

A NOVELLA

THE MAGNAB
PRINCIPLE

R . D . N I X O N

The Macnab Principle

A prequel novella

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Part One

10th December 1987

The flat, spitting sound of the gunshot was almost lost in the snap of Duncan Wallace's collar as the wind stepped up a level. But the faltering shape in the sky told him his aim had been true; the grouse tumbled, graceless, to the ground, to be triumphantly borne back in the laughing mouth of Duncan's Gordon Setter.

'Good lad, Spark,' Duncan murmured, handing the bird to his underkeeper.

'Nice shot.' Alexander's voice lacked conviction as he lined up his own, but Duncan took the compliment; it *had* been a difficult shot in this wind, and he allowed himself a moment's satisfaction as he watched his underkeeper fasten the kill to his previous one.

A glance at his other three companions, ranged across the hillside, showed them eyeing their own totals with less satisfaction – particularly Will, standing at a conspicuous distance from the others. The five of them had been at the same school at roughly the same time; Rob and Duncan had always been close, as had Sandy and Mick, and the four of them had, from mildly rebellious boyhood, together enjoyed the freedoms that well-off family connections afforded.

Will Kilbride was a decent enough bloke too, but he was... superfluous, really. He'd started hanging around with them as they'd hit their teens, and had been tolerated well enough, but no-one noticed, or minded, if he wasn't there. Besides, he was new money, and it showed. For all that, Duncan quite liked him. He had a certain tenacity about the way he was determined to become part of this inner circle of Highlands royalty, and a bluntness of manner that appealed to Duncan's sense of devilry.

Anyway, today was the last day of the grouse season, and Duncan was feeling expansive. It was a time for goodwill, not elitism; for celebration, and perhaps a little well-earned gloating now, too, since the sun was dipping too low for the others to catch up.

He let Sandy take his shot, then broke his own gun for the last time. 'That's it, lads! Time to call it a day.'

'Are we stopping for a dram before we head back?' Rob asked, 'Bit of a wind-down?'

Duncan looked back along the path, to where the gillie's wooden hut nestled halfway down the hill by the fast-flowing river, overshadowed by trees so it was barely visible. There would be a paraffin lamp, camping chairs, and some half-assed attempt at whisky waiting in there... He pulled a face. 'Prefer a proper drink,' he said. 'What do you say, Mick, how's that home brew of yours? We're closer to yours here anywhere.'

His friend looked up at the lowering sky. 'Aye, okay,' he agreed. 'All back to mine, then.'

Duncan looked at Will, since none of the others did. 'Coming?'

Will shook his head, affecting a fairly convincing regretful look. 'I've got to pick up Donna from her granny's.'

Duncan and Rob exchanged knowing grins. Will had made no secret of the fact that, if he had to sit through Mick banging on about his family's prized gem collection once more, he'd nick them himself, and distribute them to all his most gauche aunts for Christmas. Little Donna Kilbride had probably just deprived her great aunts of some interesting gifts this year.

That thought led to Duncan's own daughter, and he scanned the hillside. 'Have you seen Sarah?' he asked Rob, who took his godfatherly duties seriously. 'I assume she's buggered off to that old cottage again.'

Rob nodded, swinging a brace of grouse over his shoulder. 'She sloped off at the start, as usual.'

'And she'll have spent the whole afternoon skulking in there, but will still take her beater's fee,' Duncan said, reluctantly impressed. Sarah was a one-off. Angry little miss sometimes, sweetest thing ever at others, but at all times she had her eye on any prize that offered itself. He could hardly reprimand her; she was just a chip off the old block after all. It was just that, at sixteen, it was becoming less "cute" and more problematic.

Will set off back to Duncan's house to pick up his car. The four remaining friends put their guns and birds in the back of Mick's Land Rover, and Mick let down the tail gate so Spark could scramble in next to his own dogs. The walk took only around ten minutes from this end of Duncan's land to the neighbouring Drumnacoille, locally known as the Spence estate, and they were soon in Mick's porch, peeling off coats and easing off boots.

'Get that moonshine going, Mick,' Duncan urged, rubbing his hand in anticipation.

'You keep calling it that,' Rob warned him, 'and that's exactly what he'll give you one of these days.'

They settled into the two deep-seated sofas on either side of the fire, and for a while all was quiet contentment, but for the sounds of Mick's two kids charging around like bull elephants upstairs. Duncan heard them laughing, and wondered again if he and Mary had been wrong in deciding to stop at one; perhaps a sibling or two might have calmed Sarah a bit. Too late now though. He put it from his mind, accepting the tumbler of vintage Drumnacoille whisky from Mick's butler with a deep sigh of contentment.

'This is the stuff.'

Mick patted the table at his side. 'Good man, Rafe. Leave the bottle.'

‘Here’s to another good season,’ Duncan said, raising his glass. The look that passed between the other three did not escape him, and he grinned. ‘Some better than others, of course.’

‘Here’s to you, ya bastard!’ Rob lifted his own glass, and Mick and Sandy followed suit just as a shout and a thump drifted down from the room above.

‘Keep it down!’ Mick bellowed at the ceiling, and shook his head at the others. ‘Nearly the end of Christmas term,’ he explained. ‘They’ve got the bug.’

‘Ah, leave them be,’ Sandy said, with all the indulgence of the happily childless, ‘it’s nice to hear.’

Alright for him, Duncan thought sourly. When Sandy went home tonight, to the grandest pile of them all, it’d be to blissful peace and quiet; Duncan was already on edge, thinking of Sarah demanding unearned money, and knowing he’d give it to her, nevertheless. Sometimes he wondered why he was such a pushover.

‘So, you’re all free for Hogmanay then?’ he said, to deflect those unwelcome, morose thoughts. ‘Only three weeks to go now, and Mary’s wanting numbers.’

Rob and Sandy nodded, but Mick looked down at his glass. ‘I can’t, not this year.’

Duncan tightened up at once. ‘What do you mean, you can’t? You were all for it when I mentioned it.’

Sandy looked equally disappointed. ‘Bloody hell, Mick, I was counting on you to keep me out of the clutches of that nutty Martha what’s-her-name.’

‘Who?’ Duncan asked, momentarily distracted by that surprising nugget. ‘Not that it matters,’ he added, ‘if I don’t know who it is, you probably don’t need protecting from her at my party.’

‘Oh, he does,’ Rob said, laughing. ‘She’s that divorcée who’s moved into the old malthouse on the far side of Abergarry. Set her sights on Sandy right away, so his mother says. Your Mary will have invited her, Dunc, they all three go to the same book club.’

Mick finished his drink and picked up the decanter. ‘I don’t know how you’d think I could help.’

‘She knows you’re a widower,’ Sandy said, sitting forward earnestly, ‘and it won’t take more than an offer to show her the gems, to keep her glued to your side all night.’

Duncan and Rob exchanged another look, this time with rolled eyes, and Duncan looked pointedly at his watch. ‘Twenty minutes from the moment we walk in, to the first mention of the Spence jewels. I didn’t think it’d be you though, Sandy, you traitor.’

‘Oh aye?’ Mick gave them a mock scowl. ‘What are you trying to say?’

‘Good thing Will’s not here,’ Duncan pointed out, ‘you know what he’s like about your collection.’

‘No worse than he is about his sodding phone,’ Mick grumbled. ‘Waving it under our noses every chance he gets.’ He adopted an exaggeratedly high-pitched tone. ‘*Oh, look at my brand new Naawkia, it cost two grand, don’t-you-know?* Tossers. Who wants to carry a brick like that around with them, anyway? And I’d rather not be reachable twenty-four hours a day, thanks.’

Duncan forced a short laugh. ‘Forget him and his *Naawkia*. More to the point, why are you and your family snubbing the only Hogmanay knees-up worth attending?’

‘Hardly snubbing!’ Mick took a generous mouthful of his drink, and shook his head. ‘It can’t be helped though, sorry. We’ve been invited over to Inverness, to a family do.’

‘And that’s more important, is it?’ Duncan kept his tone teasing, but he still felt the sting of rejection.

Mick shrugged. ‘Sometimes family comes first. Especially when it’s the Spence side, after all I owe Claire’s family a lot.’

‘If you say so,’ Duncan said, putting his glass down. ‘I’m away to shake the snake.’ He didn’t want Mick to see he was genuinely annoyed, but it rankled that the man was still a slave to his deceased wife’s family, no matter what he’d been bequeathed in her will. Besides that, Mick was an influential bloke as well as a friend, and there were always plenty of opportunities to be had while whisky and good cheer were flowing; Duncan had already told several of his well-connected guests that they’d meet Mick at New Year, but he’d be lucky to see any commissions sealed only by a handshake, and a promise that would soon be broken. The bloody man would cost him in the hundreds of thousands, just because he felt he ought to snivel to his in-laws.

