Drink-driving can put you in prison, as can dangerous driving. We have to protect the public from people like you who feel they are entitled to take to the road in powerful cars and flout

motoring law with impunity. If that means a stretch in the slammer, so be it. Nobody will give a damn whom you know.”

“That’s the trouble,” snapped Rupert, “thanks to all these do-gooders, people of class are not allowed to use their privileges.”

“What? Do you think it should be your privilege to crash into other innocent drivers? You realise that not only would you kill yourself but other innocent people? That is definitely a criminal offence, and you could get fourteen years in the slammer.”

“Those damned Tufty Club members shouldn’t be on the road at all!”

“Mr Bell-Dick, we are going to report you for the traffic offences of driving while disqualified, and for dangerous driving. With a record like yours, your driving ban will be doubled, and you will face a fine of at least £10000. We are going to take your licence away from you now and return it to the DVLA.”

“How the devil do you think I am going to get around to do my work for the Conservative Party? I have got several engagements for the Brexit campaign as well. This is going to cost me a bloody fortune. Get out of my house!”

“Not so hasty, Mr Bell-Dick: we have the paperwork to do. Or we could handcuff you and call for a car to take you down to the nick and we will do it there. As for your work with the Tory Party, you will have to cadge lifts off others, I am afraid, or better still, catch the bus. Shank’s Pony is reliable, even if a bit slow.”

“There are no bloody buses around here!”

“How you sort out your transport is up to you, Mr Bell-Dick,” said Constable Jackson, “as long as you don’t take either

of the cars on the drive. While you are disqualified, may we suggest that you start to grow up a bit and realise that you have responsibilities to other motorists? They drive according to the Law. Both of us have served as police officers for thirty years now. We have come across your type, even down to using the phrase ‘Tufty Club’. You will be expected to drive properly when you do your extended test.”

“What’s more,” added Constable Merriman, “we have official footage of your driving. You have certainly made an impact among our colleagues in the Traffic Division. Now, shall we get the paperwork done?”

“I told you to get a taxi. I told you umpteen times. Now look what has happened.” Kathryn was not very pleased with her partner.

“You said you would take me, but no, you suddenly decide to go to your head office.”

“I told you. Bob called a meeting for today. He did so two weeks ago, and I told you. You had two weeks to get a taxi.”

“Quite frankly,” Rupert replied, “I didn’t want to be ripped off by some inarticulate yokel who can only talk about the football. Then I would have had to pay him to sit on his arse all morning when I was in the court. It would have taken him for ever and a day to get there and back. Besides he wouldn’t have the right sort of car for me. Why should I have to get a taxi when I’ve got you?”

“WHAT?” yelled Kathryn. “Is that all you want me for, to be your bloody chauffeur? You can think again. I have my career to think about. I don’t mind taking you to the station when I am working from home. But I am not going to sit up half

the night when you are at your party meetings. I have my own work to do.”

“I thought I was giving you a more interesting life than up north with that ex of yours and that drip of a son.”

“Don’t mention them ever again! I don’t want to be reminded of them.”

The conversation drifted on in an increasingly negative tone until Kathryn stormed upstairs. Rupert slept on the sofa bed. Kathryn’s wardrobe was rapidly occupying the spare room.

Sleep was not an accurate description of what he actually did. He tossed and turned. God, Kathryn could be a bitch at times. It was at times like this that he felt tempted to feel sorry for Stephen. Normally he would put such feelings to one side, but not on this occasion. Stephen was probably a saint for having put up with her for twenty years. Or he survived by working on the other side of the world. Sebastian was a drip, but no wonder with a mother like that, who deemed that all the gifts he had been given were his mother’s property on loan. What a mercenary cow!

He would have to get his own chauffeur for a good long time. The fees for Premier Cars and Chauffeurs would only make a small dent in his salary. Besides with a bit more creative accounting, he could reduce his tax-burden further so that it would pay the fee outright. He didn’t want to be driven. He liked to motor the way he chose. Their “highly experienced and professional chauffeurs” would drive like they were members of the Tufty Club, and that would drive him bonkers, if one could pardon the expression. However, he would have to put up with it for at least three years, by the time those do-gooders in the magistrates’ courts had finished with him. Anyway, the chauffeurs could take him for his Conservative Party and Brexit engagements. And he could drink what he liked.

As he couldn't sleep, he got up and put the computer on, accessing his favourite hard-core site. A few quid from his credit card would allow him to escape into a private fantasy. Kathryn wouldn't approve but sod her. The site was quick enough to take his money but delivered the product at a snail's pace. The broadband in the Laineshurst area was notoriously slow. This particular movie was designed to appeal to a rainbow spectrum of perversions, and several scenes featured... well it was what he imagined (completely wrongly) what Kathryn's ex-son would get up to with his boyfriend. It was against God's Law, except Rupert was a devout atheist. But it had happened at the expensive boarding school that he had attended in the late nineteen seventies. He had got six of the best from the headmaster for beating up a fellow pupil that had been outed. The pupil had ended up in hospital, and Rupert's late father had to pull all the strings he could to get Rupert off that particular legal hook. A very large donation to the school had ensured that Rupert had remained on roll. It was suggested strongly to the families of the other boy and his boyfriend that they should leave.

Rupert switched the movie off in disgust. He had just wanted some straight-forward bonking, just like that which he had done during undergraduate parties of poor taste at Oxford. Instead, he turned the lights on in the open plan main room to put the coffee machine on. The lights were set high in the vaulted ceiling. One flashed brightly, and there was a dull pop. A shower of sparks and glass shards fell to the floor. There was a dull thud from the fuse box as the circuit breakers cut out and all the electricity in the house went off.

Rupert had done circuit breakers at school, but he knew next to nothing about them. Physics was as dull as ditch water and his teacher was a boring old fart. He did remember that they were the modern way of changing fuses, and, amazingly for him, he knew where the fuse box was in the useful utility room. He

groped for several minutes muttering comments that were demeaning to women. He found the circuit breaker that had tripped and reset it. He tried turning on the light, but nothing happened. Then he remembered that there was a thing called an RCD in the fuse box. He had no idea what RCD meant, but he did know that the one in their fuse box seemed to trip when it hit the electrical equivalent of ten bluebottles. He pushed it across. The light in the utility room went on momentarily, before there was another dull thud as the RCD and trip switch cut off at the same time.

Rupert swore but had the sense not to reset the errant trip switch. The light in the utility room remained off, but he could hear the fridge and deep freeze come on. Fortunately, in the kitchen there were low-level lights under the wall-units that were on a different circuit. He put the coffee machine on and waited. It was typical of Windhover Barn. It was a house that looked superficially very attractive with all sorts of hi-tech gizmos. However, corners had been cut and many of the gizmos worked only intermittently or not at all. Part of this was because they were meant to use a mobile phone app, but Wapplesfield was a not spot for their network. The boiler could be switched on remotely when Rupert and Kathryn were out, but not from within the house. Nor could the curtains be drawn automatically.

Rupert stomped back to the sofa bed. Still sleep eluded him. There was one born every minute and he was one of them for buying Windhover Barn. On Monday, the estate agent had come to value the house. It could go on the market at 1.1 million pounds. Hell, he and Kathryn had paid twenty-five hundred grand for the place and now it was worth eleven hundred grand. The fourteen hundred grand shortfall could be accommodated, as Rupert's salary and bonuses were more than substantial. And Kathryn was not exactly on poverty wages either. If people who mattered found out that he had lost fourteen hundred grand of

his own money, they might start thinking about his ability with the Bank's money. He knew how to deal with that. He had several organisations in mind. He would recall the loans and strip their assets. It did not matter at all to him that several hundred people would lose their livelihoods. They were little people whom he despised.

At six o'clock, Rupert was awoken with a start. Kathryn was shouting his name. She was coming down the stairs and did not look very pleased.

"Rupert, you have slept in yet again. You've got to get to the station, and I have got to take you. Shift your fat carcass and get dressed. You can't take that suit. It's a mess. Can't you fold anything up? The light's not working in the en-suite. Why's the coffee machine still on? Why isn't your cup in the dishwasher? Can't you put anything away?"

Rupert went upstairs grumbling. Not only did the bathroom light not work, neither did the razor point nor the shaving light. Rupert wanted to trim his beard, but the trimmer would not work, and he could not see to do it. Well, nobody would notice.

"Rupert! The lights downstairs are not working! Come down and sort it out!"

"Let me finish upstairs!"

Fortunately, that morning, Kathryn was wearing her slippers. As she walked across the main room, she heard a crunching under her feet. She shouted, "Now you can't even clear up after yourself when you've had a mouthful of cereal."

After a few minutes, Rupert came down grumbling about this bloody house. He was now dressed. He saw Kathryn go into the utility room.

“Get me a torch, Rupert,” she snapped. “I want to see what has happened.”

She saw the trip-switch was in the off position and flicked it over. There was a pop in the vaulted ceiling, and a shower of sparks fell towards the floor, and the trip switch and the RCD both cut out at the same time.

“Rupert, you are going to have to get the electrician in,” Kathryn said.

“You can do it. I’ve got far too much to do to be chasing after tradesmen.”

“What the hell do you think I am going to be doing today? Sitting on my arse drinking coffee? I have got five clients to see. Then I am going to the gym. You’ll have to wait for me when you get back. You can get your own breakfast. I am going upstairs to get dressed.”

The lights under the kitchen units gave some light, enough for Kathryn to work out the crunching under her slippers. A quick look at the soles revealed the cause, which did not please her one little bit. There were many tiny shards of thin glass, and many more across the floor.

“Rupert, what’s happened here?”

“I put the lights on last night and there was a bang, and the lights went out.”

“How many times have I told you not to put them on when they are turned up full? Why have you left the glass all over the floor? Look what you have done to my slippers. Think what would have happened if I had come down in my bare feet,”

Kathryn replied. She was truthful when she said this. She normally came down in bare feet. "Now get out the dustpan and brush and clear it up while I get dressed."

Rupert again felt a fleeting moment of sympathy for Sebastian. No wonder he had a boyfriend with a mother like that; he was glad that she hadn't been his mother. Since Rupert had had rather too many corporate luncheons, he found it difficult to bend down to sweep up the glass from the burst light bulb. It was then that he discovered scorches on the Persian rug that was directly underneath the light fitting. Hot shards from the electrical explosion had singed it. He looked up at the light fitting. It was blackened and there were scorch marks on the ceiling and the roof-truss on which the fitting had been mounted.

"You haven't done that properly," came the familiar nagging voice. "I suppose I'll have to do it. No time for breakfast. Come on, get in the car."

The train was leaving Laineshurst Station when Kathryn turned into the car park. Rupert grumbled that if she had put her foot down, they might have made it, to which Kathryn had replied that with another three points on her licence, she too would get a ban. There were no kisses or sweet nothings outside Laineshurst Station that morning – just a heavy slam of the nearside door of the Mercedes.

The passenger entrance was as bleak and unwelcoming as ever. The staff had a warm office, but in the booking hall, the heater had packed up years ago, and the train operating company was as tight fisted as a Yorkshireman, except for where senior managers' bonuses were concerned. A cold dank breeze blew down the station platform. Although it was getting light, the day was set to be one of those overcast and cold days of anti-cyclonic gloom.

There were seats on the platform, but there was no shelter from the breeze. A north-bound fast train hurried through the platform. There were random and bright flashes from the conductor rail. Then a south-bound freight train came through, hauled by a pair of elderly diesel locomotives that were excessively noisy and smelly. Rupert was cold and bored as he waited. To increase his discomfort, the train was running ten minutes late. Even in first class, it was crowded, and Rupert had to stand. It was about high time they provided more first-class accommodation, an opinion shared by everyone else in the carriage. By the time the train approached London, the first-class compartment was as grossly overcrowded as the rest of the train.

So, this would be his lot, Rupert thought, for the next three years at least. If those traffic cops were right, Rupert would be banned from driving for another eighteen months. Even then he would have to pass the extended driving test. He remembered his first driving tests as a teenager. He was furious when he failed it a second time. The examiners at his local centre refused to take him for a third time, so he had to take the test somewhere where they had never heard of him. He would tell Kathryn when he got home that he would stay in Town during the week and come back on Friday evening. He could easily afford the extortionate rent for a Town pad. It was simply a matter of securing a property that was good enough for him. Kathryn would be livid, but she was livid with him anyway. Premier Chauffeurs and Cars would take him in their Porsche or their Range Rover to his meetings of the Conservative Party or the Brexit campaign.

Rupert knew several of the top hedge fund managers in The City. Some of them banked with Glynn's Bank. On their advice, Rupert had hedged some of his money (and that of Glynn's Bank) on the Brexit campaign being successful. Rupert looked forward to the great unwashed giving the Prime Minister, a smug PR man, a good smack in the eye.

A good number of companies called Thursday 11th February 2016 “Black Thursday”, for Glynn’s Bank called in a good number of loans with five working days’ notice. Although one company repaid the loan within the required period, it was not spared the fate of the others. Glynn’s Bank sent in “support staff” whose job was to strip the assets of the companies down to the last paperclip. It was done “in order to protect the Bank’s interests” and was done so efficiently that Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Finance, was given a personal congratulation by the Chairman himself.

Twenty thousand redundant employees would not have shared the Chairman’s pleasure in a job well done.

Chapter 18

February 2016

While there were few sweet nothings at Windhover Barn in the North Sussex village of Wapplesfield, there were plenty at 34, Adam Place in Corscadden. Imogen Salway (42) now was engaged to Alexander Fairburn (36). Both were incredibly excited. After many years of feeling left on the shelf, they had found each other's soulmate and were making up for lost time.

As well as canoodling, they spent many a happy hour in the kitchen cooking up wonderful meals. They would go running, cycling, and walking. Once a week they would go to the Strathcadden Sports Centre to play squash or badminton. They would have a swim. When it was too cold to go out, they would go to the Sports Centre gym that had a wide range of machines that resembled mediaeval instruments of torture. Both were competitive and gave each other no quarter.

At home they were decorating. Imogen had a great sense of colour and design, so that each room looked splendid after it had been done up. Imogen had a fairly traditional sense of taste, and she did not like the ultra-minimalist contemporary styles that featured in so many magazines. It was an opinion shared by Alex. Each room was homely and felt cosy, especially on a cold winter's day. As soon as spring arrived, they would do the garden. Imogen was an enthusiastic gardener and the garden of her chocolate box cottage in Clinton Muncey was loved by the villagers.

Towards the end of February, Alex was ready to add his biggest asset to the home. Like his late big sister, Mary, Alex was a good musician who enjoyed playing the piano. He may not have been a piano virtuoso, but he was pretty good on the ivories. Ten years before, he had bought himself a baby grand. However, he had to store it at his parents' house, when they moved back to the Borders. Because of the prices demanded for even the

smallest house on the South Coast, Alex could not afford to buy his own home and the shared houses he had lived in did not have the space for a baby grand. This was just as well, because later on he rented a room from his girlfriend. She ditched him because he had been made redundant and chucked him out. The last couple of months he had to sofa surf with a friend. He was mightily relieved when he filled up the car with his meagre possessions and forty litres of diesel and headed north without stopping. When he got back to his parents, the first thing he did was to reunite himself with his piano.