He wandered down the familiar passageway to the ground floor bathroom, listening to his friends’ voices as they began wrangling over who’d shot the most since August the twelfth – besides him, of course. The air was see-your-own-breath chilly down here, since tightwad Mick had a thing about turning on the radiators, and in a month or so, once winter really hit, the thin yellow curtains would be stuck to the inside of the single-glazed window for the duration. Duncan shivered as he closed the door, shutting out the sounds of chatter that drifted down from the sitting room; he’d have used one of the upstairs bathrooms instead, if it hadn’t meant listening to those boys raising the roof up there.

On the back of the low-level cistern, there was the usual dog-eared copy of Buchan’s *John Macnab*, its curling pages and almost white spine a testament to the hours Mick must have

spent in here avoiding family life. Most of the pages had been marked at some point, with the corner folded down to indicate Mick's place, and it looked as if he was mid-way through it yet again.

Duncan's resentment faded a little as he picked the book up and flicked through it, smiling as he remembered the earnest boy Mick had always been, practically forcing them all to read it during the holidays. Even at that young age he must have known, deep down, that they'd one day become the same bored, wealthy landowners as the protagonists in this book... And yet he was shunning the party of the year. Couldn't be that bored then. Duncan tossed the book back onto the cistern with a sigh, and attended to matters before his frozen equipment snapped off in his hand.

Back in the sitting room, the others had been given a taste of the newly bottled Drumnacoille 25, and Mick had apparently called down for some dinner. Duncan lit a cigarette, accepted his own glass of the new single malt, and felt his annoyance further melting away in the relaxed atmosphere. There was every chance Mick's plans would change, anyway, and he'd come to the party after all, so it was pointless putting off those businessmen who'd accepted his invitation; the frustration would be ten times worse.

The remainder of the evening passed without further mention of either the Wallace Hogmanay party, or, thankfully, the Spence collection, and, by the time Rob and Sandy, who lived nearest to one another, were ready to leave, the four of them were at least three sheets to the wind. The stovies they'd enjoyed were sitting warm in their stomachs, having been slow cooking for most of the day, and they'd moved from whisky to red wine, and then on to brandy.

Duncan was feeling replete and mellow, and had made up his mind to tell Sarah she'd not earned her beater's fee, so wouldn't be getting it. Time the wee spitfire learned the value of money... He felt braced, but not entirely convinced he was ready, and didn't join the other two as they stubbed out cigarettes, ready for the off.

'Can we get a lift home, Mick?' Sandy asked. 'We're not fit to drive.'

'Or to walk back to Dunc's for our own cars, even if we felt like risking it,' Rob added, patting his pockets to check he had his keys, fags, and lighter.

'You'll find Iain in the factor's office,' Mick said, 'he'll drop you home in the jeep.'

Duncan pointed to the clock. 'You might want to glance that way, before you go volunteering your staff without asking them. Again.'

Mick did so. ‘Bloody hell, that late, eh? Well, never mind, he leaves the office key under the water trough, and you’ll find his home number on the board. He’ll come out to you, no problem.’

‘I’m not ready to go yet,’ Duncan told the other two, ‘but I can walk back later, anyway. Your cars’ll be fine overnight where you left them.’

‘I don’t remember if I locked mine,’ Sandy said, levering himself, with evident reluctance, off the sofa.

‘Bloody hell, you’d better stop off and do it then,’ Duncan said drily. ‘What with all the marauding car thieves prowling Glenlowrie, it being only a twenty-minute drive off the main road and all.’

‘Sarky sod,’ Sandy grinned good-naturedly. ‘Fair enough, I’ll leave it.’

He and Rob took their leave, and tramped away across the yard to the factor’s office in search of their ride home, leaving Duncan and Mick to talk. As usual, their conversation centred on the relative difficulties involved in running a regular working estate like Glenlowrie, versus a tourist trap like Drumnacoille.

The distillery was the main draw here, but several of those executives Duncan wanted Mick to meet were interested in one of those newish kind of team-building events; shooting, fishing, and the like, living the life of the laird for a few days before they hustled off back to London, or Manchester, or wherever. They’d pay top whack for it, too, and Duncan felt it wouldn’t take a lot of persuasion to convince Mick that’s where the future lay. He brought the subject up, without telling Mick he’d already volunteered him, to gauge the response.

‘Sounds bloody awful,’ Mick opined, his eyes closed as he puffed contentedly at his cigar.

‘But you can see the financial benefit.’

‘Aye, I can see that.’

‘I mean, with a whisky-tasting thrown in, it couldn’t hurt the distillery side of the business either.’

‘I said I can see it. Doesn’t mean I’d want it for Drumnacoille.’

All Duncan could hope for, assuming Mick didn’t turn up at New Year after all, was that he’d be able to talk the execs into a meeting later in January, and use the intervening time to convince his friend he was sitting on a gold mine.

The evening crept on, and finally Duncan accepted the inevitable. Though, with luck and a following wind, Sarah would have gone out with her friends by now, and he could put off that particular confrontation until tomorrow.

‘I’d better start back,’ he said regretfully. ‘I’d not meant to leave it this late, and Mary’s not going to be happy.’

Mick eyed him for a moment, then seemed to make up his mind about something. ‘Before you go, I’ve got something to show you.’

Duncan looked at him in sleepy surprise. ‘Really? Why me and not the others?’

‘Because you’ll...’ Mick broke off, frowning, then shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I just think you’ll get it better than them. Even Sandy.’

Intrigued, Duncan followed in Mick’s slightly weaving wake, to the little office off the library. When Mick crouched by the safe and started punching in his familiar combination code, Duncan groaned.

‘Not those bloody Spence trinkets again!’

‘Just wait a minute.’

Duncan leaned on the desk, trying to curb his impatience. The walk home might not take long, but now he was aware of the time he felt it slipping away at a tantrum-inducing rate. Mary knew how to make a life miserable when she wanted to.

Mick rose again, clutching something wrapped in black silk. He laid it on the desk, and carefully folded back the covering until he’d exposed what lay within, then he wordlessly lifted his eyes to Duncan, who suppressed another impatient sigh, and shifted his attention to it.

‘Holy shit,’ he breathed, when his lips would move again. ‘What is it?’

‘An opal, from Lightning Ridge.’

‘Where?’

‘Australia. Stephen Spence, Claire’s grandfather, brought it back with him.’

Duncan squatted beside the desk, so his eyes were on a level with the stone. Big enough to fill the palm of his hand, though he daren’t touch it, its smooth surface had looked dull and opaque at first glance, but the second he’d moved, and the light hit it, its fierce beauty had him in its grip. He didn’t know how long he remained in that squatting position, mesmerised, but when he was able to move again a spear of pain shot up his thigh and into his hip, and he was quite prepared to believe he’d been there long enough for his youthful thirties to have become arthritic eighties... Time, which had been slipping away so fast before, had meant nothing while he gazed into the heart of that stone.

‘It’s called the Fury.’ Mick’s voice seemed to come from another room. Inconsequential.

It didn’t matter what the opal was called, but the more Duncan stared at it the more the name made sense. It was a glorious riot of colour, captured inside a dull black stone from the

other side of the world, but the warmth that flared every time he moved his eyes a fraction made him feel that the chaos could not only be controlled, but that the stone would reward him for it. He reached out a finger, only to find it brushing black silk as Mick folded the covering again.

‘Let me,’ he found himself whispering, and it sounded horribly like begging, even to his own ears. ‘Just for a second?’

‘No. You’ll smudge it.’ Mick picked up the opal and put it back into the safe. Now that he knew what that safe protected, Duncan wondered how he could be so stupid as to still be using his phone number as a combination.

‘I wanted to show it to you,’ Mick said, ‘that’s all. So you’d understand a little of why I’m still indebted to the Spence family.’

‘It *is* yours though?’ Duncan rose, feeling a new chill in his fingertips, so abruptly denied the warmth they had been offered.

‘Not technically, no. Claire’s grandmother gave it to Claire along with the collection, but this belongs solely to the boys. She doted on them.’

Duncan remembered the carefree yelling, and stampeding up and down the upstairs landing, and felt an unexpected, and disturbingly violent, surge of jealousy.

‘She died then, did she?’

‘Aye, a week ago. They’re holding a special memorial for her, that’s why I’ve had to change my Hogmanay plans.’

Duncan’s irritation twitched again, remembering that. ‘Do the boys know about this Fury?’

‘The wee one used to spend a lot of time with Granny Spence in her room, doing puzzles, after his mother died. I assume she’d have shown it him then. When they’re old enough, they’ll be told it’s theirs.’