Now he was going to be permanently reunited with it in Adam Place. A space had been made for it in the living room and that would complete the house. Alex had engaged a specialist remover of musical instruments, and today was the day.

The removal van arrived at half past eleven in the morning, and both Alex and Imm went out into Adam Place to meet the van. There were four steps up to the front door of each of the houses in Adam Place. This would, of course, be no problem. They had got pianos into top flats after all. Four steps would be a piece of cake, and they set up a ramp. The piano, which was on a small four wheeled bogie, came out onto a tail lift and came down slowly towards the road. Then the removal men manoeuvred it around onto the pavement and up the front path towards the front door.

It was while they were getting it up the ramp that disaster struck. The apprentice, Cody, had not been listening while the foreman was giving a briefing. Instead, he was listening to rap music on his mobile. The foreman and his mate were pulling the piano up the ramp. The apprentice was at the back. He was not pushing but fiddling with his mobile to select a new playlist. Then he got out a cigarette and lit up.

“Cody!” shouted the foreman, “Get off that mobile and steady her at the back... Put that cig out...! Chock the back wheels... What are you playing at...? Get a chock... Where are the chocks...? Come on... Get those bloody earphones out...! What do mean they are in the van...? Get the piano back on the path... Steady...! Cody don’t let go...! Hold the bloody thing!”

Cody pulled a chock from under the ramp. The ramp split because it was no longer adequately supported. The foreman and his mate tried to hold the piano but could not do so. The 250 kilo piano lurched backwards, and Cody jumped out of the way. Somehow it stayed united with the bogie as it started to run down the path, off the pavement, and across Adam Place before striking a van parked across the road. It bounced off and started running down Adam Place which had a slight downhill gradient. The piano got to Belford Street and, disobeying the stop sign, raced across the road accompanied by a screech of tyres and a crash of glass and shattered glass reinforced plastic. In the collision it was deflected before hitting the pavement. The piano leapt off the bogie and bounced down two steps to smash through the shop window of Corscadden Hi-Fi. With a tone cluster played on the Harp of Hell, the piano was smashed to pieces as well as destroying several very expensive items of high-fidelity music reproduction equipment.

There were quite a few people who witnessed the escapade of the grand piano. The two older men trotted down, as far as their bulk allowed them, to where the piano had made its crash landing. Mr Mackenzie, the owner of Corscadden Hi-Fi, was staring incredulously at the wreckage of his shopfront. The driver of a Mazda 3 was standing by her damaged car.

Alexander Fairbairn was standing there incredulous with his mouth hanging open. Imogen Salway pushed her digital compact camera into her fiancé’s hand to get him to do something useful before he went into melt-down. He took a

good number of photographs of the wreckage and offered them to those who wanted to make a claim.

The author of the misfortune was looking gormless, wondering where everyone had gone. Cody decided to do something useful. He got the piano stool out, putting it on the front lawn. After that he got the legs to the piano. Finally, he went back to the van to get the paperwork. Cody went up to the front door and thrust the clipboard at Imogen.

“Sign here,” he said. “It’s cash on delivery, £550. Oh, you’re not Mr Fairbairn.”

It was one of those moments that Imogen remembered for the rest of her life. She wasn’t sure how she restrained herself not to knock his block off. It was probably the prospect of a couple of years in the slammer.

“Where’s your boss?” she snapped.

“No idea,” said Cody.

“Get him NOW!” she yelled.

“If you ask me nicely.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you are charging us for a delivery of an item that is completely smashed up?”

“I’ve brought the stool and the legs. They’re in perfect condition. We’ve met our part of the bargain. Cash on delivery. We brought you the piano, didn’t we?”

“You brought us a piano stool and some bits of wood that were intended to support a piano. The rest of the load is now firewood and scrap metal. So, GET YOUR BOSS and DO IT NOW!”

Just then the foreman walked back towards the van, being trailed by Alex, who looked distraught. Cody called out, “Wayne, Madam here wants a wee word with you.”

It was more than a wee word. It was a lot of words. Imogen Salway was an assertive woman who would not tolerate the kind of casual incompetence she had been witness to.

“It’s insured,” said Wayne. “What more do you want?”

“I want goods that are delivered to my house to be handled with care, for a start. When something goes wrong, the least I expect is an apology. That is my fiancé’s piano which he paid for himself. It was expensive and he used all his savings to buy it. He is a good pianist and was looking forward to having it here. It has a lot of sentimental value to him. He wanted to play a piano, not a heap of firewood and scrap metal.”

“We did deliver the legs and the stool,” Cody interrupted. “She won’t pay the cash on delivery.”

“Listen, you idiot,” Wayne rounded on his apprentice. He was going to pass the hairdryer treatment that he had received from Miss Salway in full. “No wonder she won’t pay. She and her other half will be able to sit on the piano stool, but they won’t be able to get much of a tune out of three piano legs. You were listening to the rubbish on that bloody mobile instead of listening to the instructions. You made no effort to hold the thing.”

“It was starting to hurt a bit,” Cody remonstrated with a tone of offended innocence. “I am entitled to due care under Health and Safety. I could have got hurt. Also, I wanted to change my playlist. I had already gone through it twice. It was getting boring.”

“You will get plenty of time to listen to your playlist when Mr Cullen hears about this. Mr Fairbairn is not too pleased, nor is Miss Salway.”

Wayne got his mobile to ring the boss, but the line was engaged. This was because Imogen had got there first.

“I am so sorry Miss Salway... No, this should not have happened... We are fully insured... We will need evidence for us to make the claim, so if you have any pictures, please could you e-mail them to me at... I understand why Mr Fairbairn is so upset... Please pass on my sincerest apologies... I can assure you that I will undertake a most thorough investigation.”

At Wayne’s request, Imogen passed the phone and spoke to his boss.

“Right, Cody,” said Wayne after he had handed the phone back to Imogen, “Mr Cullen’s office first thing on Monday.”

“You snitched on me! I’ll get you.”

“Are you threatening me? That will go down on my report as well as everything else. You’re going back on your own. You are not coming back with us.”

In the hall, the landline telephone rang. Alex picked it up.
“Alex, it’s Mum! Has the piano got there yet?”

“It has, Mum...”

“Wonderful. Dad and I are so pleased...”

“But...” Alex started to choke, “the removal men have dropped it. It’s smashed to pieces. It ran down the road and ended up hitting a car and going through a shop window. It’s wrecked the hi-fi shop’s display.”

“Good heavens,” Bethan Fairbairn replied. “I’ll be on to Jamie Cullen straight away. He will be appalled...”

It was then that Alex went into melt-down. The piano meant everything to him. His late sister, Mary, had inspired him to play. She was a teenager when he was born. However, she had taught him when he was a small boy, and she guided his talent for playing. She had advised him when he bought the piano, which was a very high-quality instrument. He had spent his savings on it. Due to her tutelage, he had become a talented and enthusiastic amateur. He knew that he was not good enough to become a pro, but, like his nephews Aidan and Ewan, he played to relax. Alex had taken it hard when, just over two years before, his sister had suddenly passed away.

Imogen cuddled and soothed her fiancé. They watched from the front door the aftermath of the demise of the instrument. Then they saw Laura and Joby coming up Adam Place from Belford Street. The twins were in the double buggy.

“What’s been going on here?” Joby asked.

“See those imbeciles?” Imogen replied. “They have just wrecked Alex’s piano.”

“How the hell did they do that?” said Laura.

“The apprentice looked a lazy bugger,” said Imogen. “They were pushing the piano up the steps. He wasn’t pulling his weight, and he let go at the critical moment to fiddle with his mobile. The piano ran away and ended up in the hi-fi shop. It hit a van and car on the way. Heaven knows what would have happened if it had hit a pedestrian.”

At that moment, the two older of Cullen’s men came past pushing the wreckage on the bogie. They were being helped by the two policemen who had attended the incident. Cody had paused to light another cigarette. He still had his earphones on, and he was fiddling with his mobile. He made an offensive gesture towards the group gathered around the front door.

A young man scurried up the front path. "Excuse me," he said, "Sorry for butting in, but I have taken a video of the whole thing. I thought it might be useful for your insurance claim."

The young man transferred the video clip to Imogen's mobile and gave his name and address to act as a witness. It would later appear on You-Tube under *Idiots at Work*. For anyone not involved, it was pure slapstick. For Alex Fairbairn and Mr Mackenzie, it was not very funny at all.

The stress caused to Imm and Alex by the demise of the piano was soothed by a good strong cup of fresh coffee and the excellent company of Laura and Joby. Coffee sorted most things out with the Walker tribe. The twins crawled and cruised about excitedly as one year old infants do. The radio was tuned to *Classic FM*, just as it was in Brewster House. The boys loved it.

The following Wednesday evening, there was a knock on the front door. Imogen answered it. A man in his forties was standing there in an immaculate suit.

"Good evening. My name is Jamie Cullen. Is Mr Fairbairn in?"

"He is. Come on in. He is down in the kitchen." Imogen replied. "Alex, Mr Cullen is coming down to see you."

"Good evening, Mr Fairbairn. I have come to apologise for the dreadful performance of my employees last Saturday. I have had all the pictures and the video-clip. I can only say sorry for the distress and inconvenience that my company has caused you. I can assure you that I have carried out a very thorough investigation into what happened. I was satisfied that everything that you told me was correct. The apprentice has been trouble

since he started with me six months ago. He no longer works in my company.

“I have made an insurance claim to cover the purchase of a new instrument of the same quality. I am told that the claim is straight-forward and we will be arranging payment and compensation in the next four weeks.

“I have also apologised to Mr Mackenzie for the damage to his premises and to your parents who suggested us to you. Please be assured that this is the first time it has ever happened on one of our jobs. I am so sorry it has happened to you...”

Chapter 19

Early March 2016

One of the drawbacks in exclusive residential areas like Wapplesfield was that it was hard to get tradesmen. And Kathryn Chetwynd and her partner, Rupert Bell-Dick, needed to get one in a hurry. A bad electrical fault in a lighting unit had tripped the lighting circuit in Windhover Barn. The Barn was open-plan; the main lighting for the open-plan space was up in the vaulted ceiling, some eight metres above the floor. Therefore, the open plan area was in darkness, except for three hurriedly purchased standard lamps. That had spoiled the minimalist look of the place.

The first impediment was that Kathryn and Rupert had insisted that the other should ring the electrician. Neither of them had done so for a fortnight. Part of this was due to the fact that on the day after Rupert's loss of his driving licence, both had come back from work late. Each was in a thundering bad temper. They had had a blazing row. Kathryn refused to talk to Rupert for a week. She tended to cherish her grudges.

A second impediment was the height above the floor. High scaffolding would have to be hired to ensure a safe working environment. Rupert was of the opinion that the Health and Safety at Work legislation was a cumbersome piece of red tape that had been introduced by a socialist government to interfere with the purpose of businesses, which was to make money. If an apprentice fell off a tall ladder onto the marble floor, that was just tough. Kathryn argued that the resulting blood would ruin the marble. The hire of such scaffolding would put a couple of hundred pounds onto the bill: all that just to change a light bulb.

The third was that the nearest electrical contractor lived in Ettringden. The county town was nearly forty minutes' drive. Self-employed tradesmen could no longer afford to live in places like Laineshurst or Wapplesfield.

Finally, after another argument, Kathryn gave way and agreed to call an electrician. The closest tradesman told her that it would cost six hundred pounds plus VAT, because he had to hire scaffolding which would need to be set up. He had done work on Windhover Barn a couple of years back. It had been a devil of a job. Also, he couldn't come out for at least three weeks, since he was so busy.

The next tradesman didn't travel that far. It was during coffee time that Kathryn noticed a local directory. It was tatty but had a mobile number for an electrician. She rang the number but only got a rather indistinct recorded announcement for another number. She had to ring the number three times to write it down correctly. She rang it and, surprisingly, got an answer. Her luck was in. Not only could he come tomorrow morning, but he gave an estimate of only three hundred pounds. However, she was going to have to pay up front.

The next day, Kathryn took a day off work. It was in the late afternoon that she rang Mr Cattel of J C Electricals.

“I had an urgent job this morning,” said the voice on the other mobile. The tone of voice suggested that he was not in the least bit sorry. (In reality there had been no urgent job; Mr Cattel had watched some late-night boxing that was taking place in Las Vegas. He had had several beers to accompany it.)

“I am going to have to take another day off work,” Kathryn complained. Her grievance was, for once, justified.

“I'll see what I can do.”

Mr Cattel did arrive the next morning. He parked his rusty and dilapidated van right by the front door. J C Electricals was one of those companies for which a shoestring was a definite extravagance. Mr Cattel was accompanied by his apprentice, Boyd. Boyd had a slovenly demeanour in dress, speech, and

manner to others. He seemed to do everything at half speed and maximum reluctance. Kathryn was not impressed.

“Miss Cheating?” said Mr Cattell. His diary was open revealing the name spelled as ‘Cheating’. Kathryn noticed the error.

“You have spelled it wrong. It’s spelled ‘C-H-E-T-W-Y-N-D.’”

“You said it was ‘Cheating’ over the phone. It should be ‘Chetwind’ then?”

The mispronunciation of Kathryn’s name was a constant source of irritation to the Chetwynd family.

“I have lived with the name for nearly forty-five years. I should know how it’s pronounced,” Kathryn snapped. “We’re not here to chatter about names. There’s a job for you to get on with.”

“As you please,” replied Mr Cattel. “Boyd, get the ladder.”

Boyd got a tall ladder from the top of the van. It clattered loudly onto the drive. He picked it up and put it on his shoulder. It banged into the front door, putting a long scratch across its varnished surface as Boyd used the ladder to push it open.

“Look what you have done to our front door,” Kathryn snapped.

“If you would hold the door dearie,” Boyd retorted, “then I might be able to get through.”

The ladder overbalanced and struck the marble floor. Then Mr Cattel said, “The calm and unhurried manner you took to get that ladder, you should live to be a bleeding hundred.”

The ladder just reached to the light fitting in the vaulted ceiling of Windhover Barn. Mr Cattel went up it. It creaked alarmingly, for Mr Cattel looked as if he were six months pregnant. Where the two halves of the ladder joined, there was a scary looking kink.

“Need the bog, dearie” said Boyd to Kathryn. “I’m dying for a slash.”

Kathryn looked outraged, which Boyd picked up. “I could do it in the sink, dearie.”

Kathryn took Boyd to the cloakroom. Boyd was, she thought, coarse, vulgar, and ignorant: an assessment shared by everyone else that had had any dealings with him. Her opinion was lowered even further by the fact that he neither closed the door when he went in, nor flushed the lavatory when he came out.

Meanwhile, Mr Cattel had diagnosed the problem. He called down, “Miss Cheating, the light fitting has had it. I need to get another one from the wholesaler.”

“How long’s that going to take?”

Mr Cattel got down the ladder.

“I’ll be back after lunch. Depends on what they have and what other jobs I’ve got on. I need another two hundred off you to buy it. Cash: I haven’t got my card reader.”

“Typical,” muttered Kathryn. “I haven’t got two hundred pounds in the house. I will have to get it from the cashpoint in Laineshurst.”

“Give me what cash you’ve got, Miss Chetwind. Boyd! Get up that ladder and take that light fitting off!”

Grumbling and swearing, Boyd climbed the ladder. At that point it occurred to him that he needed a screwdriver. He noticed that his boss had gone out to the van. He shouted down to Kathryn, “Oi! WAG, get me that screwdriver and bring it up the ladder.”

“How dare you talk to me like that?” Kathryn retorted. She was truly outraged and would have happily thrown this lout out of the house with her bare hands. “I will tell your boss.”

Boyd belched loudly in reply. Grumbling, he came back down the ladder, picked up the screwdriver, and started to climb up again. As he passed Kathryn at face level, Boyd broke wind loudly.

“You are an insufferable lout,” Kathryn squawked. Boyd giggled with the smug satisfaction of a job well done. He started to undo the screws and released the light fitting from the wires. It was heavy. Rather than carry it down, Boyd lobbed it in the general direction of the leather Chesterfield. It missed, but as it was about to hit the floor, the edge caught the front of the sofa and put a rip in it about twenty centimetres long. A chip of marble was knocked out of the floor. At the same time, Boyd lobbed the screwdriver towards the Chesterfield. Totally by accident, it took on the trajectory of an air-to-surface missile, stabbing one of the leather head cushions. It penetrated to the back of the Chesterfield, impaling the cushion.

“One hundred and eighty!” Boyd called out gleefully.

Kathryn was on the verge of apoplexy as Mr Cattel came back in.

“Mr Cattel, get this creature out of my house NOW!” Kathryn yelled. She pointed at the wrecked light fitting and the screwdriver standing proudly to attention in the cushion. “Look what he’s done to my floor and to my Chesterfield.”

“I meant to put the old fitting on the couch,” said Boyd with a tone of offended innocence. “Not my fault I missed. It was heavy. I was aiming for the couch with the screwdriver. I didn’t mean to pin it down. Saves the cushion from falling off the back of the couch.”

“Chesterfield, not couch, you idiot!” Kathryn screamed. She was very house-proud, and that this lout of an apprentice had caused damage to her minimalist and expensive paradise was too much. She had been none too impressed with the mess that Boyd had left in the cloakroom. The last time she had had to wipe around a lavatory was six years ago as a result of Sebastian’s carelessness. (As a consequence of her nagging, Sebastian got into the habit of weeing in the German style.) This would normally be a job for the cleaner who came in five days a week, but she had gone before Mr Cattel and his tame idiot had arrived. It put her in an even worse temper.

“He’s a bit rough,” said Mr Cattel, “but he’s alright in the end.”

“Look what he’s done to my Chesterfield, my floor, and my front door. I don’t want him in my house again.”

“If that’s the case, you won’t have me. Do you want the job finishing?”

“Of course I do. I have already paid you for it.”

“Well, I need Boyd. Now give me the cash you’ve got.”

Kathryn stomped up the stairs to the master bedroom. Although it was early afternoon, it was a gloomy day. The light in the bedroom ceiling did not work. She had one hundred and fifty pounds. She gave it to Mr Cattel.

When she got back downstairs, she found Boyd sprawled out on the Chesterfield with his dirty boots up. “Get your feet

off my Chesterfield!" she yelled. It was the sort of thing that Sebastian's friends from Barrowcliffe High School would have done, and she didn't want their deplorable habits in her house. It had embarrassed Sebastian no end, but she did not give a damn.

"Oh hoity-toity," Boyd replied insolently.

Kathryn glared at him. Then her eyes strayed to the site of the light fitting that had been the cause of all the trouble in the first place. An untidy festoon of wires, bare at the end, stuck out of where the fitting had been mounted.

"Mr Cattel, are you going to leave it like that?" Kathryn asked with more than a hint of contempt. "It looks dangerous. I want it done neatly."

"Boyd, get up that ladder and tape those ends up," said Mr Cattel.

Boyd grumbled as he climbed up the ladder with a roll of insulating tape. As he climbed up, he let rip loudly. He tied all the bare ends together and wrapped them all in tape. He then used his teeth to cut the tape. After that he bent the wire back on itself and taped it. "Is that better, dearie?"

Boyd's final act on the ladder was to sniff loudly, to clear his throat, before spitting out the contents of his mouth. They fell messily at Kathryn's feet.

"How revolting! Clear that up now!" shouted Kathryn, who wondered why she had given these two clowns access to her house.

Even Mr Cattel was getting irritated. "Do as she says, Boyd. I don't want to lose a customer." Boyd went to the kitchen area and demanded a cloth. Kathryn resisted the temptation to put it in his face. It was wringing wet, and he slopped it about the mess he had made with his foot. This had

the effect of redistributing the mess about the marble floor. He then picked up the cloth and lobbed it over to the sink. It missed and ended up on the coffee machine.

Kathryn was mightily relieved when the two left to get the replacement light fitting. They had taken the ladder with them but had left the detritus of the job. She felt a deep sense of gloom and wondered why she and Rupert had bought Windhover Barn. It had been nothing but a damned nuisance. The telephone rang.

“Hello, Miss Chetwind, it’s me, John Cattel. I’m at Laineshurst Electrical Wholesale. The light fittings you have aren’t made any more. I can get you one that will do you for the faulty one, but I recommend you replace all eight. I know how proud you are of your house.”

“I suppose I will have to do that,” Kathryn sighed. The prospect of one of the fittings looking completely different would irritate her sophisticated tastes in contemporary design. It could even affect the entire ying and yang of the barn.

“They are two hundred pounds each, so I will need another fourteen hundred pounds. Can you do that? I have my credit card reader here. I’ll bring the receipt, when I come back in a couple of hours. I will also need payment up front for my time. That will come to seventeen hundred pounds altogether.”

Kathryn was emotionally exhausted and agreed, giving her card details. As she put the phone down, she wondered what would be left of Windhover Barn after these two goons had finished the job. Not a lot. Her most fervent wish was that she never saw them again.

That fervent wish was granted. Mr Cattel did not come back. Initially he said that an urgent job had come up, and he

promised he would be in on Monday morning at the time that the cleaner came. He did not keep his promise. After that he did not answer his phone, nor did he reply to the messages left by Kathryn. Kathryn made a call to Laineshurst Electrical Wholesalers. No, they had not had an order for eight lighting units for vaulted ceilings. J C Electrical used to have an account, but it had been closed, but they could not tell her why because of data protection.

Kathryn had been scammed well and truly – and she, a financial professional.

Chapter 20

Late March 2016

Rupert was not pleased when his partner told him that a tradesman had scammed them. The idea that a mere tradesman could get one over two high-flying financial professionals annoyed him particularly. Although he would never say it in those terms, Glynn's Bank encouraged its staff to carry out dealings to the advantage of the bank, some of which could be considered as scams. They were not scams at all; those were carried out by common criminals. The correct term was "high-risk, high return derivatives". The high risk was on the shoulders of the client; the high return was to the benefit of Glynn's Bank and the senior managers' bonuses.

Kathryn told Rupert that he should see if he could do any better at getting tradesmen. Rupert considered this below his pay grade. The result of the following argument was that Rupert spent another night on the sofa-bed.

The next morning, Rupert had to wait for an hour at Laineshurst Station for the first train, as Kathryn had a meeting at the Bournemouth office. It was still a bleak, comfortless and joyless experience. He was still smarting about rogue tradesmen. He did not like self-employed tradesmen one little bit. They never answered the phone, never replied to messages, and never turned up on the correct day, let alone the appointed time. But they always charged exorbitant prices for poor quality jobs. In his early career with Glynn's Bank, he had put several of them out of business. Later, while in the Mortgage Division, he had foreclosed on several others. To Rupert, tradesmen typified the "little person", and he despised them.

This would be the last day that he would have to do the daily commute from Laineshurst. He had secured a lease on a flat

that would be his pied-à-terre in Town. The rent for the Knightsbridge flat was five thousand pounds a month. To Rupert, that was little more than loose change. He was due to move in on Monday, and he had ordered the furniture from Harrods, which was not that far from the flat. The estate agent would let the delivery men in, and he had paid a company to set it all up, so that when he had picked up the keys from the estate agent, everything would be ready for him.

Kathryn would not be pleased when he told her that he would be working away from home from now on. He would leave on a Monday and would be back home on a Friday evening. Sometimes he would have to stay in Town over the weekend. For at least five days a week he wouldn't have her pecking away at him. She wouldn't like it, but Rupert didn't care. His philosophy of life was simple: "if it feels good, do it". There were a few times that this philosophy had got him into trouble, such as the three-year driving ban that he was going to have to put up with. He had got an extra eighteen months ban at Ettringden Magistrates' Court last week. He had been warned that if he did it again, a custodial sentence would be considered. That would not feel good.

No, Kathryn was not easy to live with. She had a short temper and cherished her grudges.

Rupert's brain was quite simple to analyse. The greatest proportion was dedicated to his ego. Two other equal-sized portions were dedicated to making money and for advancing the interests of, and pleasure for, David Rupert Roderick Bell-Dick. A very tiny volume, about the size of a pea, contained what passed for a conscience. Mostly repressed by the three major parts of his brain, on very rare occasions it became active. This was one of them and, momentarily, Rupert had felt some sympathy for Stephen Melhuish. He must have been a saint to put up with her for fifteen years. Thank God that Kathryn had

never been his mother. All that stuff about all Sebastian's possessions being Kathryn's property on loan was something he had not come across before. It was weird. No wonder Sebastian, her ex-son, had turned out to be queer and had a steady relationship with another teenage boy in the same year at school.

She was a control freak. She liked to give out orders, taking the credit when things went well, but ready to off-load the blame onto others when it didn't. It did not occur to Rupert that the same applied to him. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

Later that day, Rupert obeyed his orders to look for an electrician to sort out the lighting in Windhover Barn. He drew several blanks and his contempt for tradesmen became even more firmly entrenched. He rang Kathryn and put the ball firmly in her court.

Rupert was right in his assessment of Kathryn's reaction when he told her that he was going to live in Town during the week, and some weekends too.

“You didn’t tell me,” Kathryn squawked.

“I did mention it a couple of weeks ago,” said Rupert.

“So quietly that I missed it completely,” Kathryn retorted.
“How much is it going to cost you?”

“Five grand a month. I have paid a year’s rent in advance.”

“WHAT? That’s almost half my salary!”

“Your salary goes to pay the mortgage on this place,” Rupert replied. “It’s the pin money. The rent is small change as far as I am concerned.”

The reference to her hard-earned salary as 'pin money' did not please Kathryn. But that was typical of Rupert who viewed his worth as the salary that he earned. He was one of the most highly paid senior executives in the City. His salary would have paid for the entire body of senior executives in Kathryn's company. He had his fingers in a number of pies involving investment funds for the very wealthy. Some of these engaged with favoured friends in the City who would give him the nod about stocks and investments which he would use to his and their advantage.

"You said it was unfurnished. Where are you getting the furniture from?" Kathryn demanded. "You're not taking anything from here."

"Harrods, of course."

"How much did it cost?"

"Small change," replied Rupert, "about forty grand. They are delivering it on Monday and setting it up ready for me."

"Why have you done this, Rupert?"

"It saves me from having to get up at some ungodly hour to wait at Laineshurst Station for an hour in an ice-cold dump waiting for a crowded train which is twenty minutes late. Look, you won't have to get down to Laineshurst to drop me off and pick me up in the evening. You grumbled enough about it. Besides, you know how often I have to work late."

"So do I," snapped Kathryn. "You are not the only one who has to work all God's hours."

"I'll be back at the weekend, and you and I can go places. You can support me at the Conservative Party events."

“Oh, wonderful! I can be your chauffeur and little slip hanging off your arm, making small talk with the blue-rinse brigade.”

“You know how much it means to me. You know I am in the running for the candidacy for this constituency when Sir Francis retires at the end of the parliamentary session.”

“That’s right! All that matters is your career with the Tories. I am your little woman to make you respectable. Don’t count on it. When they find out about your three year’s driving ban and your extended driving test, they won’t look kindly on it.”

“I’ll get a chauffeur from Premier Cars to take us to constituency events. I am looking to get a Bentayga. The Range Rover is rubbish. It spends half its time on a breakdown truck.”

“A Ben Tay Go?”

“You know, it’s like the Bentley we had to sell to get this place. I need it for the right image, you know. The Porsche is not quite the done thing.”

“And how much is that going to be?”

“Two hundred and fifty grand.”

“Is that small change?”

“I will use my bonus.”

“Rupert, what world are you living in? Don’t you realise that an MP gets paid half what I get paid? Are you completely off your rocker?”

“I can make it up with directorships. Only need to be in the House for essential votes.”

“I want you here so I can keep an eye on you.”

“It’s going to happen. If you don’t like it, tough.”

“Image! Image!” Kathryn shouted. “That’s all you can think about, your bloody image.”

Rupert spent the weekend on the sofa-bed. It was getting regular. He was also made to get his own meals. This was a bit of a problem as he was utterly incompetent in the kitchen. The new flat had a small kitchen which looked brilliant but would see little use other than for breakfasting and making coffee. Wapplesfield had one bus a week on a Tuesday, so he had to make do with The George and Dragon, the gastropub in the village.

With the Merc, Kathryn had the choice of several high-quality restaurants in Laineshurst. She never worried about not having an alcoholic drink.

The following Monday, Kathryn was quite looking forward to having five days to herself, Rupert had had his fat carcass shifted to London on the first train, despite the hour’s wait in the grey cold booking office. The Merc was warm, and Kathryn did not give a damn that her partner was cold and uncomfortable. He had chosen to drive like a pillock and now had to face the consequences of the driving ban. One of these was that he had to sit on his fat arse in that cheerless booking office. Perhaps he could while away the minutes watching porn on his mobile. Yes, she knew about that.

That evening, she drove straight back from Portsmouth. At least she didn’t have to deviate to Laineshurst to wait for a train that might or might not be late and might or might not be carrying Rupert’s fat arse among several hundred other fat Sussex arses. She had bought a nice piece of salmon which she was going to have for her dinner. Then she could put her feet up and watch some trashy chick-flick on Netflix without Rupert grumbling about what a load of rubbish it was. It was certainly

less unwholesome than the porn movies that Rupert watched while she wasn't looking.

She put the heating on through her mobile. The irony was that she could do this while stuck in a traffic jam but could not do it at home. This was because the receiver had a number on the Speak Easy network, which was the only one available in Wapplesfield. Both Rupert's and her mobiles did not work at all at home. She also turned up the ceiling lights that Mr Cattel had assured her were safe.

Windhover Barn was dark when she parked the Merc. The lights in the vaulted ceiling were meant to be on (except for the fitting that was no longer there). She went in and turned on the standard lamps. These were so *passé* and low tech; they had to be turned on by hand.