‘Well, they’re good lads. They deserve it.’ Duncan heard the words coming from his own lips, and wondered how he could lie so smoothly; those kids couldn’t possibly appreciate the Fury the way he did. ‘You’re right though, I do, as you say, *get it.*’

‘I knew you would.’ Mick smiled. ‘You’ll be away now, then?’

Duncan nodded. The last traces of pleasant, drink-induced wooziness had vanished now, and all he wanted to do was get out into the clear night air and feel the wind on his face. He needed to think.

Part Two

New Year's Eve, 1987.

The downstairs rooms had been opened up, and the hallway of Glenlowrie House transformed into as close to a ballroom as the Wallaces could make it; the wilting Christmas greenery had been thrown out and replaced with fresh, glossy holly, artificially studded with berries where it fell short of perfection; two enormous Christmas trees, one at either end, twinkled with tiny white lights, and more lights were draped over the stags' heads that adorned the walls.

The Glenlowrie Hogmanay parties traditionally started in the late afternoon, and it was still early when Mary Wallace signalled for music, rearranged her red tartan sash, and swept everyone away from the dining table and into the makeshift ballroom.

Will Kilbride was around somewhere, but, contrary to his usual attempts to include the relative outsider, Duncan drew only Rob and Sandy into his office and poured them drinks.

'To absent friends,' he said, raising his glass. 'To Mick.'

'Mick,' Rob and Sandy echoed.

'You've forgiven him, then?' Rob asked after he'd drunk.

'Nope, he's made me look a proper fool tonight.' Duncan shrugged and sighed. 'Aye, of course I've forgiven the annoying little gobshite. He's still our friend.'

'I saw him yesterday,' Sandy put in. 'Took the boys' presents over. You know he asked his family to buy him a mobile phone for Christmas? A Cityman 1320, exactly like Will's.'

'No!' Duncan couldn't help laughing. 'The only thing that does surprise me is that he didn't buy it himself.'

'Probably didn't want to admit he wanted one,' Rob said. 'This way he can deny everything.'

'Turns out Will was telling the truth about what it cost, too,' Sandy went on. He put his glass down to dig around in his wallet. 'He gave me his number, asked me to share it with you.'

'To do what? Call him and tell him he's missing the party of the century?' Duncan shook his head. 'Serves him right!'

'It's not his fault,' Sandy said, predictably loyal. 'He's never missed one before.'

'And he won't miss one again,' Duncan said, with deliberate emphasis.

Rob eyed him suspiciously. 'Meaning?'

Duncan re-filled his glass, and offered a top-up to the others. ‘Meaning I think we need to teach him a friendly little lesson.’

Rob and Sandy looked at one another, then back at him. ‘Go on,’ Rob said, clearly interested, while Sandy just looked uncomfortable.

‘Is he staying overnight at that shindig he’s gone to?’

‘No, he’s got meetings first thing, he said he’ll be heading back soon after midnight.’

Duncan put down his glass. ‘Right, now don’t go interrupting, just hear me out.’

‘Sounds ominous,’ Sandy murmured.

‘Shut up!’ Rob and Duncan said in unison, but both were smiling.

Sandy grinned and held up his hands. ‘Fine! Stop beating around the bush and get on with it then!’

‘Okay. We’ve all read John Macnab?’

‘Aye,’ Sandy said, but Rob pursed his lips.

‘Remind me?’

‘The John Buchan story Mick was obsessed with, about the rich Scotsmen who were all feeling in a bit of a slump. You know, successful, but missing excitement. Three of them used the one name, and the fourth set up the prank, whereby he’d warn his neighbours that “John Macnab” was going to poach something from their estate: salmon, stag, that sort of thing, and then return it, without the owners even knowing they’d taken it to begin with. Then the others set about it.’

‘Ah yeah, I remember it now. There was a TV programme I think, a few years back.’

‘Right. So my idea is that we break into Mick’s place—’

‘No way!’ Sandy ignored Duncan’s raised eyebrow. ‘No breaking in,’ he said firmly.

‘Alright then, *gain entry*,’ Duncan amended. ‘The staff will all be off for Hogmanay. Thanks to Mick we know there’s an office key we can get hold of easily enough, and there’s sure to be spare house keys in there. So, we take it in turns to go in, and... just do something that’ll piss him off.’

‘Such as?’

‘Ah, I don’t know...’ Duncan waved a vague hand. ‘Maybe turn all his paintings upside-down, or strip the beds. Turn on all his TVs. Whatever you like.’

‘So, just a prank,’ Sandy pressed.

‘Like I said, he’s still a mate. Anyway, as soon as one gets back it’s the next bloke’s turn, and the last one to go leaves a note saying John Macnab did it, and lists what’s been done.’

It's still Mick's favourite book, you've all seen it in his bathroom. So he'll get the joke, and he'll know it was us.' He picked up his drink again. 'What do you say?'

Sandy frowned. 'If I remember the Macnab story correctly, there was *some* sportsmanship in it, since the landowners were told what would happen. They had a chance to stop him.'

'We're not stealing anything,' Duncan pointed out, 'just letting him know we're thinking of him, even though he can't be here.'

'Don't try to make it sound like we're doing him a favour!' Sandy protested, but Duncan could tell he was warming to the idea of the fun to be had.

'It'd keep you out of Martha what's-her-name's way,' Rob urged, nudging him. 'And if the first of us goes now we'd all be back well before midnight.'

Sandy looked from one to the other, then smiled. 'I like it,' he admitted.

'Good man!' Rob punched his shoulder. 'And it's a dry night too, so we won't get back here drenched, and have to answer a lot of awkward questions.'

'Who wants to go first?' Duncan asked.

Sandy still looked hesitant. 'Why can't we all go together?'

'Because the other two need to be able to cover. If we all vanish for more than a few minutes at a time it'll be harder to explain away.'

'True enough.' Sandy finished his own drink. 'Shall I fetch Will in?'

'No.' Duncan looked reflexively at the door, but it was still closed. 'Not this time. He won't get the joke, and he's greedy. God knows what he'd get up to in a place like Mick's.'

'Fair enough,' Rob said. 'Dunc, you go first, then you can't back out and drop us in it.'

'Oh, your lack of faith wounds me!' Duncan put down his empty glass and looked at his watch. 'Right, it's nearly seven. It'll take me a bit longer, since I'll have to get the key from the factor's office first, but I'll be no more than an hour and a half. That'll leave plenty of time for you two, at about an hour each.'

'What do we tell Mary if she asks where you are?'

Duncan shrugged, and plucked his woollen jacket from the back of his chair. 'You can tell her dinner has given me the runs.'

'Charming,' Rob grimaced. 'Go on then. I'll go next, just in case of delays, I'm first-foot this year, so I can't be late. Sandy can go last, and leave the note.'

Duncan took a slim torch from his desk drawer and slipped it into his pocket. 'Have fun, lads, but don't drink too much. No backing out allowed.'

It had been dry for a few days now, and the ground allowed plenty of short cuts that weren't always usable. Duncan chanced a few, and found himself approaching the back of Mick's house relatively unmuddied, and before he'd even broken a sweat. It squatted in its huge grounds in total darkness; most of the staff were probably pissing it up in Abergarry or Fort William tonight. Duncan grinned as he thought about what they'd return to tomorrow, there was no way Mick would bother to put it all straight in the small hours when he got back.

What *would* they return to though? It was time to give that some thought, but, as he picked his way across the grass by torchlight, he instead found himself thinking again about that breath-taking opal that Mick kept, criminally, locked away in his safe. It shouldn't be in there in the dark, it should be out where it could be seen.

But even as he thought this, Duncan felt a pinched, secret corner of his mind whispering, *no!* For however long he'd been lost in the Fury's depths, all thoughts of conflict with his daughter, and with Mick, and Mary, had vanished, and he'd felt utterly at peace. If he'd only been permitted to touch it, he was strangely sure he'd never have had that knock-down-drag-out screaming match he'd had with Sarah when he'd got home. It was all Mick's fault, for showing him a glimpse of the possibilities, and then hiding it again – the frustration had been immense, and it was biting again now.

Duncan moved confidently around to the front of the house, and, groping around beneath the stone water trough with his gloved hand, he quickly found the key. The factor's office was tidier than Duncan's own estate office had ever been, but then this estate's reputation was more for house parties than shooting ones... Not that there had been many of those since Mick's wife had died, either; she'd been the one to draw the visitors in, while Mick was happy in the background. He would often slope across to Glenlowrie to shoot Duncan's game instead, which was good for them both, since he paid well for his kills.