She put her stuff on the kitchen bench before picking up the torch and going into the utility room. She saw the lighting trip switch was still off. She turned it on. The down-lighters, mounted in the ceiling, as was fashionable at the time, came on. She then went to the open plan area and turned on the ceiling lights to full. There was an intense flash that lit up the entire open-plan area accompanied by a very loud electrical bang. Kathryn shrieked with the shock. Several bits of incandescent fall-out floated down from the explosion, settling on the brand-new rug. A smell of scorched rug started to waft about the room.

Everything was off. Kathryn felt her way across to the kitchen counter where the torch was. She turned on the main switch and the RCD switch which had both tripped. It was still dark. The under-cupboard lighting did not work. The fridge had stopped. The kettle was no longer boiling. Everything was dead. She went outside. All seemed darker than it should have been. She went round to Ringdove Barn. Penny confirmed that their electricity had gone off, but as they were talking, the electricity in

Ringdove Barn came back on. Feeling a sense of relief, Kathryn walked back to Windhover Barn. It was short-lived: the barn was still in total darkness.

Kathryn swore as she looked for the emergency number for North Downs Utility Networks. She tried to dial it on the landline telephone downstairs. It did not work, as it needed a power source for the base station. She went upstairs as there was an ordinary phone by the bed. She got through to a menu spoken by a computer which gave a number of different options spoken in a deadpan sub-cockney voice. She had to go through the menu twice to get the right choice. Then she had to give her phone number one digit at a time. The voice recognition software was not very good.

“Nine,” she said.

“I am sorry, I did not get that. Is that five? Press hash to start again,” replied the machine.

After three attempts, she managed to get her telephone number spoken so that the machine would repeat it correctly. Then the machine told her to press the star button to continue. The dead-pan sub-cockney voice came back on, “Your call is very valuable to us. I am afraid that we are very busy at the moment, and all our operators are engaged. Please hang up and try again later.”

Kathryn swore loudly. “Valuable my foot!” she said. “You couldn’t give a shit!”

Several minutes later, she tried again. This time she did not get the machine that wanted her telephone number. Instead, the sub-cockney voice said, “All our lines are closed now. We are open from 07.00 to 20.00 from Monday to Friday, and 08.00 to 16.00 on Saturday and Sunday.”

It was getting cold in the barn. The gas boiler needed an electricity supply to work. Rupert had done this deliberately to get one back on her. Putting the salmon into the freezer, she put her coat on and stomped off to the George and Dragon.

The George and Dragon was welcoming. It had been a genuine village local when Wapplesfield had genuine locals who lived and worked there. Then the house prices became eye-watering and ordinary people couldn't afford to live in the village. The pub lost its clientele and atmosphere. At one point the pub closed altogether.

A brewery redeveloped the pub to remove all traces of atmosphere. They threw out all the old fittings and features that gave the building much of its atmosphere. The rooms were redecorated and refurbished with modern facsimiles of what the brewery thought should represent a typical "Merrie England" village local in Southern England. In came beams made of glass-fibre to cover the rolled steel joists. There were lots of horse-brasses mounted on false leather belts. There were lots of toby-jugs consisting of characters from the eighteenth century. Music was piped throughout. Industrial beer was served on tap. Sandwiches, pies, and scampi and chips were manufactured from a central kitchen. Hot food was served in plastic baskets, microwaved into instant edibility, accompanied by sachets of mayonnaise and ketchup. The pub was run by a manager whose actions were strictly in accordance with company policy.

The pub was not a hit with the newly wealthy villagers, most of whom commuted to London on a daily basis. It was simply not classy enough. Nor did it please the real ale enthusiasts who wanted a good old-fashioned country pub with atmosphere and nice food. As such the George and Dragon fell

between two stools. As takings fell, the manager gave up and within a couple of years, the pub had closed again.

The brewery sold the place to a foody couple from London. On the proceeds of the sale of their London premises, they could afford to do the place up completely to run as a gastropub. The George and Dragon was refurbished yet again in a minimalist chic style, painted a very pale grey throughout. There was exposed brickwork to make a contrast. The carpets were removed to expose stone flooring in the oldest part of the pub and stripped pine flooring in the later parts. The menu was written on slate chalkboards. The tables and chairs were second hand and had a distressed effect applied to enhance the shabby chic.

They sold good beer, albeit at rather higher prices than elsewhere in Southern England. They cooked the sort of food which wealthy people liked. It was exquisitely arranged in small, neat piles, with dashes of sauces artistically lined around the piles. Instead of plates, the food was served on slates or wooden platters. The portions were minimal, but the prices were maximal; bills of £100 per head were not uncommon.

The gastronomic experience was moderate, but the payment of the massive bill was something of an ego-trip for the host, who liked to show his guests how wealthy he (or she) was.

Rupert and Kathryn had been there a good number of times since they had moved to Windhover Barn, so they were well known in the pub. For Kathryn and Rupert, the gastropub attracted the right kind of clientele, meaning that they were wealthy people like them who could afford the eye-watering prices of houses in the Laine Valley. The beer was expensive, and the food was even more so. The carpark held top-of-the-range sports utility vehicles. Occasionally there was the odd battered

pick-up truck or saloon. These were frowned on, but as long as their owners' money was good, the landlord made such people welcome.

"Kathryn!" Lorna called out running out to greet her, "Lovely to see you darling! Mwah! Mwah! Where's Rupert?"

The two women hugged. Lorna was Kathryn's kindred spirit in Wapplesfield. During the day, they shared each other's coalition of prejudices, as well as visits to the gym and lashings of coffee. In the evening, it would be a bottle of wine.

"Rupert's working up in Town," Kathryn replied. "He's staying in Town from Monday to Friday."

"Why is that?"

"You know he got an eighteen month ban from driving? He then got caught driving back from Etteringden Magistrate's Court. The cops charged him, and he got another eighteen months on top of that."

"Poor Rupert," Lorna replied. "The cops should be fighting crime, not hounding innocent motorists."

"He's got himself a pad near Knightsbridge. The rent is eye-watering."

"Rents are so awful nowadays. So, what brings you here?"

"I've lost my electricity in Windhover Barn. Rupert blew up a light fitting at the top of the barn. I got someone to come and fix it. You ought to have seen him and the lout that was his apprentice. The apprentice called himself Boyd and had no respect for his betters. He dropped the broken light fitting onto our leather Chesterfield and ripped it."

"That Chesterfield cost you a fortune."

“If that wasn’t enough, he threw a screwdriver that went through one of the cushions like a dart. He had the cheek to call out ‘One Hundred and Eighty’.”

“Boyd...? Boyd...?” said Lorna. “The name rings a bell. It wasn’t J C Electricals, was it?”

“Yes. Mr Cattel.”

“Oh darling, you poor thing; you have made a bad choice. John Cattel is a notorious rogue. Trading Standards have been after him for as long as he has been in business. He comes up and charges a real fortune for a bad job. He tells you that you need a new this or that and gets you to pay up-front. Then he disappears. He tells you he has an urgent job and promises that he will come next week. He never shows. Then he doesn’t answer his phone. Then he gets a new number.”

“Lorna, that sounds very familiar,” Kathryn replied. “Boyd left bare wires where the broken unit was. Then Cattel sent him up to tidy it up. When I put the lights on there was a massive bang. Now I can’t get any electricity at all.”

“Sounds like you blew the Board’s fuse,” said Jean, the landlady. “Now, Kathryn, how can I help you?”

“I would like to have my dinner here. I know I haven’t booked, but I can’t cook at home.”

“Table for two?”

“No, Rupert’s in London, so just for me.”

“I think I can fit you in.”

Kathryn sat at a table that was next to a couple that she recognised by sight. They lived in one of the houses whose gardens butted up to the garden of Windhover Barn. They were

chatting and she ignored them. However, what they were talking about made her prick her ears up and she listened carefully. It was earwigging, which was frightfully bad manners. It made her blood run cold.

“You know, I have just heard that Glebelands Farm has finally been sold to Sussex Fine and Country Developments,” said Judy Abbey.

“When did you hear that?” David, her husband said.

“At work. The Laineshurst branch was handling it. It’s gone for 15 million. They have got planning permission for 450 homes, including 100 affordable units. The council has the plans on view.”

They saw that Kathryn had stopped eating. Then Judy said, “Are you the lady who lives in Windhover Barn? We have seen you out with your husband a lot. We haven’t introduced ourselves, have we? I’m Judy and this is my husband, David.”

“I’m Kathryn and my partner is Rupert. He works away in Town during the week. He was finding the commute too much.”

Kathryn emphasised the word ‘partner’ as if it meant a lot to her. After Stephen, she despised marriage as too twee and having too many connotations of religion. She was a free spirit, having rid herself of Stephen, Sebastian and any vestige of conscience. She then went on, “What’s this about Glebelands Farm?”

“Alan Marton used to have the place,” said David. “He was talking about selling up when we moved here fifteen years ago. The council are looking to make more affordable housing. You know what it’s like around here. We bought our semi for two hundred grand: now it’s worth about eight hundred.

“Glebelands was a bit of a mucky place. Marton was old-fashioned, to say the least. He had been doing things the way he had since his dad had the place. His new tractor was forty years old. He was no spring chicken and decided to give up the farm. None of his kids wanted to take the place over. He found it hard to make a living from it, and he was getting no younger. He started by splitting the place up into paddocks to rent for city folk who wanted ponies for their daughters or places for alpacas. He made more money that way than he ever did from the farm.

“Some folk from the village got up in arms about the farmhouse though. He had a big garden where he kept lots of chickens. Unfortunately, along with chickens came brown animals with long pink tails.”

“Yes, we’ve seen them,” said Kathryn. “We didn’t spend two and a half million on our place to be surrounded by rats.”

David continued, “Marton had been badgered for years by Sussex Fine and Country Developments. They were keen on the place. They were the ones who did up your barns. He made the best part of a million from the sale of the barns. They made a fortune tarring up the space in the middle with a communal garden and laying block pavements on the concrete access road. They finished a couple of years ago, selling them for close on a million each. I didn’t realise they were worth much more.”

“Rupert and I got caught up in a contracts race,” Kathryn explained. “I wanted Rupert to call the whole damned thing off and tell them the place was grossly over-valued, but Rupert is determined to win at all costs. That’s why we ended up paying two and a half for it. We had it valued a month ago; they said we would be lucky to get one point one. However, ours has got part of the garden from the farmhouse. Rupert wants to put a garage for his cars in the corner where those old and ugly elms are.”

“Be careful,” said Judy. “They are protected. God knows why, but you will need to get planning permission to do that.”

“As I was saying,” continued David, “Marton hung out for the highest price. Sussex Fine and Country Developments offered him more and more until they gave him fifteen million, and one point eight million for the farmhouse. He took the loot and ran.”

“So, what’s happening now, then?” Kathryn asked.

“They are continuing the leases on the paddocks until they run out. Most are up for renewal next year, and they will take over the paddocks then.”

“I have a paddock in front of Windhover Barn. I was going down to the agent soon to take a lease on it. I am looking for a horse. We didn’t do it immediately as we were sorting out the house.”

“Forget it,” said Judy. “You won’t get it for love or money.”

“And you will lose your view. They are putting up some of the affordable housing there,” said David, “and a roundabout as well. They are giving the barns an exit from the roundabout in compensation. The road will run where your drive does.”

“It will split our garden,” said Kathryn.

“I know. The current plans are to have it as a through road, as I see it. You would need to check with the developer.”

The prospect of a cold and dark Windhover Barn held little attraction for Kathryn. She finished her meal, and asked if they had a spare room at the pub. She was in luck; they did. At least it would be warm. She went to the barn and picked a few things up. Tomorrow, she hoped she would make progress with the electricity. Fortunately, she was working from Laineshurst.

She would have rung Rupert, but Wapplesfield was a not-spot for their network. Her view of Speak Easy was shared by almost all its customers – it charged exorbitant prices for a second-rate service. And Sussex Fine and Country Developments were rip-off merchants and cheapskates for their work on Glebelands Barns. Superficially the barns looked fantastic, but within a couple of years, they were giving trouble. Kathryn had had enough trouble to last her a lifetime. Maybe she would join Rupert in his London pad. Whatever, she was rapidly falling out of love with Windhover Barn.

The next day, Kathryn had more luck with North Downs Utility Networks. It only took her a couple of attempts with the voice recognition software to get to the next stage, and her call was answered within fifteen minutes. After that, it seemed that they took her situation seriously and would get someone there within three hours. They would pick her up at her office so she could let them in.

The cause of the fault was obvious. They told her in no uncertain terms to keep that circuit isolated until she could get someone to fix the lighting unit. They were very interested in which tradesman had done the job. “If my apprentice did work like that,” observed the foreman sadly, “I would have kicked his backside to kingdom come.”

The bill was three hundred pounds plus VAT.

Kathryn was on a roll. Mr Curwen from A C Electricals had had a job cancelled, so would be there the next day. And he was.

Once he had set up the access tower, Mr Curwen looked sadly at the remnants of the explosion. “If you ask me,” he said, “it looks like a real cowboy did this job. It could have set your

thatch on fire. If I were you, I would replace all eight fittings. These are cheap and nasty. I have a catalogue in the van. Nick, could you get the catalogue, please. It's under the front glove compartment.”

Compared with Mr Cattel, Mr Curwen was a breath of fresh air. He was professional. He showed a range of good quality fittings. She spent a while deciding, before she chose one that would go the best with the contemporary minimalism of the barn. Mr Curwen had to use the landline instead of his mobile to get to his wholesaler. They would be there in three-quarters of an hour.

As Mr Curwen worked at the other fittings, there were frequent observations of “cowboys”, “apprentices getting a kick up the backside” and “it wouldn’t be long before the thatch caught fire”. He was particularly scathing about the devices that could turn the lights up and down remotely from a mobile. In the end, he decided that he would have to rewire the whole lot.

“The trouble is with Sussex Fine and Country Developments is that they like to have flash looking gimmicks, but they do it on the cheap and charge a fortune.”

Curwen showed the remote-control box. “Cheap and nasty,” he said, pointing out scorch marks that suggested that the electronics inside was struggling to cope. “Another couple of hours and this would have gone up in smoke.”

“We never used it,” Kathryn said. “We couldn’t connect with it.”

“No wonder. Wapplesfield only gets a mobile signal from Speak Easy. So, if you aren’t on their network, you can’t get a signal here.”

In the end, Mr Curwen stripped out all the wiring of the lighting circuit in the open plan room and replaced it before

installing the eight new light fittings. He had to get one of his mates who was a plasterer to cover up where he had put new ducting in the ceiling. It was mid-evening before they finished and Kathryn had paid two thousand pounds. To do the transaction, both Mr Curwen and Kathryn had to go to Laineshurst so that Mr Curwen's mobile could pick up a signal. For Kathryn, a cheque book was well in the past.

At least the lights in the vaulted ceiling now worked, but there was a network of brown lines of plaster in the ceiling. Now all Kathryn had to do was to get a decorator to redo the ceiling. That would be another job in itself.

When Kathryn mentioned to Rupert what she had picked up in the pub, he was dismissive. "It's just local tittle-tattle that you always find in a pub. Barford and Partners would have picked that up. However, I wouldn't mind fifteen million. Go down to the estate agent and rent that paddock from Marton."

Which is what Kathryn did. Surely Rupert's solicitors, Barford and Partners LLP would have picked it up and told them. They had a good name and did much legal work for the Conservative Party. They also charged an arm and a leg.

However Kathryn was proved to be correct, something that she would normally crow about and use for scoring points for ages. She had been to Blomfield Estate Agency in Laineshurst to apply for the lease on the paddock in front of Windhover Barn.

"Mr Marton has sold all the property from Glebelands Farm," said the lady at Blomfield. "The new landowners are no longer granting new leases on any of the paddocks. The leases that were arranged with Mr Marton will run until their end date, but they too won't be renewed."

“What’s happening to that land?”

“They’re building 450 houses there. That paddock you were talking about is going to have a roundabout. The council have the plans. The good news is that they won’t be starting for at least eighteen months.”

“How come we didn’t know about it?” Kathryn asked.

“I don’t know. It’s hardly new news. Sussex Fine and Country Developments have been eying up Marton’s place for years. He was hanging out for a bigger price. Sounds like your conveyancer has goofed.”

Thoroughly alarmed, Kathryn arranged to take the next day off and visited the planning department at North Sussex County Council. Normally secretive and unhelpful, the council officials were more than obliging. They even photocopied all the plans for a fee. There were an awful lot of them that showed the extent of the Glebelands Estate. Kathryn instantly saw the paddock outside Windhover Barn. There was a roundabout, twenty-five metres across with four entrances, including one for the Glebelands Barns development. One of the roads was prosaically called “Central Spinal Road”. It led down to Etteringden Road and there was to be a roundabout at the far entrance. There were also the “West Service Road” and the “East Service Road”. There was a primary school to be built on the west side of the estate. There was a new road called “Glebelands Barns Avenue”. It took some of their garden and would separate them from the plot that formed the bulk of their garden.

“Those aren’t the final names of the roads, of course” said one of the officials cheekily. “The names will come from the big donors to the Conservative Party, or the council – same thing.”

For one so addicted to scoring points off others, Kathryn was remarkably restrained when Rupert got back on Friday evening. The good news was that the ceiling lights in the open-plan room at Windhover Barn were working properly, even though they could no longer be turned on by an app on Rupert's and Kathryn's mobile. The bad news was that in about two years' time, Windhover Barn and Ringdove Barn would be losing their view. There would also be a public road in place of Windhover Barn's drive. Confirmation came in a cutting from the local newspaper.

Land Purchase now Secured

All the land from Glebelands Farm in Wapplesfield has now been sold to Sussex Fine and Country Developments of Ettringden, the Managing Director, Mr John Garrett has confirmed. The deal is worth £15 million. Plans are available for the public to view in County Hall, Ettringden.

This will come as a massive blow to the Laine Valley Conservation Group who have fought for over ten years to prevent houses being built on the West side of Wapplesfield. Jean Cottrell, the chairman of the LVCG told the Laine Valley Press, ‘This is a most disappointing outcome. Beautiful fields that have been home to hundreds of horses and alpacas will now be lost to the equestrian community. It is typical of a big developer like Sussex Fine and Country Developments to have massive resources which we as a small community group cannot afford.’

Mr Garrett emphasised the improvement in road infrastructure which would result in fewer cars passing through Wapplesfield village. He emphasised his company's commitment to providing affordable housing for young families. He would put pressure on the North Sussex County Council to restore a bus service to the village. ‘With a starting price of £499995 there will be a broad choice of homes that will excite a wide range of buyers,’ Mr Garrett said.

Rupert was not impressed.

“What a load of trash,” he grumbled. “That’s another two hundred grand off this place, if not more...”

Rupert’s pea-sized conscience kicked in momentarily. “How many young people, or middle-aged people for that matter, can afford five hundred grand for a tiny house?”

“Get Blomfields up here and let’s get it on the market,” said Kathryn. As one whose pea-sized conscience had been removed completely in a pioneering operation, she did not care one iota about whether families could afford houses that cost at least five hundred grand. She wanted to be well away from it.

“And we lose one point four million?” said Rupert. “If the Bank hears that I have lost that on my house, there goes any chance of further promotion. Of course I can off-set it against tax, but I have so much off-set against tax that some little minion from the Inland Revenue might start thinking for himself. Then our losses on this place will seem like small change.”

“Barfords should have picked it up,” said Kathryn. “You should sue them.”

“No way. They do a lot of work for the Conservative Party. As soon as the Party hear that I am suing one of their favourite legal practices, they will tell me that I have rocked the boat too much.”

“What does that mean?”

“Listen. Tomorrow I will be selected for the candidacy for the constituency. If I rock the boat, they can and will drop me. Remember what happened to John Cowell? He made the mistake of criticising Maggie in a newspaper article. He said that too many poor people were losing what little they had under Thatcher. The Chairman recalled him for rocking the boat and the membership voted him out. That’s when Francis Maine got

the job. If suing the Party's favoured legal practice is not rocking the boat, I don't know what is."

"That's right, Rupert," said Kathryn, "your career is the most important thing, isn't it? I know you want to get a knighthood – Sir Rupert. But is having a roundabout and several show homes in front of the house what we want? Don't you understand that we are losing our view? We came here to get away from the plebs. I shudder when Sebastian brought his friends around from the comprehensive school. They were plebs. I have never forgiven him for failing the Common Entrance."

Again, Rupert's pea-sized conscience kicked in. Despite his insults at him, Sebastian seemed a rather pleasant boy. With a mother like Kathryn, no wonder he had a boyfriend. If his mother was like that, no doubt he would have been the same.

"Have a look at this," snapped Kathryn pushing one of the plans in front of Rupert. It showed the roundabout, and the first dozen show houses. There was going to be a wall two metres high that separated their garden from the development. That wall would be ten metres from the front of Windhover Barn. The people in the new houses, which were packed quite tightly together, would be able to see into the barn quite easily from their back bedrooms.

"I'll see what I can do," Rupert grumbled. "I've had a hard day, and I want to be ready for tomorrow."

"What you need to do is to go with me to Blomfields and put the barn up for sale," Kathryn snapped.

"And lose one point four million? I have told you that my career in the Bank would be finished. And what do you think will happen to me as the candidate. You know as well as I do that the Party stands for sound money. If we have lost one point four

million on our house, people are hardly going to take me seriously when I emphasise the need for extra austerity.”

Chapter 21

Saturday, April 2nd, 2016

The next day saw Rupert dressed up in his finest suit. When Rupert went to work, he was always immaculately dressed, but this suit, shirt, and tie were bespoke tailored and cost an absolute fortune. The fine quality was visible for all to see. It was a particularly important day, for he was one of three candidates for selection to be Conservative Party Candidate for the Laine Valley Constituency.

Kathryn had dressed up for the occasion as well. She too had had bespoke tailoring done for her. Her best suit fitted perfectly. Although she was not a particularly pleasant woman to work with, there was no doubt that she was very elegant. She also knew how to oil up to the right people, which explained her career and social successes.

The two of them would arrive in style. Rupert had ordered a car from Premier Cars and Chauffeurs. He had paid for a Bentley and that is what he got. The Bentley came with Mr Heep, its chauffeur. Although Rupert thought Mr Heep drove far too slowly, he restrained himself. Even he felt it would be far better to arrive at the Laine Valley Conservative Association in style than in a steaming temper.

The Laine Valley Conservative Association did not occupy a small shop with a flat above. Instead, it was housed in a substantial Georgian house in an extensive garden, Ettering Hall, for the membership was very wealthy. As well as offices, there was a dining room, a bar, and a conference room. The drawing room was available for members to relax and read that staple of the Conservative Party, *The Daily Telegraph*. Open fires crackled in their grates and there was always a faint but very pleasant aroma of wood smoke. The house had the air of a rather pleasant

country house hotel. Indeed, members and their guests could stay the night in the front bedrooms, all of which had splendid and far-reaching views across the Laine Valley.

The other two candidates were there. Paul Batten was a landowner and farmer. Although his farm was big enough to employ a farm manager and several staff, he was very much hands on. When a job needed doing, he was there. He was a thick-set man with work-hardened hands the size of shovels. As well as literally, he was willing to get his hands dirty metaphorically. Mr Batten was well known as an activist, particularly in the area about Etteringden. He called a spade a spade, whereas others in the Laine Valley tended to call a spade a digging implement.

The other candidate was Helen Byland-Bailey. She had a rather superior air about her. She was very well qualified, and like Rupert, knew the best people to butter up to advance her career. She exuded an air of contempt to those she considered below her station but would charm the right people in just the right manner to get her way. She was definitely on the up as far as those in Head Office of the Conservative Party were concerned. A barrister by training, she was firmly based in Knightsbridge, not that far from where Rupert had his pied-à-terre in Town.

Rupert felt smugly satisfied. He had come across Paul Batten before and found him a rather coarse man, a characteristic that resulted from mucking out cattle sheds and spending too much time on a tractor. He had heard of Ms Byland-Bailey. She was often referred to as HBB and in terms that were none-too complimentary. Her problem was that she knew almost nothing about the Laine Valley. George Sherratt, the constituency association chairman had often said that he wanted someone who knew the area. That had been a strong point of Sir Francis Maine.

As far as Rupert was concerned, the constituency candidacy was his for the taking. He would enjoy the day, chatting with members of the constituency association, most of whom had a world view very similar to his.

There was a buffet luncheon laid out in the Dining Room. It was a true smorgasbord of delightful canapés. There was no doubt about it – the Laine Valley Conservative Association had excellent catering staff. Sir Francis tucked in straight away, putting helpings on his plate that were appropriate to his rather large corporation. Others helped themselves. Showing admirable restraint, Rupert was not at the head of the queue but did load his plate with rather more than seemed decent in the circumstances. Kathryn was quite picky, and by the time she had chosen and picked up her glass of wine, Rupert had eaten over half his ample portion.

There was the usual small talk, which ranged from the sunlit uplands of Brexit to the banalities of paying fees to some of the most expensive independent schools in the country. (“You poor thing, darling, aren’t school fees crippling?”)

Kathryn had a good chat with Helen Byland-Bailey, and both found that they had met their kindred spirit. Helen grumbled about the quality of her daughter’s school, despite the eye-watering fees it charged. She constantly had to challenge the teachers who were not stimulating her daughter at all. Kathryn listened but did not want to mention anything about her son, whom she had disowned when she had started dating Rupert. At least the school fees for Strathcadden Academy were a tiny fraction of what Helen was paying. She would not admit it, but Sebastian had done rather well there. He was now at Edinburgh University, but she did not give a damn about what he was doing there.

George Sherratt, the Chairman, called the candidates through to an anteroom next to the Conference Room. He welcomed the candidates with the usual clichés, “Good afternoon colleagues. Thank you so much for giving up your Saturday afternoon. We hope you find the process enjoyable. Do remember that you are interviewing us as much as we are interviewing you. We will be doing the interviews in the following order – Paul, Helen, and Rupert. We will be starting shortly. Paul, we’ll fetch you from the Drawing Room in about ten minutes or so...”

Paul Batten went to the Drawing Room to prepare. Helen Byland-Bailey went out into the garden. It was the first decent day after a long period of dull and cold weather. Rupert went back to the Dining Room, to help himself to seconds at the buffet and another glass of wine. Kathryn looked askance at him.

Once he was replete, Rupert sat next to Kathryn, and they started the *Daily Telegraph* cryptic crossword to while away the time. Somebody else had done the quick crossword and written the word hidden in the two first across clues.

After three quarters of an hour in which the two had written down five clues that fitted, but were not necessarily correct, they gave up. Rupert got out his mobile and looked at the notes on the things he would say in the interview. Kathryn did the same with hers and was soon busy texting.

It was well after three o’clock before George Sherratt came through to fetch Rupert. It was going to be a walk in the park. Rupert had the gift of the gab in interviews, which partly explained how he had managed to get such a good grip on the greasy pole of promotion. Yes, he had it in the bag.

There were five people on the panel. Three of them Rupert knew well. Sir Francis Maine was the MP. George Sherratt was the Chairman. Sir Gerald Barton was a

representative of the membership. Finally, there were two women who introduced themselves, but Rupert forgot their names almost at once. They were officials sent down from Conservative Party Head Office in London.

Apart from a trip up when he could not recall the names of the officials, the interview went swimmingly, so Rupert thought. He gave the answers that he knew would go down well, enlarging on Brexit being an excellent opportunity to adopt policies of the unfettered free market, and reduce taxation levels for the highest paid people. There should be austerity for the common people as had never been seen before. More tax breaks should be offered to the highest paid to enable them to invest. The NHS should be privatised and charge fees. People who couldn't afford insurance could not possibly be treated. Most of the Laine Valley Conservative Association believed in those policies as well. Why should they pay tax to keep scroungers and inadequates who could not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps?

The body language of the three members of the panel from the Association seemed to be that of approval. That of the two officials from Conservative Party Head Office was inscrutable. Yes, Rupert had it in the bag.

When he had left the Conference Room, Rupert found Kathryn in the Drawing Room.

“How did it go?” Kathryn asked.

“Couldn’t have gone better,” Rupert replied. “They lapped up what I had to say. I’m sure I’m going to be the one who stands. It’s a safe seat. Parliament, here I come. Fancy a celebratory champers?”

“Sounds good to me,” Kathryn replied.

While Rupert went out to the bar for the champagne, Kathryn had a feeling of pride. She would be the partner of the MP for one of the Conservative Party's safest seats. It showed how quickly they had been accepted into the better part of the community in the Laine Valley. It was a constituency that a donkey with a blue rosette would be elected. She decided that she should not go down that road any further. However, there were times that Rupert could be as stubborn as a donkey.

Rupert returned and soon after, the champagne arrived in a pail of ice. The waiter popped the cork and served it.

“Well, here’s to my new career,” said Rupert.

“Cheers,” Kathryn replied.

Rupert had it all planned out. He still had another four years as Head of Corporate Banking. That would be plenty of time to squirrel his wealth away into offshore accounts so the taxman wouldn’t get his grubby paws on it. It had been his boast of many years that he paid tax as a lower proportion of his income than his office cleaner did. The income would support the pittance that would be his salary as an MP. He would also network to ensure some good directorships which paid a maximum salary for minimum work. He knew the City like the back of his hand. Therefore, he would also use his many contacts with hedge funds. He would earn as much in a month from his contacts as he did in a year from being an MP. True, he would have to declare his interests. Well, some of them, and make sure that nobody snooped into his affairs.

Certainly, he would hang on to his five-grand-a-month flat in Knightsbridge. It wouldn’t be that far from the House. He would certainly climb the greasy pole with the Conservative Party. It would be more challenging than doing so at Glynn’s Bank, but he knew how to soft soap the right people, while treading on his rivals. There would be no turning of the other

cheek. That was for the softies. He would make sure that he kicked them in the balls and they would never get up again.