Duncan's frustration grew, as he realised there was no convenient house key hanging on the rack alongside those for the bothy and the logging shed. Now what? The minutes were ticking away, he couldn't go back now and say it was all off. He left the office and crunched across the gravel path that led around the side of the house, to the passageway that housed that poky little, ice-cold bathroom. They'd be able to replace a small, single-glazed pane in half an hour, and it *would* be more of a shock for Mick, to think he'd been broken into, after all. More value for time spent, it was simple business economics. Mick would get that if anyone would.

‘Sorry, Mick,’ he whispered a few minutes later, as the tinkle of glass echoed through the hallway on the other side of the door. He stuck his arm through the broken pane, and twisted the lock, stumbling a little as the door opened under his leaning weight.

Once inside he listened carefully, but it was clear there was no-one home, and after he’d kicked the broken glass aside, he hesitated in the hallway, still not sure what he could do that would piss Mick off as much as Mick had pissed him off. The fact that they’d been in the house would probably be enough, but where was the fun in that? It had no *finesse*.

His first stop was the bathroom, but this time it was only to fold down the corners of several pages of *John Macnab*, and straighten the one that indicated where Mick had got to in his most recent re-read. Small stuff, but it was amusing to think of his friend’s annoyance... it would most likely be the last thing he found, after everything else had been straightened, which made it funnier.

Satisfied, he made his way to the big front sitting room, with the vague idea of rearranging some furniture, and spotted the cut crystal decanter in its usual spot on the sideboard. He glanced at his watch; seven-forty-five. As long as he was back at Glenlowrie by eight-thirty, Rob would have plenty of time to come over and do this part, so that gave him almost half an hour before he had to leave. He poured a generous slug of Mick’s prized new whisky, and drank it off in one gulp, grinning to himself as he pictured the look on Mick’s face.

‘This here’s *sippin*’ whisky, you lousy sonofabitch,’ he told himself in the mirror, in an exaggerated drawl. He laughed at himself, then started to take knick-knacks off a small table in preparation for moving it, and noticed a framed photograph of Mick’s dead wife. A flash of guilt nearly stopped him, but it was eclipsed by the brightness of a much better idea. By the time Mick got this far, he’d already be thinking he’d been broken into, so why not go the whole way? He could take the prized Spence collection back to Glenlowrie, returning it, in the true spirit of the John Macnab prank, before Mick even realised it had gone.

He abandoned the sitting room, in favour of Mick’s office, and went straight to the safe, where he began to enter Mick’s phone number. Nothing. Damn! He sat back on his heels, frowning. Why would the man have felt the need to change the combination now, after all this time? The frown cleared almost immediately the question crossed his mind, replaced by cold realisation and a wholly unexpected, and sobering, anger. Did Mick think Duncan would come after that opal? Did he *really* think that? After all the years they’d known one another? Well fuck him. Fuck him, *and* that precious black stone of his.

But the memory of it kindled that need once again, just to see it. To touch it. He’d never have thought about stealing it before, but the thought that Mick believed he might have, was

enough to make him consider it now. Even if it were only for an hour. It would serve Mick right to think he'd lost everything, and he'd feel pretty shit when Duncan handed it back to him. He thought, too, of the look on Will's face when he later found out they'd done what he'd always joked about, but without him. Priceless.

So, this combination code. If not the phone number, then what? He tried to recall the date of Claire's birthday, but gave that up almost immediately; Mick wasn't the sentimental type, or he'd have used it before. He looked at his watch again; almost eight. He had to figure it out fast, or it'd be too late for Rob and Sandy...

Duncan straightened slightly. Sandy had Mick's new number, it had to be worth a try.

The irony came through loud and clear, as he found himself wishing there was a quicker way to get hold of Sandy than calling his own home and getting someone to find him, but he was halfway to the phone on Mick's desk, when he realised he couldn't risk Mary picking up and realising he wasn't at home. Frustration quashed his elation at the brilliance of his plan. It would have been perfect; prankish, but with just enough edge that Mick would know for sure it was because he'd embarrassed Duncan tonight, and cost him money.

But it could still happen. Sandy would stuff it up royally, out of pure nerves, and he'd probably argue about it for so long the moment would have passed, so Rob would just have to do it. Mick would still know Duncan was behind it, and, more importantly, why.

Duncan returned to the sitting room and spent the next ten minutes dragging pieces of furniture a few feet out of their usual positions, and, for good measure, he replaced the Drumnacoille 25 in the decanter with cheapo blended stuff from the kitchen. Then, with fifteen minutes in hand, he left through the same side door, and made his way back to Glenlowrie.

Walking into his own home was like stepping into a furnace. The heating was on high, and the crush of bodies was almost overpowering after the freshness of the outside air, and he realised with a groan, as he pushed through it all, that he hadn't arranged to meet Rob anywhere specific on his return.

'Good bash,' a voice yelled in his ear, and he turned to see William Kilbride, his arm around someone who definitely wasn't his wife.

'Martha,' the woman supplied, clearly interpreting his blank look as belonging to someone who cared. Duncan remembered: Martha What's-her-name, the gay divorcee. Will was evidently making the most of being allowed out alone, which was good news for Sandy, if not for the Kilbride marriage.

‘Seen Rob?’ he asked Will, ignoring the woman’s proffered hand.

Will jerked his head towards the back of the house. ‘Conservatory, I think, with Sandy.’

‘Thanks.’ Duncan turned to go, but spotted the cloud crossing Will’s face. He understood it, and while there was no time to worry about who was feeling left out of which gang now, he clasped Will’s arm in a show of comradeship.

‘I have a message for him. Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be five minutes.’ He belatedly smiled at What’s-her-name. ‘Nice to meet you. Mary’s talked about you.’

He left them slightly mollified, and found Rob and Sandy in the conservatory. He caught Rob’s eye above the crowd, and as Rob made to break away and begin his mission, Duncan pointed at Sandy too, and then towards his office.

‘What?’ Rob asked impatiently, as they joined him. ‘You’re cutting into my time.’

‘Sandy, give me Mick’s phone number, quick.’

‘He won’t want you calling him,’ Sandy said, fishing in his wallet again. ‘The Spences eat late, they’ll be in the middle—’

‘I’m not going to call him.’ Duncan took the piece of paper. ‘Why would I want to do that? Rob, I’m pretty sure the last four digits are the new combination for Mick’s safe. You need to grab the Spence collection, and—’

‘You can’t do that!’ Sandy breathed. ‘He’ll go mad!’

‘He won’t even know we did it, until we give it back. The safe will still be locked. He’ll think he’s had a break-in... Well, he will have, I suppose—’

‘You broke in?’ Rob interrupted. ‘You said we’d not be doing anything like that.’

‘Aye, well needs must, there was no key in the factor’s office. It was only the little window in—’

‘Bloody hell, Dunc!’ Sandy said, ‘this wasn’t what we agreed.’

‘Can I get a word in?’ Duncan rolled his eyes, and turned back to Rob. ‘Get the collection, and bring it back here, we’ll keep it safe until we hear from Mick.’

‘Why do you want to do this?’ Rob wanted to know. ‘Just to teach him to shut up about it? I mean, he already knows it pisses us all off, so it’s hardly necessary.’

‘The point of the Macnab story is to prove that they *can* do it. Same for me.’ Duncan grinned, and added, ‘The chances are he’ll blame Will, anyway, until we own up.’

‘Bonus,’ Rob agreed, relaxing into an answering smile. ‘Okay, I’ll do it.’

‘I don’t like it,’ Sandy said quietly. ‘Not the Spence stuff, anyway.’

‘How do you know? You’ve never seen it.’ Duncan gave him an exaggerated smile, complete with jazz hands, but Sandy still looked miserably unsure.

‘If my family get to hear *any* of this, my life won’t be worth living.’

Duncan began to wish he’d left Sandy on the outside, with Will. The man spent his entire life trying to live up to his family’s frankly frightening standards, it was the main reason he was still single; he appreciated spirited young women, but no-one with an ounce of gumption was prepared to surrender to the Broughtons’ ideals.

‘Your family won’t find out,’ Rob sighed. ‘Stop fannyng about, Dunc, and give me that phone number.’ He glanced at it, and shoved it into his pocket. ‘Right, which door do I use at Mick’s?’

‘The side door, by the back stairway. Pick up my canvas rucksack on your way out, it’s on the hook behind the oilskin.’ Duncan ruffled Sandy’s hair and put on a soothing voice. ‘Aw, don’t fret, little one, Mick’ll see the funny side once he gets the collection back.’

‘Piss off.’ Sandy punched him in the shoulder, but a reluctant grin was starting to surface. ‘If Mick goes off the deep end I’m blaming you.’

Duncan turned back to Rob. ‘When you get back, come straight in here, put the bag under the desk, and come and find me.’ He pulled a face. ‘I’ll probably be schmoozing some disappointed executives, trying to recover a bit of dignity.’