“Rupert,” said George, “could you come through to the Conference Room?”

Rupert’s reverie was broken. He had just accepted the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer from the Prime Minister, an Old Etonian. He went through to the Conference Room with growing anticipation. He noticed that the Conservative Party Officials were not there.

“Please take a seat, Rupert,” said Sir Francis. “I do hope you enjoyed the interview. You certainly came across very confidently. You outlined all the policies that would go down very well with our constituents.

“However, we chose to appoint Helen Byland-Bailey to be the Party candidate for the Laine Valley.”

“What?” Rupert squawked. The Conference Room seemed to be tossing about as if on a ship in a violent storm. It was that damned champagne. The barman must have slipped something nasty into it. He must have been hallucinating. It was a bad dream.

“Could you repeat it?” Rupert said, gripping the chair. Fortunately, it had arms, which prevented him falling on the floor.

“We chose to appoint Helen Byland-Bailey to be the Party candidate,” repeated Sir Francis.

“Why? Have you lost it?” said Rupert. This was not at all pleasing to Rupert. It was running contrary to the portion of his brain that was dedicated to his ego. The money section was not in it. The pea-sized conscience would certainly get no look-in at all.

“No, we have not lost it,” said George. “We really liked your pitch for the job. If it were up to us, you would be our MP in waiting. However, the Head Office minions are having much more of a say in the candidates we choose nowadays. The Prime Minister has often said that far too many Tory candidates are male, pale, and stale. He has given orders that women should be given favourable treatment. You know how it is. If a male candidate and a female candidate are both equal, the female candidates should be favoured. In this case you and Helen were neck and neck. The Head Office contingent insisted that we had Helen.”

“I don’t bloody believe it. Typical, isn’t it. The candidate has tits, and she gets the bloody job!” Rupert snapped. He then elaborated his point with several very sexist and vulgar comments that were very demeaning to women.

Sir Gerald wanted to voice such opinions himself but had decided that it would have undermined his standing. Also, almost all the high-status males in the constituency party had prominent man-tits themselves. Rupert could have done with a bra. Instead, he said, “Turn it up, old boy.”

“I heard all that, Mr Bell-Dick.” One of the officials from Head Office had left her diary in the Conference Room and come back to retrieve it. “I have never heard such sexist filth in my career with the Party. I shall make sure that a report goes back to Head Office, and that you will never be considered for a candidacy again.”

As she glared at Rupert, George spoke up again, “Well you can’t be over surprised, Rupert. You know that your candidacy was undermined somewhat by your record on the road. Three years driving ban does not exactly support a candidate. Can you imagine the headlines in the gutter press: *Toad of Toad Hall appointed as Tory MP?*”

“You will be hearing from us,” said the woman ominously. “I have to warn you that a disciplinary process will be considered.”

Rupert went back to the Drawing Room.

“Well, how did you get on Rupe?” asked Kathryn.

“I didn’t get it!” Rupert snarled. “Where’s the car?”

“You told him not to come back until five.”

“Well, I want him now,” said Rupert tapping a number into his mobile. “Heep! I want you up here now!” he yelled.

Discreetly the barman removed the champagne. “I don’t think he will need this,” he said to his colleague. “Talk about counting your chickens...”

Rupert Bell-Dick was beside himself with rage. When, ten minutes later, the Bentley arrived, he let rip at Mr Heep, the chauffeur, “Where the bloody hell have you been? I wanted you ten minutes ago. I shall be putting in a formal complaint!”

For Kathryn and Mr Heep, the twenty-five-minute journey back to Wapplesfield was purgatory. Mr Heep discreetly turned on the dashcam. Although it would record a mundane journey in the great car, it would also pick up the profanities that were coming from his client’s mouth.

And there were plenty of them. Rupert was not happy at the normal progress that Mr Heep was making, as he was a cautious driver who drove in accordance with all motoring law, including sticking to speed limits, and stopping at red traffic lights. This was unnecessarily petty, according to Rupert, who kept on telling him to put his bloody foot down and move.

As well as a long-serving and loyal employee of Premier Cars and Chauffeurs, Mr Heep was highly professional, although sorely tempted to kick his passenger out and make him walk home. Although Rupert considered his journey back a third-class ride and it was quicker to walk, Mr Heep refrained from telling Rupert about first-class rides on Shank's Pony.

After twenty-five minutes they got back to Windhover Barn. Rupert was now at the height of his belligerent mood and shouted a considerable amount of racist abuse at Mr Heep, who had African Heritage. He then hurled himself out of the car towards the barn.

In the car, Mr Heep sighed with relief. He would tell Mr Oxley, his boss, everything, and would play the footage from the dashcam.

While that Saturday was a day that Rupert Bell-Dick would have wanted to forget, six hundred kilometres to the north west, it was a day to remember. That Saturday was one of the rare Saturdays that Brenda was not rostered on her bus. She often had to work rest days.

Instead, for the first time in nearly twenty-five years, Brenda, Imogen, and Laura did something that many a sister likes to do with their mother. They went shopping together. The upcoming nuptials between Imogen and Alexander Fairbairn meant that each of them needed a new outfit. Since the two sisters were in their forties, and mother was in her sixties, none of them were exactly spring chickens.

Two years previously Christian had made a name for himself by designing a range of clothing for men and women of all ages. The designs, made in their own workrooms, sold well at Walker Bros. They were the kind of produce that the people of

Strathcadden would call “sensible”. It was a view shared by online customers as well. So, Christian’s designs were a good place to start.

The three women had spent a congenial evening on Friday looking through the website. They also had a bit of fun imagining each other in teen-gear. Talk about mutton dressed as lamb. It reminded Imm and Laura of the fun person their mum was before that loony church had got its claws into her. The religious detox was working well. Dad had come in from locking up at Strathcadden Academy and joined in. He brought down a picture of himself as a long-haired twenty-year-old in shorts that seemed even skimpier than Ewan’s running shorts. He decided he would look a snip in Chris’s sports gear but was unanimously told he was not giving away his older daughter dressed like that.

Where better to get their outfit than Walker Bros? Late on Saturday morning, while Joby and the boys were looking after the twins, the three women descended on the ladies-wear department. By the end of the morning each had a shortlist of potential candidates. Now a well-deserved luncheon was had. They were making a treat of it. And Chris waited on them, as he had got back from university the evening before.

Finally, Imogen had selected her successful candidate, a peach number with a short jacket. She had rejected the more usual white. It fitted her perfectly. Then Laura fell for a floral design. Brenda had the most trouble. It nearly fitted, but the dress was just a bit tight.

“It makes my bum look big. You know what your dad would say.”

“Go on up another size, Mum.”

“I’ll have to go on a diet. And Dad can go on one as well.”

“You know what you are like with diets, Mum. Dad ends up weighing less than you and you go hopping mad.”

“I’ll have to get the next size up.”

The next size was loose. No problem. Since the outfit had been made in the Walker Bros workrooms, it would be no trouble to adjust it. Just a few measurements. It would be ready for next Saturday.

By the time they got in, Brian had settled behind the telly for the afternoon’s footy.

Chapter 22

Saturday 14th April 2016

Corscadden and Wapplesfield have little in common. Wapplesfield is characterised by its gentrification, a euphemism for social cleansing. Corscadden is a friendly and inclusive community where everyone looks out for each other.

Alexander Fairbairn had met and fallen in love with Imogen Salway. At 42, Imogen was six years older than her fiancé, but both looked younger than their ages suggested. As a result of their engagement, they both had gained a zest for life that was much more than what it was when they were single. Imogen was always optimistic and outgoing. Alexander was a quieter man, thoughtful and reflective. He could come over as rather shy at first, but when he was at ease, he had a quiet and dry sense of humour.

In this way Alex was very similar to his nephews. His late sister, mother to Aidan and Ewan, was very outgoing and could be feisty at times. Aidan was, if anything, shier than he was. Ewan was almost a clone of him, a tall and lanky youth with wavy light sandy brown hair. Alex had sometimes felt a little isolated from the Walker tribe, especially when he worked in the south of Sussex. It was as far south in the British Isles that one could get without falling into the sea. He had carried on working there when his parents retired back home to the Borders. He had shared houses with other young professional men, but they would have to move on when the landlord wanted the house back. He had tried hard to save for his own house but never had enough for a deposit. Even the smallest flat was beyond his means. He missed his piano, although he had a keyboard that he played. His housemates regarded his love of the piano as a harmless eccentricity. Alex would wear headphones so as not to get up his housemates' noses.

When he was thirty, he moved in with his girlfriend. However, he was made redundant. Almost immediately she found another boyfriend and ordered him out of the house. He made a decision to go back home to Scotland. One morning, he filled his car with diesel and headed home without stopping. He swore he would never go back to Sussex.

Now he had fallen in love with Imm, was now her fiancé, and had moved in with her into a spacious house which cost considerably less than the tiny houses on the Sussex Coast. In Sussex, nobody seemed interested in him. Here lots of people were. They were thrilled when the wedding was announced to be on Saturday 28th May 2016.

On this particular Saturday, Imm and Alex were waiting in eager anticipation. A brand-new piano was due to arrive at 34, Adam Place. It was the same make and model as the previous instrument which had been damaged beyond repair when it ran away due to the incompetence of a slovenly and dim-witted removal apprentice. On this occasion, the manufacturer delivered the piano using its own transport along with highly skilled operatives.

The job was done to perfection. The instrument was carefully moved into the house. It was unpacked, set up properly, tested, and tuned. Alex played a tune to try it out. If anything, it sounded even better than his previous instrument.

That afternoon, Alex composed a little piece, which he called “Welcome back to my piano”. Imm loved it and decided that she wanted to play. Guess who was going to teach her.

The wedding was due in about six weeks. It was going to be a small occasion; it would be a simple ceremony at the Corscadden registration office followed by a blessing in church,

for neither was at all religious. Imogen had been put off by the appalling sect that had imprisoned her parents for many years with its constant threats of hell, fire, brimstone and damnation. It was only last year that she had managed to extricate them from its ghastly clutches. Their religious detox was going well. However, she had a deep respect for those like her sister's parents-in-law who lived a life that was based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The Walker tribe shared a joy of love, life, and light. It was rubbing off onto her. Alex had picked up elements of his sister's beliefs. She was certainly not meek and mild, but exuded joy which rubbed onto others including him.

They therefore were going to have a blessing in church, and the Reverend Matheson would take the service. The reception would be at Brewster House. Their nephews would be back from university. Laura and Joby as always made excellent hosts. The Walker tribe enjoyed any excuse for a party. And, what a surprise, Walker Bros would do the catering. The plans were falling into place.

Alex mused on how he had started with two nephews. Now he had five, and they were all genuine, not step-nephews. For three of them were Imm's nephews. One of them was nineteen going on thirty. The other two were active fourteen-month infants who loved crawling over everyone and everything.

As for Alex's nephews, three of them were going back to Edinburgh University the next day. They shared their father's flat that he had used when he was the Dunalastair Professor of Electrical Engineering. The fourth flatmate was Jordan Melhuish, who was Ewan's boyfriend. The harmony that characterised the four young men continued regardless of whether they were at Brewster House, or in Marchmont.

At university, they were conscientious in their studies, working hard to get their assignments in on time, and to ensure they scored highly in their examinations. They worked with a purpose. They also played with a purpose, whether it was running with the Haries, or playing badminton at the university sports centre on The Pleasance. Theirs was a model of harmonious communal living.

Gemma Hammond came round from time to time. Chris and she would go for a walk or cuddle up on the settee in the flat's living room and watch a movie streamed from the internet. Gemma tried to explain electrical engineering to Chris. It was an uphill struggle, but Chris remembered Ohm's Law and had a vague recollection of impedance. He had achieved more in this respect than his grandfather.

Chris had made more progress with music. Aidy was teaching him the keyboard and by now he could string a page of notes into something that resembled a tune.

Ewan was feeling very content. His course was challenging, but his progress delighted his tutors. Also, he had Jordan there, and their love for each other seemed to deepen. The two young men were inseparable, except that they did different courses. Jordan still felt the rejection by his ex-mother, but Ewan was always there. Both agreed she was a vixen, and hoped she was giving Mr Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Finance a hard time. Jordan found it almost impossible to forgive. He certainly could not forget. It would haunt him for the rest of his life, although in years to come, it might not have so much venom.

With Eejay about, Jordan felt safe and wanted. He looked forward to being engaged to Ewan, and a year or two later, to marrying him. They had to be more discrete in Edinburgh than in Corscadden. They had suffered homophobic abuse on one occasion. They ran like hell. If they hadn't, it would have been a

homophobic attack. Since both were good runners, they outran those obese specimens and got away with it. In quiet areas where everyone else was not, they would hold hands, and cuddle in the same touchy-feely way that Chris and Gemma did.

Aidy was in regular contact with Tamsin. He didn't see her as much as both would have liked. He had gone home for her seventeenth birthday towards the end of February and gone out for a meal with her parents. Even though their pair bonding was being done at a distance, they were going steady. Aidy had a montage of pictures of himself and Tamsin next to his bed. Tamsin had bought him a large soft-toy dog, which he bunched up around before going to sleep. He would have preferred Tamsin there, but the dog reminded him of his young girlfriend.

Aidy had bought Tamsin a large teddy-bear, and for Tamsin it too was a bed-time stand-in for Aidy. Aidy would be twenty in August, although he looked rather younger. The age gap may have seemed significant at this stage, but a few more years, nobody could give a damn.

With their joyful atmosphere of harmonious communal living the four young men in their top floor flat in Marchmont would have made for a very dull television show. However, that was the way they liked it. They were there for each other, and they would need to be as Semester Two examinations were coming up. In the rather twee words of the Examination Regulations, each "was offering himself for a diet of examination". For even the best student, the thought of these examinations was not exactly a palatable diet. However, it tended to act as a good diet, for the very thought of several three-hour examinations was enough to put any student off his or her food.

As Jordan put it, the sight of a student leaving a three-hour examination after thirty minutes gave him a sense of relief. "At least I know a bit more than he does."

As in Semester One, examinations took place, not only in Adam House (the main examination hall), but in any place where sufficient desks and chairs could be shoe-horned in. One of Chris' examinations took place in a large storeroom in the roof of a large and rather dilapidated looking building.

The weather during the Semester Two examinations was what was traditionally known as "examination weather", meaning that it consisted of hot spring days with unbroken sunshine. At the end of the examination period, the weather often broke, with a Haar (or a sea fret) coming in off the cold North Sea and making its way up the Firth of Forth.

Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn's Bank and his partner, Kathryn Chetwynd had an understanding about how they shared their lives. They spoke to each other minimally to ensure that neither tripped over each other in the minimalist space that was Windhover Barn. They spoke more to each other in social gatherings to assure the outside world that everything was hunky-dory.

They did their own things, for each had a strong principle that "if it feels good, do it". While Rupert's life was dedicated to making money and the luxury that it allowed, Kathryn's life was dedicated to instant entertainment. Her previous life was bogged down with the routine drudgery that being mother to a teenage son involved. It involved other teenage boys who were so common, and called Sebastian "Jordan", or even worse, "Jordie". When Rupert offered her a way out, it felt good to take it, so she did so, ditching Stephen and Sebastian in the process. The fact that this involved abandoning Sebastian in the family home was just tough. Stephen could sort it out, which he did. As far as she was concerned, the further away Sebastian was the better. A school in the further reaches of the West Highlands of Scotland

seemed ideal. She didn't care less – not that Sebastian was bad. He was naturally a kind and considerate boy, but he was just like his father, meek, mild, and so boring. She had got what she wanted, Rupert, who would give her the lifestyle and the instant hedonism she craved.

However, Rupert could be an obnoxious prick at times. This was especially noticeable when his notion of what felt good ran contrary to what her notion was of what felt good. She didn't mind whether Rupert was rude to others who stood in his way, but heaven help him if he tried it on with her.

Rupert may have seen a big man, but he wasn't so large. He was fat, and that was that. Kathryn had a whiplash tongue which served to keep Rupert in his place.

On this particular Saturday, Rupert was doing his own thing with the Laine Valley Conservatives. They would be holding several meetings in various parts of the constituency and the neighbouring constituency of Ettringden to promote the withdrawal of Britain from the European Union. As well as the falsehoods promoted at a national level, especially on the side of a large red bus, the Laine Valley Conservatives promoted their own vision – a regime where the wealthy would pay much less of their income in taxes. Since the demographic in the Laine Valley was predominantly elderly, privately educated, white, and very wealthy, the vision was shared widely. There was also a strong desire to put the clock back to the good old days in which the plebs and foreigners knew their place.

Kathryn was going to the gym with Rachel and Carol, before playing tennis, and having lunch in Laineshurst. After that, they would spend the afternoon in the expensive boutiques of Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Kathryn had packed her change of clothing for the afternoon in a small bag. Then she heard shouting downstairs

from Rupert, "Mr Oxley? Where is my car? He's ten minutes late..."

Kathryn could hear increasingly animated squawking from the other end.

"He's ten minutes late... My name is Rupert Bell-Dick... What...? What do you mean that you are not serving me...? I never got a letter... How dare you? How very dare you...?"

There followed some appallingly racist abuse from Rupert.

"...I will be taking this up with my solicitor... What do you mean that you will take it up with yours...? Mr Oxley, may I remind you of your social position. You are a mere chauffeur... Don't you dare put the phone down!"

The buzzing from the telephone suggested that Mr Oxley had done just that.

"Did you hear that?" Rupert shouted. "That man is refusing to send a car to me. He won't have me as a customer again. He said he sent a letter to me. Tommyrot if you ask me."

"There's a pile of letters here, Rupert," Kathryn retorted. "You haven't been exactly diligent in looking through them."

"I'm a top banker, not a bloody office clerk!"

"Here, this is probably it."

Rupert opened the letter with a letter knife. Although opening letters was, he considered, below him, he always insisted that tearing envelopes open was decidedly vulgar. Indeed, the letter was from Premier Cars and Chauffeurs.

Dear Mr Bell-Dick

On Saturday you hired one of our vehicles with our chauffeur, Mr Errol Meek.

During the journey back from Ettringden to Wapplesfield, you continually shouted at Mr Meek, because he would not drive at an excessive speed. You used a considerable number of abusive and racist terms to him. I was highly concerned when he told me on Saturday evening. He played me the sound from the dash-cam at the front of the car.

I need to point out that Mr Meek has been driving for me since I started the company twenty-five years ago. Like all my drivers, he has taken advanced driving training by ex-police instructors. He also undergoes a rigorous assessment at least once a year, and he has always passed with distinction. If I am asked to provide a driver for the North Sussex Constabulary, they always ask for Mr Meek.

Mr Meek resisted the temptation to comply with your rantings, or to eject you from the car. He had more patience than I ever would have.

Therefore, I have taken the reluctant decision to refuse any more custom from you or Miss Cheating. I have had several of my staff abused by you. I have warned you in the past that it is unacceptable for my staff to be treated like this. I have also contacted my colleagues in the trade, some of whom have reported similar behaviour from you and Miss Cheating. Therefore, if you need transport, you will need to make alternative provision for yourself from now on.

Yours sincerely

Charles Oxley

“He has no bloody right to that. I shall be seeing Barfords on Monday. I will sue Oxley for every penny he has. I will not be humiliated by a bloody chauffeur...”

“No, Rupert, of course not.”

“You can take me to my meeting.”

“No way, Rupert. I am spending the day with Rachel and Carol. You will have to get a taxi, if they’ll take you. It depends if Oxley has blacked you across taxi firms as well as uniformed chauffeur companies. Shank’s Pony is very reliable, if a bit slow.”

Kathryn then ostentatiously picked up the keys to the Merc and walked out. She too was stung, partly by the fact that Oxley had blacked her as well, but more because he had misspelled her name, “Cheating”.

Chapter 23

Last Week of May 2016

For Christian, Ewan, and Jordan, the first year at university was now finished. For Aidan, it was the second year. All had passed their exams with merits and distinctions. Eejay had won a departmental prize for his efforts.

The following year, Aidan would be going abroad, Semester I in Mulhouse in Southeast France, and Semester II in Basel in Switzerland. It was handy because the two towns were close together, just 30 kilometres apart. Moving between the two would be simple. He and other students could share the same house. Their commute would be about 30 minutes on the train.

For Aidy, that would mean seeing Tamsin less. It would make the heart grow stronger. Aidy would be back to Scotland as often as he could. During the Easter break, they planned that Tamsin would come down to Basel. She was excitedly looking forward to that.

The more immediate thing was that Tamsin would be at home where they would be for the next few months. True, she would still be at Strathcadden Academy for the next month, and she was busy organising the end of year celebrations. The big shock was that Mr Mitchell had retired on the grounds of ill-health. He had kept it secret from the hordes of nosy Caddies, a feat in itself. However, a blue-lights ambulance taking him to the Strathie could not be hidden. Small and incomplete snippets of information came out, all suggesting different illnesses. The precise nature of Mr Mitchell's illness was nobody's but his business. It did need to have a prolonged course of treatment, but he was making good progress.

Mr McEwan was now Headmaster. It was not necessarily a promotion he wanted, and he said he would do it for no more

than three years to ensure a good successor was found. Surely someone would come forward by then.

A more uplifting development was the engagement of Craigie Boy and Miss Birch. Not that it was announced at school, but it might have well been so in each year assembly. Craig Farjeon popped the question one Saturday. By Monday afternoon, the news had circulated about the school. By the end of the school day, it was no longer news.

Nobody at Strathcadden Academy knew what happened to Julian Rowley after he had left. Nor did they particularly care. The only one who did was Mr McEwan, who had become acting headmaster by the time the case arose for sending malicious communications. It was only reported in the local news as a fifteen-year-old youth being placed under a Risk of Sexual Harm Order for two years.

This year Aidy and his brothers would enjoy the end of year concerts from the comfort of the audience. There had been no panic call from Peter Struther to ask him to play.

The first morning that Christian was at home from uni, he was straight into Walker Bros. There was work to be done. He was back in his familiar haunt of the restaurant, serving the customers. The Summer and Autumn Collections were to be worked on, before going on-line. Liam Cosgrave was also in regularly keeping the computer system in tip-top shape. The equipment may have been elderly, but it was still fit for purpose. For a computer genius like Liam, the software was simple, but it did the job that Walker Bros required of it.

The planning that had come into action last August had saved Walker Bros from what could have been a terminal disaster. They had relied on low-tech equipment and a lot of hard work,

which had put the company systems well on the way to recovery. Riverside Networking Solutions had not exactly distinguished themselves with their response. The last that anyone heard of them was that the premises were destroyed by two ex-employees with a grudge against the owner. Both the young men were found guilty of arson with intent to endanger life and given eleven years each.

Jordan and Ewan were spending a couple of days in London. Jordan's grandparents, Richard and Celia Melhuish were going to London to visit a long-standing friend of theirs, Roger Densom, MP for Ettringden. Mr Densom ploughed his own furrow as a backbencher. He cared little about the current fashions in the Conservative Party. He despised the crop of snake-oil salesmen who were pushing for the UK to leave the European Union, selling it as lies printed out on the side of a large red Mercedes bus, which he called the Lie Bus.

Behind the scenes, Roger clashed regularly with the Prime Minister, whom he described as a typical PR-man – a lot of froth and very little substance.

By sheer coincidence, Jordan's father, Stephen, was on business in London that week.

On Tuesday morning, the five of them were on the train to London, First Class. It cost an arm and a leg, but they didn't do it very often.

Roger Densom and Richard Melhuish had a long-term friendship. They had met at school and had worked together in accountancy for many years. Roger had become an MP, while Richard steadily climbed the promotion ladder in the company. Now Roger was going to retire at the next election. He realised

that he had never shown his friend and family around the Houses of Parliament. Now was the ideal time to do it.

The Houses of Parliament is not just an historic building; it is rich in symbolism throughout. Not only are there the two debating chambers, the offices, and the hundreds of facilities that are needed to sustain a functional government, but also the whole place is run on the ceremonial that the symbolism underpins. The House of Lords sounds like an assembly of a gentleman's club. The House of Commons sounds more like the bar of a pub in which the landlord has just announced that the go-go dancer has rung in sick. Jordan and Ewan were fascinated in the rituals that showed the independence of the Commons from the Crown. Jordan also wondered how long it would take for Black Rod's staff to wear through the door into the House of Commons. Progress was certainly being made.

A long tour showed that the Houses of Parliament were also suffering their age. They were certainly not ship-shape and Bristol fashion. There were buckets all over the place to catch the rain. Woodwork was rotting. Wiring was dangerous in places. The tender loving care needed was going to cost a fortune. The famous Great Bell in the Elizabeth Tower was going to be silenced. Jordan liked the idea that the popular name, Big Ben, came from Sir Benjamin Hall, Commissioner of Works, a Welshman who was as overweight as he was long-winded.

Now Roger Densom and his guests were in the Member's Dining Room. They were joined by John Cowell, the Independent MP for Canterbury South. The conversation progressed quickly to Jordan's ex-mother.

"I haven't seen her since July," said Jordan. "Dad and I went up to a posh hotel. Mum had called us there. We hoped that Mum would come back to us. Instead, her boyfriend was

there, and he told us to hop it. Mum said that she never wanted to see either of us again. She was finished with both of us.”

Roger Densom and John Cowell looked shocked. Jordan continued, “Then I saw her on the telly.”

“How did that happen?”

“It was a program called *Rustic Refugees*. They were in North Sussex looking at expensive houses that people like me can only dream about. There was a place called Wapplesfield and there was a barn conversion that they liked. Suited my ex-mother – fit for a cow! Her partner looked like a pig.”

Jordan looked pained, and Ewan held him by the hand. Although the incident had happened nearly a year ago, it had the power to hurt like hell. It would do so for the rest of Jordan’s life. Jordan enlarged on how she had taken away everything that had meaning for him. Jordan’s grandparents assured them it was all true.

“I am speechless,” said Mr Cowell. “I can’t imagine such cruelty. What made her like that?”

“Her boyfriend; he’s a banker,” said Celia. “Since she met him, she became obsessed with two things – money and feeling good. Her philosophy of life was always a bit selfish. Her parents said as much. When she met her boyfriend, she would say, ‘If it feels good, you do it.’”

“Was her boyfriend called Rupert by any chance?” said Mr Densom.

“Yes,” said Richard. “Rupert Bell-Dick, Head of Corporate Banking at Glynn’s Bank.”

“An unfortunate name,” said Mr Cowell. “Roger has filled me in on what has been going on at the Canterburybridge South Conservatives. The party there didn’t like me as their MP, so they

deselected me. I was too left-wing for them. There were a lot of wealthy old men who had a kind of old-boy network. They are still running things. Our Rupert has somewhat muscled in on Laine Valley. He and his partner, your mother, Jordan, love to be seen at all sorts of functions.”

“Don’t forget that they have done the same for me, John,” said Mr Densom. “I announced my retirement, preferring to jump before I was pushed. Our friend, Bell-Dick Head of Corporate Banking, was in on it, even though he doesn’t live in my constituency.”

“Why is Francis Maine retiring?” said Richard.

“There have been some funny goings on. Central Office has been investigating the background, very discretely of course. The PM has been pushing for more open accountability at the grass-roots level.

“Anyway, the Laine Valley Constituency selected a new candidate for the next election. Our friend Rupert was a candidate in the selection process. Central Office sent down its preferred choice and a couple of assessors to ensure things were done properly. Bell-Dick didn’t get in. He had turned up in a chauffeur-driven Bentley...”

“Is he that rich?” said Ewan.

“He is, but he likes to drive himself, except he got banned from driving – had too much to drink one night. He lost his licence. Silly bugger drove himself back home like a lunatic and got caught again. Three years ban and an extended driving test. The chauffeur and car came from a hire company. After the interview, our friend was hopping mad and apparently gave the chauffeur a mouthful. They won’t take his custom again and he’s been blacklisted by other companies.”

“Not a pleasant man,” said Mr Cowell. “His partner is even worse.”

“That’s my ex-mother,” said Jordan.

“I know,” Mr Cowell continued. “I can assure you that none of her has rubbed off onto you. She loves to be at parties and loves to be the centre of attention. She has strong opinions that she likes to force down other people. But she gets all uppity if anyone doesn’t agree with her. She was made a director of an accountancy firm, Robson & Gibbs, in Portsmouth. She knows how to network around the important people. If you’re not important, she’s a bitch. Several people have walked out on her. They tell me there’s a good way to wind her up. That’s to call her, ‘Miss Chet-wind’.”

“Another way is to write ‘Miss Cheating’,” Jordan added. “If a teacher from my old school sent a letter with that on, she would go ape.”

“I suppose she would go even madder if you called her ‘Mrs Melhuish’,” said Richard. Her treatment of their son and grandson still rankled with him and Celia.

“Where do they live?” Ewan asked.

“They live in a place called Wapplesfield in North Sussex,” said Mr Densom. “It’s in John’s old constituency. It’s one of the most expensive areas to live in the entire country – even dearer than Surrey. In Laineshurst, the main town, the cheapest two-bedroomed house is four hundred thousand pounds. In Wapplesfield, a similar house is nearly six hundred. Your friends and mine bought a mid-sized thatched barn conversion. They got caught in a contracts race. Our Rupert cannot stand losing, so out-bid them by offering two and a half million pounds. But to him, two and a half million is little more than six months’ salary.”

“I bet he doesn’t pay much tax on it,” said Celia. “It’s the little people who have to pay tax.”

“Right in one,” said Roger. “Our constituency association is in a large Georgian house which is shared by Laine Valley as well as us. It’s like a country house hotel. Rupert and Kathryn are often there, busy networking. You can tell, as her voice carries in a particularly penetrating way, haughty and self-important. Anyway, Rupert claims that he pays tax at about half the rate the office cleaners do at Glynn’s Bank. Much of his wealth is off shore. One or two of my contacts in the City say that some of his dealings employ dubious techniques.”