Part Three

‘So he’s not coming at all then?’

‘When *will* we be able to see him?’

‘You’re saying I’ve wasted a ten-hour journey, on New Year’s Eve...’

The complaints were wearing, and Duncan was growing weary of repeating the same platitudes, but he kept his smile firmly in place and managed to sound equally regretful each time.

‘I know, but there’s nothing he could do. Family emergency. He sends his deepest apologies, and hopes to fix something up in the next few weeks, if you’re still interested.’

He was speaking now to Andrew Silcott, the CEO of a sportswear company that was fast becoming one of the ones to watch. Silcott had travelled up from Kent on the understanding that he’d be introduced to Mick tonight, and Duncan assured him he’d be taken on a tour of Drumnacoille tomorrow, followed by an exclusive whisky tasting, including the new ’25. Of course then he’d have had to stay the night, by the end of which they’d all have ended up winners.

‘In the next few weeks, *if I’m interested?*’ Silcott repeated slowly. ‘Wallace, it’s a day’s travel either side. That’s four days that a two-minute phone call could have saved me. I’ve left my own celebrations, and my family, and spent a *hell* of a lot of money getting here. Do you have any notion of the cost of hotels over Hogmanay?’

‘I do understand,’ Duncan said smoothly, making sure he sounded suitably sympathetic, but without the contrition that might indicate he was at fault. ‘Believe me, I’m as disappointed as you are. Mick’s a great friend, and I was looking forward to introducing you.’

‘Ah, there you are, Dunc.’ Will appeared at his elbow, minus Martha what’s-her-name now, and held out his hand to Silcott. ‘Pleased to meet you, Mr Silcott, I’m William Kilbride.’

They shook, and Silcott looked ready to resume his complaint when Will spoke up again. ‘I gather you’d hoped to visit Drumnacoille while you were here?’

‘I had, yes.’

‘Rotten shame. I thought Duncan here would have called to let you know.’

Duncan tightened up, and tried to send a *shut-the-fuck-up* signal with his eyes, but he kept his tone even. ‘It *was* a bit short notice, Will.’

‘Three weeks?’ Will shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t have said so, but you know best.’

‘Three weeks?’ Silcott repeated, his eyebrows lowering as he looked back at Duncan.
‘You said it was sudden.’

‘Oh!’ Will said smoothly, ‘yes, of course, I was mistaken.’

But Duncan saw the glint in his eyes and, for the first time ever, wanted to punch him.
Hard. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing.

‘Actually,’ he said instead, with a kindly smile, ‘though I don’t expect him to have told *you*, Mr Kilbride, but he’d cancelled the plans you’re talking about, in favour of this party. He fully intended to come, as he does every year, being such a close family friend.’

‘I see.’ Will turned back to Silcott. ‘Anyway, since you’re here now, I know an excellent estate a little farther down the glen. It’s a bit smaller, but at least the laird’s here tonight. In fact, why don’t you come and have a chat? I’m sure he’d be happy to discuss your needs, to save you making the trip all over again. I know for a fact that he’s open to the idea of executive...’

The friendly chatter faded into the music as Will led Silcott away, and Duncan watched thousands of pounds in commission vanish into the crowd. What the hell was that sod up to? They were supposed to be friends; Duncan was the best mate he had, for crying out loud!

He rubbed his forehead. Word would get out fast; people would be starting to say he was unreliable, couldn’t deliver on a promise, and wasn’t to be trusted in matters of business. He’d gone to all the trouble of contacting them, and stoking their interest in the Scottish estate team-building idea, only to have them drop like ripe apples into the waiting hands of William Kilbride.

He caught Sandy’s arm as he passed on his way to the buffet table. ‘What’s up with Will, tonight? Why’s he so intent on sabotaging my business?’

‘Is he?’ Sandy looked around. ‘I don’t know why he would.’

‘Really?’ Duncan frowned. ‘You’re looking a wee bit shifty, if I may say so.’

‘Just looking for Rob, nervous to get going. Isn’t he back yet?’

‘He’s barely been gone twenty minutes,’ Duncan pointed out, with rising impatience.
‘Look, I’ve still got one or two people to see, why don’t you come over and back me up? Your family connections will make it harder for Will to put the boot in.’

‘I wouldn’t worry, he’s still busy with Silcott.’ Sandy side-stepped as Duncan’s daughter and her friends cut through the crowd searching for some kind of diversion, probably in the shape of the sons of Duncan’s acquaintances. Sarah was, like her friends, wearing too much make-up, and dressed like Madonna; what was her mother thinking, allowing that skimpy top that looked more like a corset? As he reprovingly followed her progress through the room,

Duncan caught sight of one of the few CEOs he'd not yet had chance to speak to, and grabbed Sandy's sleeve.

'Come on.'

But word had clearly got around, with the cold efficiency so often reserved for character assassination. The thin, nervy-looking man, unlikely head of a chain of hiking shops throughout the lowlands, had evidently caught sight of Duncan coming towards him, and he visibly braced himself. Not a good sign, and Duncan uttered a curse that was thankfully swallowed up in the music as Sandy slipped away with a sympathetic shrug.

Enough. Duncan just couldn't be bothered anymore tonight, and, if he were honest, he supposed he couldn't even blame Will for cashing in on it; he'd have done exactly the same. It was Mick's fault, no-one else's, and Duncan wished he could re-live punching his elbow through that little window in the side door at Drumnacoille – he'd enjoy it a lot more this time.

Around half an hour later he was relieved to see Rob Doohan's dark head bobbing in the crowd, searching for him. He caught Rob's attention and indicated the office, then hurried there to meet him, Sandy at his side, and this time he locked the door. Just in case.

'Got them!' Rob put the canvas rucksack on the desk. He looked both elated and a bit worried, and Sandy, predictably enough, voiced his own concern as he put his hand over the buckle, preventing Rob from opening it.

'We took them out of the house,' he said. 'Isn't that still stealing, even though we're planning to give them back?'

Duncan waved a dismissive hand. 'It's only Mick! And he's still got those two Eric Clapton CDs he walked off with last year, if we're talking about borrowing things without asking.'

But with the reality sitting in front of him, and in the bright light of the undecorated office, the festive air was dissipating, and he too felt the first creeping tendrils of trepidation; could it really be classed as a prank, purely because they knew the victim? If Mick was angry enough to press charges, they were all in the soup. He gently pushed Sandy's hand away from the rucksack, then loosened the buckle and lifted the flap.

Inside was a jumble of velvet boxes and loose chains, many of them tangled in one another, where a panicky Rob had pulled them from their neat compartments in the safe and thrust them all together, in his haste to be away. It was a glorious mess. And somewhere in amongst it lay the Fury... The need to reach in and search for it almost burned, but Duncan couldn't let either of these two know about it; he felt absolutely certain that sharing

knowledge of it would somehow diminish it, and too many people knew already. It stopped with him, it had to.

He flipped the top of the bag closed again and chewed at the inside of his lip for a minute, battling with his conscience. When he looked up to gauge the mood of his friends, he was struck once again by Sandy's inability to look at him properly.

'What is it?' he asked, nerves making him snappish. 'Come on, Sandy, you've been looking like a rabbit in headlights for an hour now, and it's your turn to head over to Mick's. You don't exactly look equipped for this.'

'It's only... I was talking to Will for a bit, earlier.'

'And?'

'And...' Sandy flushed dully. 'I might have told him what we were doing tonight.'

Duncan stared. 'You *what*?'

'Not the jewels,' Sandy rushed on. 'We didn't know about them at that point, it was when you were over there. We were just chatting, and he asked where you were. So... I told him.'

'Jesus!' Rob's voice rose, and he shot an exasperated look at Duncan. 'What the hell did you do that for?'

'I just said we were playing a wee joke on Mick, moving stuff about to freak him out a bit.'

'I'm guessing he wasn't best pleased to have been left out,' Duncan said, remembering how the man's brittle good humour had given way to blatant client-poaching. 'No wonder he was so pissed off earlier. Seriously, Sandy, you really are a prize pillock.' He dragged a deep breath in; at least that had taken the dilemma out of what to do next. 'Well then, we're just going to have to put these back,' he said, gesturing at the bag. 'We can't risk him telling Mick there as any malice involved. Which we all know he would, in his present mood.'

'Aye.' Rob nodded reluctantly. 'Right, Sandy, off you go.' He pushed the backpack across the desk, but Duncan stayed Sandy's hand when he reached for it.

'Wait a sec. I'm not giving up that easily.' He moved around to the business side of his desk, and took out his polaroid camera. 'We'll take a picture of it here, in the office, to prove what we did, and leave the photo in the safe.'