As the Melhuish tribe went back to the Borders a couple of days later, Jordan had a better insight into the conduct of his ex-mother. She was her own selfish bitch. She loved the social high life of the South. She loved to be seen to be the centre of attention. At work, she was a schmoozer. Jordan could use a rather more vulgar expression. To those who worked for her, she was a bully. As for that partner of hers, the Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking, Jordan had reached a very rapid judgement of him when they had met last July. It had not been favourable then, and there was no evidence now that it could be changed for the better.

Jordan had come to the conclusion that being a total shit was far too much like hard work. The Bell-Dickhead of Corporate Banking had to think up all sorts of different ruses to keep ahead of the taxman. Jordan didn’t understand The City and its devious ways. He was not that clever. He liked things simple. He had earned what little money he had. When he started work, he would pay taxes just like everyone else. Dad would help him with anything major, like putting down a deposit on a flat. He would pay his Dad back, of course.

The vixen that was his ex-mother had shacked herself up with a partner who seemed to have a complex love-life. For Jordan, love was simple and was sitting next to him in the train. Love was a tall and very beautiful eighteen-year-old man who had been his best friend and soulmate for the last four years. Ewan and he were having a teenage romance that was gently blossoming, and they were going to be engaged once the two of them had graduated and had got a job. Ewan was the opposite of Jordan's ex-mother, gentle, thoughtful, and loyal. He did not have to strut about in the way that his ex-mother did, drawing attention to himself. Ewan never dealt with others in the haughty and manipulative way that his ex-mother had. His love was completely unconditional. Jordan looked up at his boyfriend who smiled at him gently.

Ewan always looked elegant, whether it was jeans, trainers, and T-shirt, as he was now, or his best suit. When Ewan dressed up, he always wore a tie. Going to work was dressing up time, and it was to be done properly. Although he was young, Ewan disliked the habit of open-necked shirts that was currently fashionable. He always said that open-necked shirts were for the garden.

In contrast to his ex-mother and the Bell-Dickhead, Ewan never needed to power-dress. The sight of the Bell-Dickhead nearly a year ago with his shaven head and beard made Jordan feel sick. Ewan's wavy light sandy brown hair, which covered his ears, may have been retro to some, but to Jordan it was what he liked. Ewan could have grown some sparse youthful fluff about his face, but it would have irritated him.

And Jordan too, at the age of nineteen, was shaving every other day. No beard for him either. He liked his hair long as well. His ex-mother used to shout at him for having it long and would make him have it cut. All the more reason...

Jordan's ex-mother was shacked up with that Dickhead. Theirs was a very expensive shack, a thatched barn conversion. In Wapplesfield, a small shack would still cost six hundred grand. They had overpaid grossly for their shack, and now houses were going to be built in front of it, blocking out the view. Lots of little boxes, with little rooms, little garages that would not accommodate a car, little gardens, and massive mortgages that would need both parents to work all God's hours to pay. It was people like his ex-mother and the Dickhead that had forced house prices so high that ordinary people could not even afford to rent. Edinburgh was expensive as well, but he and Ewan would still be able to afford a flat together.

Jordan placed his hand on Ewan's thigh and again gazed into his boyfriend's eyes. Ewan did the same. With his other hand Jordan reached over to caress Ewan's face, before saying, "Eejay, I love you so much." The two boys kissed with gentle affection.

A warm fuzzy feeling ran through Ewan, as it always did in moments of intimacy with his boyfriend.

Stag nights and hen parties were for the youngsters. Instead, Alex and Imogen had a quiet night at Laura's, if one could call an evening with the Walker Tribe quiet. Chris had his half-brothers and Jordan jumping to it in the kitchen. The twins, Benjamin and Daniel, were the centre of attention as befitting fifteen-month infants. There were lots of toys for the boys to play with. They loved to talk to each other, and to others in the room.

It was a slightly chaotic evening of family life at its best, a joyous harmony that was inclusive from oldest to youngest. Alex had often been at Brewster House when his sister was alive. He liked being there, but now there seemed something extra that

there wasn't there before. And it wasn't just that Aidy and Chris had their girlfriends and Ewan his boyfriend. Laura was going to be his sister-in-law. True Imm was older than him and they were not going to try for children. There were plenty of children already in the Walker Tribe. In a few years more, there would be even more little Walkers, even smaller than the two toddlers who were crawling over him. By that time, the current junior Walkers would be skinny blond teenagers, who would be as good-looking as Christian. Laura and Imm had often said that Chris looked exactly like that when he was fifteen months.

Alex had got to know Chris well over the last few months – nineteen going on thirty. Chris was one who had graduated from the University of Hard Knocks. He had come out of it well. Alex often wondered what he would have been like if he had had to put up with what Chris had. That said, Alex had had his own setbacks, like his parents retiring to the Borders while he had to stay in Sussex. And then his girlfriend ditching him and turning him out when he had been made redundant. Talk about being knocked down and then kicked in the balls.

To be truthful, Alex could well have ended up with a boyfriend, like his nephew. Until Imm had come along, he was, to say the least, wary of women. He knew what it was like to have a tomboy as a sister – and a feisty one at that. She had not been known as Scary Mary for nothing. She had picked it up off their grandmother. Alex had even ridden pillion on her BMW Flat-Twin that now lived in permanent retirement in the garage behind the house. It was scary.

Saturday 21st May 2016 was a fine day in Corscadden. It could not have been better for Alexander and Imogen. The Corscadden Registration Office was housed in an imposing townhouse in Welford Square, just round the corner from Adam Place. The various invited tribes arrived for the ceremonial, crowding out the downstairs room leaving standing room only.

For Brian Salway, it was his big day. He was giving away his eldest daughter. He had felt guilty he had not done the same for Laura. That loony church had a lot to answer for. However, he was mighty proud of his grandson for doing it for her.

After the ceremony, it was round the corner to St Columba's for the blessing in church. Aidy provided the music on the organ, while Tamsin entertained everyone with a performance of Liszt's *Sospiro* on the piano, a virtuoso piece that required technical skill that would challenge a professional.

It seemed natural that Christian should be master of ceremonies. While Charles and Muriel Walker were the patriarch and matriarch of the Walker Tribe, the role was slowly passing over to Christian. Although physically he was skinny and young looking for his nineteen years, he had a big strength of character, the character of a gentle giant. It had blossomed over the previous two and a half years. It held no bitterness or resentment of the past. Instead, there was a gentle and deep empathy for others. It could stand up to the aggressive but was gentle and thoughtful towards the vulnerable.

Walker Bros had done the reception, so there was little for Chris and his half-brothers to do other than to be with the guests. This they did easily as they were naturally sociable. The twins carried on doing what fifteen-month infants did, enjoying being the centre of attention and having four big boys and two big girls to play with them. There was an intermission for sleepy time. At the end of the afternoon, most of the guests had drifted off, all wishing Alex and Imm a very long and happy marriage.

By the middle of the evening, just the Walker tribe was left. Aidy and Tamsin were snuggled together in the drawing room listening to music, as were Joby and Laura. Christian and Gemma were in the games room on the old sofa, saying lots of intimate and affectionate sweet nothings. Jordan and Ewan were

doing the same on the trampoline in the garden. They too were snuggled up together, feeling safe and loved.

At about midnight, Alex and Imm flew from Edinburgh to Tarbes. They spent their honeymoon in the Pyrenees.

Chapter 24

June 2016

The United Kingdom was anything but united that month. It had been riven by a divisive referendum campaign. The common topic at the time was the move by a small number of right-wing zealots and little Englanders to pull the nation away from its close ties with the European Union. It had never been an issue; there were more important things to be done. Many of these prime movers were very wealthy people who disliked paying tax. For these tax dodgers, payment of the right amount of tax was for the little people. The associated referendum was a ploy brought about by the then prime minister, a shallow PR man, to try to quell unrest caused by these people in the Conservative Party.

A fellow Old Etonian became identified as a major player for the Leave campaign. It was a bit of a jolly jape to get at his schoolmate, and to help his attempts to become leader of the Conservative Party.

The snake-oil salesmen took advantage of the fact that of the ten most deprived areas in Northern Europe, nine were in the UK. Although the deprivation was entirely due to the policies of the Conservative Party over the years, certain mendacious individuals placed the blame at the feet of the European Union. They played on the inequality that divided Britain. They claimed that the divorce would be easy. They claimed that countries would rush to make trade deals. They hired a large red (Mercedes) bus on which a slogan was written about £350 million a week going to the National Health Service. It was a lie, spelled out in large letters, but had a large influence on the outcome of the vote. All sorts of rumours and fake news appeared on social media, including assertions that the EU had caused public lavatories to be closed, and cleansing operatives to snoop in

people's wheelie bins, as well as cucumbers and bananas having to be straight.

On the other hand, the campaign to stay in Europe was run as if winning were a forgone conclusion. The campaign was focused on all the negatives, such as loss of jobs, trade, and so on. Little attempt was made to show the European Union in a positive light. This gifted the charlatans an ideal opportunity to sell the sunlit uplands of Brexit, along with an undercurrent of nationalism for the Little Englander fighting off all those beastly foreigners. Some evoked the spirit of wartime, playing on the nostalgia for the nineteen-forties as portrayed in *Dad's Army*.

In Scotland the false promises were treated more sceptically. There was more recognition of the benefits of EU membership. The EU had had more of a role to play in developing the left-behind areas. One of these was the Region of Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil, which had benefitted massively from the reinstatement of the Great Central Main Line. If it had depended on the Westminster Government, the people of the Region would still be travelling on slow and unreliable buses along the A825 to the Central Belt in order to catch a train.

Corscadden had never forgotten the help it had received from the EU. The Great Central Line brought thousands of tonnes of southbound freight from ports in the far North which had since the nineteen sixties had to use totally inadequate roads, including the A825. The proposed motorway would have ploughed through the town, taking no less than ten percent of the town's area. Due to the EU, that never happened. In Kirkstoun Place, an EU flag had been set in the paviours as a token of thanks from the Chamber of Trade.

Wartime nostalgia was lost in Buchananshire and the neighbouring Kyle of Tonsil, as all the towns in the region had suffered grievous losses in both World Wars. In the Second

World War, several thousand men had been conscripted from this land-locked county and put on board the ships that saved Stalin's Russia from starvation and almost certain defeat. Three thousand of them never returned, drowned or frozen in the icy seas. Another three thousand men were lost in other actions. While commemorations of the Fallen were taken seriously, war-time re-enactment events were looked at askance. The regional council policy was that any event that evoked nostalgia for wartime should be discouraged.

In early April, the EU flag in Kirkstoun Place was sprayed over with a Union Flag. One man was arrested. He was found to be from Essex. He was fined heavily by the Justices of the Peace Court and ordered to pay towards the costs of cleaning the mess up. A union flag, not a Saltire!

A group from south of the Border supporting the Leave campaign did a tour of Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil. Visitors to Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil were always made welcome, but not this lot. They left each town rapidly.

It would not require much guesswork to know which way the Walker Tribe and its kin would vote. And the same was true of everyone else in Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil. Some, of course, would vote to leave, but few ever admitted it.

The vast majority of students in Edinburgh (and other university cities) would vote to remain in the EU. The right to live, work, and fall in love abroad was considered to be sacrosanct. Chris, Ewan, and Aidan knew the Saxony area of Germany well and were close friends with the Fischer family in Dringhausen. Of course, their friendship would survive the rupture that would follow a Leave vote.

The leader of an English nationalist party came up one day to Edinburgh to drum up support for the Leave cause. The crowds did not make him welcome. He ended up being besieged in a pub, where he was denied a consolation cigarette, until he was hustled away by the police.

While the Walker Family was unanimously in favour of Remain (including Grandad and Grandma Salway), the debate was causing all sorts of family arguments and quarrels elsewhere. In one or two cases, members of families were hardly talking to each other. There had even been threats that should a young person vote to remain, the parents or grandparents would not talk to them or even write them out of their wills. There was much upset and anxiety. Up in their eyrie in Marchmont, Aidy, Eejay, Chris, and Jordan spent a good number of hours comforting their anxious friends. And they, too, had anxious nights about the effect. Would Aidy, Eejay, and Jordan lose their support from the Erasmus scheme for their year abroad?

Some young people said they wouldn't vote. The boys would do their best to persuade them to do so. If they didn't like the result, they couldn't complain otherwise.

No, surely the British people would not be that stupid. Chris was not that sure. He knew how xenophobic the average Sowerlander was. If they went abroad at all, they were the type that expected the locals to speak in English, or their version of the English language which was a series of grunts, punctuated by obscenities. They wanted fish and chips. They would take large pallets of cans of lager. They would get blind drunk, and cause trouble. They were most offended if they were arrested and ended up in a foreign cop-shop. One or two were further put out by the fact that foreign coppers were not averse to meting out a good hiding.

Any foreigner who ventured into the Sowerland Conurbation was not made welcome. Nor, for that matter, was any Brit who did not communicate in the rather unpleasant local accent. Sensible tourists avoided Sowerland. Anyway, there was little of historical, artistic, or cultural interest.

While Sowerland was an extreme, there were many similar areas along the North Sea Coast, including the town where the townspeople arrested a monkey, a ship's mascot, the sole survivor after a French ship had sunk with all hands. The wretched animal was sentenced to death and duly hanged by the neck until such time as he was dead. The Germans referred to such people as *Insellaffen* (Island monkeys) and it seemed highly appropriate.

To be fair to the North Sea Coast, the South West English counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, and Dorset, with their legions of wealthy pensioners living in highly overpriced houses would vote to leave. They were wealthy enough to live in areas that evoked the xenophobic nostalgia for an island existence that stood alone against the beastly foreigner. Life was so much better in the old days, wasn't it?

Christian Salway was very glad that he had picked up the Strathcadden accent.

Certainly, Scotland would vote to remain. The British Prime Minister had persuaded many of the Scottish people who were minded to vote for independence in the previous referendum to vote to stay in the Union. He did this by assuring continued membership of the European Union. And the rest of the United Kingdom would vote to remain, wouldn't they?

Thursday June 23rd, 2016, arrived. Since they were at home, all the Walkers voted at St Lawrence Primary School. For

Ewan, it was the first time he had voted. Jordan voted in Keillor. A vote to remain would be assured in Corscadden, at least.

At half-past six the next morning, Friday 24th, Laura got up early. She needed to be in early to set up a training session for radiographers at the Strathcadden General Infirmary. The coffee bubbled down in the coffee machine. Upstairs she could hear Chris and Gemma getting up to go to work. The roar of *The Cloudburst* into *The Colossus* gave it away.

The coffee was down. Laura got up to put the radio on. She retuned it from the in-your-face pop music of Radio Cadden. The headlines were coming on, “The British People have narrowly voted to leave the European Union...”

Dazed, Laura stood motionless at the sink staring out into the garden. She could not take anything in. The coffee continued to pour into her mug, overflowing onto the draining board, and into the sink.