'Hah!' Rob smiled at last, and the tension eased. 'Brilliant!'

Sandy looked equally relieved. 'Perfect, Dunc.'

'And I'll go with Sandy to replace this lot,' Duncan added. He didn't need to explain his lack of faith in Sandy, but at the same time he didn't want to leave the poor bloke out; it wasn't his fault he was so paranoid.

‘Are we going to be in the photo?’ Rob asked. ‘What about you?’

‘You two can be in it, and he’ll know this is my office. That puts all three of us in the frame. Literally.’ He gestured to the other two to shuffle together. ‘Put the bag there, next to the photo of me and Mary. Open it first, you numpty!’

The photo taken, Duncan put it on the desk to dry while he re-fastened the buckle on the rucksack. Once again he felt the fading of that little burst of joy at the closeness of the Fury, but there was no help for it. And if he was especially nice to Mick from now on, he might persuade him to let him hold it next time.

He checked the time as he and Sandy slipped out through the back kitchen; they’d make it back in time for the countdown to midnight, but it might be tight if they wanted to be seen around before that. A snuffling at his side made him start, and look down.

‘Spark, home!’ He pointed, but the dog just looked up at him, no doubt awaiting the same kind of fun that usually occurred when his master left the house with a friend. Duncan sighed, and cupped his hands pretending to prepare to throw a ball, and Spark panted and dropped to his belly in anticipation. ‘Fetch!’

Duncan let the imaginary ball fly, and while Spark tore off into the dark, the two men hurriedly continued on their way. Their torches played over the uneven, rock-strewn half-path created by years of visiting the next-door estate. The wind was getting up now, December-cold gusts, that buffeted them and made it hard to hear each other, heightening the sense that each was alone out here. When they reached the Spence estate, Duncan noticed Sandy hanging back a little, and gestured impatiently.

‘Do you want to be part of this, or not?’

‘Of course I do!’

‘Well come on, then! Rob can only keep Mary at bay for so long, we need to get back.’

With Sandy trailing him, Duncan hurried around to the side door, and reached once more through the broken pane to release the catch. ‘I’ll put them back,’ he said, as they moved quickly down the short hallway, ‘you go and do whatever you were going to do.’

‘I hadn’t thought of anything,’ Sandy confessed. ‘What did you do?’

Duncan told him. ‘Why don’t you go upstairs and turn the telly on in Mick’s room?’ he suggested. ‘He hates Channel 4, so put that on. In fact, put them all on Channel 4.’ He stopped, one hand on the door to the main house. ‘Can you hear something?’

‘Like what?’

Duncan didn’t reply. He pulled open the door and stepped into Mick’s lobby, and his heart skipped sickeningly as he saw, through the fluted glass panelling either side of the front door,

the sweep of headlights on the carriage turn. Sandy had followed him, and shunted into him so he almost dropped the rucksack that dangled from his suddenly numb fingers.

‘Is it Mick?’ Sandy asked, breathless and panicked sounding.

‘How the hell should I know? It’s just lights! Here, hold this.’ He gave the rucksack to Sandy, and clicked off his torch and shoved it into his jacket pocket, then loosened his scarf, which suddenly felt restrictive and tight around his neck.

‘What do we do?’ Sandy whispered, as if Duncan had all the answers, and Duncan bit back an irritable response; it wasn’t as if he’d ever done this before either.

‘It must be him,’ he murmured instead. ‘Get back in there.’

He pushed Sandy back, and they slipped into the passage seconds before they heard the front door open. He clapped his hand over Sandy’s torch, which was sending violently trembling shadows dancing along the walls. ‘Turn it off, you twat!’

They stood in the dark, both trying to breathe normally, and Duncan strained to hear what was going on in the house. Mick was alone, that much was clear; there was no sound of his kids, or anyone else; he must have left them at the party and come back in a hurry. It crossed his mind that the game was up, and they should reveal themselves to Mick and admit what they’d done... It was still pretty funny, although it would have been better if Mick hadn’t come home early and spoiled it.

He was about to say as much to Sandy, when Mick spoke. For a moment Duncan thought he was talking to himself, but soon realised he was on his new mobile phone.

‘I’m in the house now. No, I probably shouldn’t have, but the front door was still locked, and I can’t see anyone...’ A pause, then, ‘Of course I called them! They’ll be here any minute.’

Duncan almost swore aloud, as Sandy clutched at his arm and whispered harshly, ‘Is he talking about the *police*?’

‘Who else?’ He felt his own insides churning, and could see why the characters in that Macnab book had gone to such lengths; this was the way to get the blood pumping, alright. But the police? That was another matter; if he’d worried about losing some lucrative commissions tonight, he could kiss goodbye to them forever once his name was blackened by an arrest. Even if it all came to nothing in the end. It was too risky.

He leaned close to Sandy’s ear and spoke calmly. ‘We’ll be fine, we’ve just got to get back over the Glenlowrie boundary before they arrive. Leave the bag, just go.’

It was pitch dark in the passageway, and as they started to shuffle back down towards the door, feeling the wind reaching through the broken glass, Duncan heard Mick finish his phone call.

‘Aye, cheers, Will. Appreciate this.’

Kilbride? ‘Shit!’ he whispered furiously to Sandy, who had reached the door now. ‘He’s only on the phone to Will!’

‘What?’

Duncan sensed Sandy turning to him in his dismay, but there was no time to speak now. And the time for silent caution was long past too; he heard the door at the other end of the passage open, and then Sandy had yanked open the door at their end and they were spilling out into the night. Duncan heard a shout, thanked fuck for darkness, and then he and Sandy were away.

A tiny bobbing light from Sandy’s torch showed them a few square inches in front of them, and at any moment Duncan expected to go sprawling on the stony ground, but he somehow kept his footing. More through luck than agility.

‘Go left,’ he gasped. Mick would still be able to see the faint torchlight, and Duncan didn’t want him to see it heading in the direction of Glenlowrie; they could make a circuit and turn back onto that path when they were safely out of sight.

Through the rush of the wind in his ears he heard another car somewhere behind him, and the faint light from its headlights briefly illuminated the night as it climbed the hill to the house; he heard Mick’s shout, but not the words... presumably he was telling the police which direction the burglars had taken, but they were increasing the safety zone with every passing minute.

The police car’s engine had died, and the muffled sound of slamming doors drove them both onward; ahead of him, Mick saw Sandy stumble, right himself, and keep going, and heard the sobbing of his friend’s breath in counterpoint to his own. But, as he followed Sandy over the low part of the wall that separated the Wallace Estate from the Spence, he realised that they were away, free... Once Mick found the bag in the passageway there wouldn’t even be a real crime to answer, bar a broken window. They’d done it! Exhilaration took over, and he began to laugh, but switched to a string of curses as his foot caught in a tussock and he had to flail to keep his balance.

‘Okay,’ he gasped, holding his side as a stitch sank into him. ‘Wait, wait...’ He stopped, but gradually the discomfort began to ease, and he took longer, slower breaths.

The smile was still on his face though, as he straightened, and each panting breath carried a short laugh with it; what a night! What a cure for boredom, and a satisfying way to show Mick he was annoyed. No harm done, a replacement window pane, and a story they'd all be sharing for the rest of their lives. He threw up his hands and let out a feeble, but heartfelt, cry of triumph.

'All hail, John Macnab!'

He'd found a new lease of life tonight, for sure, and all his annoyances with the various friends who'd pissed him off had blown away with the last blustery winds of 1987. Mick, Sandy, even Will, were all good blokes really; he was lucky to have them as friends.

Sandy came back towards him; Duncan could hear the scuffling footsteps in the grass, and saw the fading pinpoint of light from the dying torch. He patted his pockets until he found his own torch, and switched it on. Sandy flinched as the light swept upwards, and put one hand out to shield his eyes.

Duncan's smile froze as he looked at his friend's other hand. 'What the fuck, San?'

Sandy looked down, seeming surprised to see he still clutched the rucksack. 'I... I don't, I didn't—'

'I said *leave the bag!*'

'I didn't hear you!'

'Even if you didn't, surely you'd... *Jesus!*' Duncan struggled for the right words, but there were just too many of them. 'Christ on a bike!' he groaned at last. 'You do realise what you've done?' He looked around helplessly. 'We're going to have to get these back in the house now, without being seen.'

Sandy shuffled his feet and looked down. 'Do you think Mick's already checked?'

'It'll be the *first* thing he checked! And no note or photo, to say it was all a prank.' The photo was still sitting on his office desk, Duncan recalled, incriminating them all now, unless Rob had seen sense and moved it. He could only hope, but Rob had his brain switched on, at least, which was more than could be said for this other clothead.

'But Mick'll know, won't he?' Sandy sounded almost pleading. 'Since it was only us, I mean.'

'I shouldn't think for one minute Will would have told him who it was, that was in his house,' Duncan said, his voice grim. 'Not in his present mood. If he had, Mick would've brushed it all off as a joke right away, and not come rushing back.'

'But he'll drop the charges when he does find out, won't he?'

He might have, Duncan thought, *but I have a feeling taking the Fury was a step too far.* He kept that to himself, however. ‘Maybe,’ he allowed, ‘but if he takes it seriously he’s got real grounds to turn nasty, now we’ve taken the collection off his land. Whatever our motives are, we’re thieves now. We could *actually* go down for this, and Rob too, if they find the photograph. The very least we’ll get is a criminal record.’

‘God, my family...’ Sandy clutched at Duncan’s sleeve again. ‘*Shit*, Dunc! What are we going to do?’

Duncan gently disengaged the cold fingers. ‘Don’t panic! Just... give me a minute.’ He shone the torch around them, satisfied they weren’t being followed, and gauging their position. Away to their left he heard the waterfall that was the Linn of Glenlowrie, which meant directly ahead lay the river, and to their right, the road that snaked its way back down the mountain into Abergarry. He shone the torch at his watch: nearly eleven.

‘Right,’ he said at length. ‘Let’s not blow this out of proportion. We did something stupid, it went wrong. We’ve got to get these back into the house. Somewhere we can pretend they were, all along.’

‘Right. Where, then?’

‘One of the kids’ rooms, maybe, he’s not likely to have checked there.’ Duncan nodded as he thought it through. ‘Then we just need to show them to him, and convince him it was all just a bit of nonsense, Macnab-style. He’ll be fine, I’m sure, once he’s had a dram and time to cool down.’

‘And how long will that take?’

‘For Christ’s sake, stop talking as if I know all the answers!’ Duncan glared at him, though Sandy probably couldn’t see. ‘He’s more likely to listen to you than to anyone, you go back the longest out of all of us.’

‘That’s true.’ Sandy took a deep breath, and nodded. ‘I could tell him Will’s just been winding him up out of jealousy.’

‘Which is true,’ Duncan pointed out. ‘But he won’t listen to reason tonight.’

‘Why not? It’s only—’

‘I just...don’t think he will,’ Duncan finished lamely. ‘Look, he’s had the police out, he’s going to have to save face somehow, and he’s not going to want to get a reputation for crying wolf, just in case. Go back to the house for now, and let Rob know what’s happened. There might be questions from the police, and we need to have our story straight. The three of us have been playing poker in the office, okay?’

‘Right. I’ll make sure the photo’s gone, too,’ Sandy said, showing the first ounce of common sense Duncan had witnessed all evening.

‘Good. And don’t let anyone see you going in, whatever you do, or it’s tatties o’er the side. I’ll join you in a bit.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Give me that,’ Duncan said, taking the bag. ‘I’ll stash it, and once midnight’s done and out of the way we’ll meet up and work out how to get these bloody things back into the house.’ He looked around again. ‘The gillie’s hut, we’ll make our separate ways there by twelve-thirty. Don’t let *anyone* see you, especially not Will. He might not have told Mick it was us, but he’s still a risk; we’ll have to handle him with kid gloves from now on.’

‘I’m sorry about him,’ Sandy muttered, shivering as a gust of wind whipped his coat collar up around his ears. ‘I swear, I didn’t think it’d be a problem.’

‘It’s not,’ Duncan assured him, privately wondering if that was still true. He gripped the rucksack tightly as he watched Sandy pick his way carefully back towards the rough path, and remembered once again what lay inside, dark among the diamonds and emeralds. He itched to take it out right now, and shine his light onto it to release those shifting, fiery strands, but the possibility of dropping it somewhere in the dirt, and somehow losing it, filled him with a cold, sick feeling.

He wondered if it was worth hiking all the way up to the old crofter’s cottage, where Sarah so often spent her days, but there was no time; that place was up near the top of the waterfall, and he had to get back in time to clean his shoes and be present for the midnight celebrations. Instead he went to the gillie’s hut, and hid the rucksack there, as best he could beneath the pile of canvases they usually used to form rough shelters on shoots.

He checked the lamp, and hissed in annoyance at the dry, dusty sound when he shook the paraffin can. It would be hard to find any to bring with him later, either, without making a costly detour via the old byre where the tools now lived. He shone the dying torchlight onto the shelf, but it was too high up to see, and he fumbled the length of the shelf with blind fingers, breathing a sigh of relief as he touched the waxy ends of a cluster of candles. Something scuttled away beneath his questing fingertips, and he gave an involuntary shudder and pulled back, then seized the candles and put them on the table, along with the box of matches from beside the redundant paraffin lamp.

To save time later, he lit one, and dribbled three maddeningly slow blobs of wax on the top of the tea chest, then stood each candle firmly in place before switching back to the torch. Its light was growing even feebler now, and as he left the hut, he cast a glance back, as if

pulled by the wishes of a single black stone. He already knew there was no way those jewels were going back to Drumnacoille, it just remained to convince his partners in... yes, in crime.

The torch died just after he reached the path that would lead him back to his house. It flickered a few times, and he swore and smacked it into the palm of his hand, but it was no use. There were batteries in his desk drawer, he would have to remember to grab some before he made his way back, the others would just have to sort themselves out.

He pushed the torch into his pocket and peered through the darkness, trying to pinpoint the familiar shapes of the mountain range behind the estate, and after a minute he got his bearings. He felt ahead with one foot, to reassure himself he was on the path properly, and was about to set off again when behind him he heard someone clearing their throat, and a voice drifted out of the dark.

‘What *have* you been doing, Mr Wallace?’

Part Four

‘What did you get?’ Will came closer. It would have to be him, of all people, but what the hell was he doing out here?

‘Get? Nothing.’ Duncan recovered from the shock, with an effort, ‘it was just a joke. We rearranged some furniture, that’s all. Sandy put all the TV sets on, and I swapped the ’25 for some cooking whisky. That sort of thing.’ He could only see a vague silhouette behind him, and felt another pang of guilt at leaving Will out of things, so he went on, sounding deliberately defensive. ‘All a bit beneath you, really.’

‘Beneath me?’ The shadow came closer. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Well, it’s just schoolboy nonsense, isn’t it? No gain, just harmless fun. We knew you wouldn’t want to get involved. You haven’t even read the Buchan novel, have you?’

‘Oh, *that’s* why.’ But there was no belief in that voice.

Duncan didn’t want to pursue it, he was starting to feel vulnerable and cold now, and there was something about Will tonight that sounded more dangerous than annoying. ‘Have you got a torch?’ he asked instead.

‘No, I’ve been using the light from yours.’ Will sounded faintly amused now. ‘That’s how I know you’re lying about what you *didn’t* get.’

Duncan had been prepared to move off, but now he stilled. ‘How long have you been following?’

‘Since you and Sandy left the party, of course. Couldn’t hear much of what you were saying, thanks to the wind, but I’m not completely stupid either.’

‘You were at Mick’s? But he was talking to you on the—’

‘He didn’t know I was there, either. I called him after Sandy told me what you were up to, and told him I saw a light on at his place. That’s the beauty of the mobile telephone, my friend, you may mock them, but they have their uses. So, what’s in that bag you left back at the hut?’

‘Beats me why you didn’t just break the door down after I left,’ Duncan said, growing cross. ‘That’d suit your sense of drama, wouldn’t it?’

‘It was more important to follow you.’

‘Of course it was.’ He’d intended for it to sound scathing, but it came out weak-sounding, and something strange was happening to his skin. It seemed to be shrinking on his bones,

tightening, stopping the flow of blood to his brain. All he could think of was stopping Will Kilbride from seeing the Fury. From touching it. Maybe even taking it...

‘Well I’m not telling you,’ he said, calmly now, though it sounded as if someone else were speaking. ‘If you want to know, you’ll have to go and look.’ It was a desperate bluff, and he could only hope Will wouldn’t call it.

The shadow stopped moving from foot to foot, and shuffling around in the long grass. In the darkness the silence swelled, the wind hissed through the trees, and, somewhere in the distance, someone let off premature fireworks.

The sound seemed to galvanise Will, and Duncan watched the man’s outline shrink abruptly as he turned and walked back the way they’d come. His feet seemed to find the path easily enough, and Duncan’s own legs began working without conscious instruction, carrying him after the retreating shadow. His heart began to beat hard, as if he were running, but he was surprised to find he was only moving at a steady, brisk walking speed.

‘You’ll feel pretty stupid when you find a pair of my wellies and an old kagool,’ he called, but got no answer. He picked up his pace. ‘Mick won’t thank you for dragging him away from the Spences, for no reason!’

Now and again his feet knocked a tussock or slipped into a puddle, but he kept upright, and by the time he reached the place under the overhanging trees, where the gillie’s hut stood, his entire body felt disconnected, alien to him. His eyes, slightly more accustomed to the dark now that he’d been without the torchlight for a while, were able to pick out Will’s white hands reaching for the door of the hut.

He stepped forward and saw his own arm rise, his own hand outstretched, his own fingers close on Will’s shoulder. Will spun around, throwing up his arm and knocking Duncan’s hand away.

‘Get off me!’

‘You’re not having it,’ Duncan said, his voice still sounding faraway, but quite reasonable, he thought.

‘It? What’s *it*?’

‘Come away, Will,’ Duncan said, and now he was coming back into himself. The night came alive around him again, and he felt the chilly December wind lifting his hair and creeping beneath the cuffs of his coat. His skin expanded once more so it fit him properly, and he heard more fireworks exploding in the sky over Fort William. He turned instinctively to look, the boy in him unable to resist, and even as his eyes picked out the dying sparks drifting down over the town he heard the shed door rattle.

‘I said come away!’ He grabbed at Will, who turned, and pushed. Duncan stumbled backwards, his arms flailing for balance, and hadn’t even realised he’d fallen until the impact knocked the breath from his body. His teeth clacked together, and his head bounced off the ground, sending more fireworks flying across his vision.

After a brief, stunned moment, he struggled onto his elbows and peered through the dark, in time to see Will prise open the shed door. He knew he should have said something then, should have been honest. He should have told Will about the Spence collection... He could have left out all mention of the Fury, and instead brought the man into the group, promising him whatever he planned to promise Sandy and Rob. But all he could do was utter a wordless, almost anguished cry, that made Will turn to him in astonishment.

It was that look, that sudden understanding on Will’s face that there was something more going on than he’d thought, that propelled Duncan to his feet. He threw himself at his erstwhile friend, who, caught by surprise at the vehemence of the attack, stumbled against the side of the hut. Duncan seized him by the arm and the back of his coat, and spun him away from the shed, his own balance thrown off by the ease with which he was able to do it.

‘Dunc! Come on, man, what’s—’

‘It’s mine.’ The two words, punctuated by a short, sharp breath, sounded impossibly obsessive, even to Duncan, but it was too late now to try and lessen the impact of his reaction.

‘You’ve nicked the collection, haven’t you?’ Will said in wondering tones. ‘Fuck me, Dunc, you’ve actually *nicked* it!’

‘It was a joke,’ Duncan insisted, but Will laughed. Loudly, and with surprised admiration.

‘Show me,’ he said, losing all his former antagonism in the face of this revelation. ‘Mate, this is epic! I wish I’d thought of it.’

He turned towards the door again, but Duncan found the torch in his pocket and dragged it out. Before he realised what he was going to do, he whipped it around in an arc, ending with a hollow smacking sound, and an agonising impact that ran up his arm into his shoulder, and made him cry out.

His fingers spasmed and flung wide, and the torch tumbled to the ground, while in front of him Will Kilbride’s knees buckled, and he reached out to grasp the door jamb. ‘What?’ he muttered stupidly, his head drooping. Duncan knew there would be blood somewhere over his right ear, but he couldn’t see it, and now everything became blazingly clear and real again.

Will’s voice was thick and slurred. ‘You bastard.’

Before Duncan could say anything in return, Will lurched towards him and Duncan felt hot pain as fingers hooked into his cheeks and mouth, pulling his lips wide as Will's thumbs slipped between them.

He stumbled back, carrying Will with him, and they fell together, the impact mercifully jerking Will's hands from Duncan's face. Duncan balled his fists and drove them repeatedly upwards, but the thickness of Will's clothing rendered the blows ineffective. Will rose up over him, preparing to roll away, but Duncan grabbed at his coat and pulled him back, unable to risk letting him get far enough away to begin kicking. He lashed out with his other fist, getting a lucky blow beneath Will's chin.

Will faltered, and Duncan could smell the blood strongly now, as it streamed from Will's head down his cheek, and warm splashes fell on Duncan's forehead. Revolted, he twisted away, and with a desperate cry, he clasped his fists and drove them up into Will's groin. Will froze for a second before falling, groaning, onto his side.

Duncan scrambled free, and stood up. He blinked, confused, and backed away, breathing hard and with an apology on his lips; this was a *friend!* Not the best, and certainly no Rob Doohan, but a friend, nevertheless. What had he been thinking? He'd been in thrall to some ridiculous lump of black stone... This wasn't him, not anything like.

'Will, I'm sorry,' he said, when he could speak. 'I didn't mean, I thought you... Look, come in on it with us. I'll show you what we've got.'

There was no answer, and Duncan moved closer. 'Come on, I'm sorry.'

Will lay motionless, and Duncan's blood chilled. He knelt beside the prone form, and bent his head close to Will's face. He felt the faint stirring of breath on his skin, and closed his eyes in relief. But the relief was short-lived; this close, he could see Will's face was slick with blood, and more was matted in his hair. He'd gone too far. This much blood must surely make it attempted murder, and even if Mick eventually saw the funny side of tonight's activities, there was no way Will would. If he even survived.

Duncan sat back on his heels, his head lowered. He didn't know how long he'd stayed there before he looked up again, but the fireworks were growing more frequent now, and on that evidence alone it must be getting close to midnight. Will had not moved, and Duncan reluctantly accepted that he wasn't just stunned by the pain of that final blow; the effect of the head injury must have taken hold.

The night breathed. Beyond it, he heard the rushing of the river that sped by past the hut, and a dim and horrific thought began pushing insistently at the edges of his clouded mind.

The thought became clearer, and he fought against it, but with ever-weakening resolve. No solution he could think of was enough to banish it entirely, and he finally stopped trying. He rose to his feet again, but as he bent to take hold of Will's feet a familiar snuffling, growling sound came from just ahead, and he looked up to see Spark, busily licking the blood from the side of Will's head.

He tried to remonstrate with the dog, but instead a rush of dizziness and revulsion made him turn away and retch helplessly; the rich Hogmanay dinner, mingled with Mick's precious Drumnacoille '25, rushed up through him, stinging his nose and burning his throat, before splashing onto the grass, and his shoes. The smell rose, rank and sour, and he convulsed again, adding to the hot pool on the ground.

At last he felt the trembling subside, and he knew he had to do it now, before he let himself think about it any longer; if he did that he might just crawl away into the trees, curl up, and simply let everything go. He shooed Spark away, took a fresh hold of Will's feet, and pulled.

His burden slid horribly easily over the grass, but with every inch they covered Duncan waited for Will to come to his senses again. He half hoped for it, for anything that would stop him from carrying this sickening deed through to its conclusion. But nothing did. Will remained unconscious and unmoving. Spark hovered a few feet away, down on his belly, but his eyes following every move his master made, until Duncan stopped at the edge of the river, and, with his own eyes firmly shut, knelt down and rolled Will off the bank.

There wasn't even a significant splash to mark the moment; it was white water here, roaring over rocks and roots, on its way to the quieter spot below, where he and Will had often fished. Someone would find him there, see the head wound, assume he'd slipped and fallen in on his way home... There was no reason to suspect anything else.

Duncan remained on his knees for a while, thinking with renewed sorrow about little Donna, and the rest of Will's family, but when his knees started to ache with the coldness of the wet grass, he pushed himself to his feet and stood up. Just as he did so, fresh fireworks burst into the sky from the direction of the house. The real thing, this time, shooting upwards into the dense black, single silver threads that burst into riots of colour and sent sprays of stars across the vast empty canvas, welcoming a new year. One which Will Kilbride would never see.

God, what had he done? Fresh tears stung as another wave of disbelieving horror swept over him. The colours melted and swam in front of his blurred eyes, dying away only to be replaced by more, brighter, higher... he could hear the shrieks of his guests, followed by the

laughter as they mocked one another for their excitement, quickly drowned out by more hissing, crackling, and ear-splitting booms.

He twisted to look back at the shed, his eyes dragged there by a force even more powerful than the plunging white river that had pulled Will out of this grey and thankless life. Inside that plain wooden hut, more colour and beauty were contained within a hand-sized black rock, than in the whole of the skies tonight. And it was all his.

His terrified tears dried on his cheeks, leaving his skin salty and stiff, and a smile even touched his lips as he turned his back on the river and its grim passenger. He began once more to walk back up to the house, Spark trotting contentedly at his side. A tune found its way out into the cold night air, and it wasn't until he'd hummed the first few lines that Duncan realised what he was singing, and began again, this time with conviction.

‘Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind...’

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