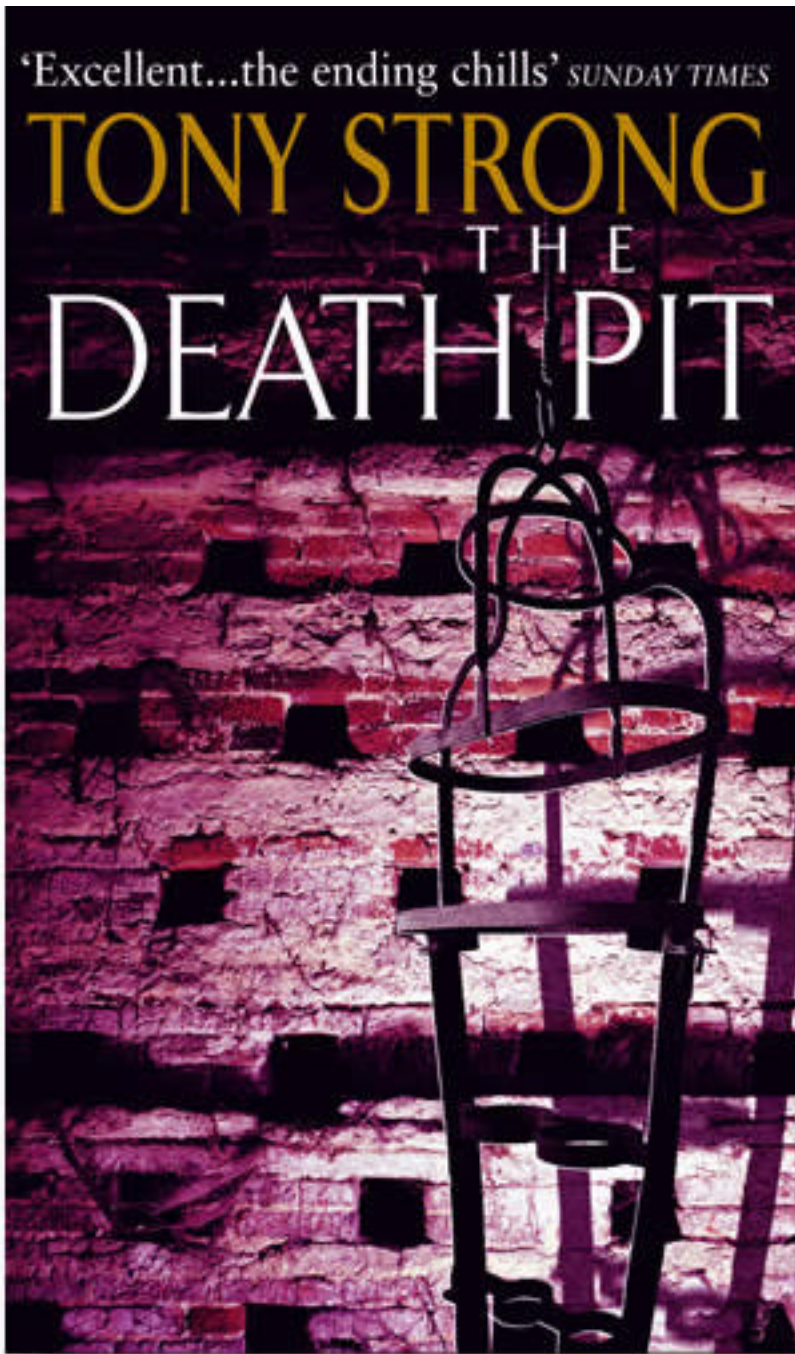


'Excellent...the ending chills' *SUNDAY TIMES*

TONY STRONG

THE
DEATH PIT



He that diggeth a pit shall fall in it

- Ecclesiastes 10:8

Prologue

He had already cut his headlights: now, as the Land Rover came over the crest of the hill, he reached out to the dash and cut his sidelights too. Above him the clouds were thin and patchy, cobwebbed with phosphorescence where the moon illuminated them from above. He didn't need his eyes in any case: the mud track down the mountainside was deeply rutted, and the ruts held the Land Rover's wheels like tramlines, twisting the steering wheel from side to side as if on some kind of ghostly autopilot.

He reached the flat ground and killed the engine, letting the car come to a bumpy halt in silence. There was a rifle lying on the seat next to him. Picking it up, he slid a round into the breech - his military training had conditioned him never to load a weapon until his vehicle had stopped moving - rested it on the window ledge, and looked through the night sight. For a moment he could see nothing, like peering through a microscope at a wriggling red haze of blood cells. Then, as he adjusted the focus, shapes became visible through the blood-coloured drizzle. The field in front of him was dotted with small, arced buildings, each one like a miniature Nissen hut, surrounded by low electric fences. Sounds of grunting and the movement of bodies came from the nearer ones: somewhere a piglet screamed as its mother lay on it, struggling to squeeze out from under the enormous, suffocating weight. The reek of animal shit caught on the night breeze, making his nostrils flare.

He swung the weapon through a hundred and eighty degrees, checking the area. A couple of sows, teetering absurdly on the high heels of their trotters, waddled up and down the electric fences. Somewhere a distant truck, on its

way to the dawn fish markets at Aberdeen or Inverness, blared its klaxon at a late-night motorist, careering drunkenly home.

John Hobbes leaned the rifle against the window, reached for the hip flask filled with whisky that had also lain ready on the seat beside him, and prepared to wait. The whisky was cask strength - 100% proof, not diluted down to the 70% or even less demanded by commercial bottlers - and he had to rest each mouthful in his throat, numbing it, before he could swallow without choking. To pass the time he rolled himself a cigarette, running his tongue sensuously down the edge of the paper, but the action was purely habitual. He couldn't smoke it: the scent might have alerted his prey. With a sigh he placed the finished cigarette carefully on the dashboard and prepared to roll another.

There were seven cigarettes on the Land Rover's dash and the flask was three-quarters empty when he heard a sound, halfway between a cough and a bark, coming from the field to his right. Instantly alert, he swung the rifle round and sighted through the night scope.

Through the red landscape moved a small red shape, slinking up the line of one of the electric fences. For a moment it stopped, turning its face towards the man in the vehicle and sniffing the air suspiciously, its eyes pale discs through the night sights. Then it was gone again. Hobbes swore under his breath - he hadn't had time to take a proper shot - and waited, his finger curled around the trigger, for the fox to reappear.

A few minutes later it was back in his field of vision. This time it was moving more slowly, its progress impeded by something small and white which it was carrying in its jaws. A piglet, Hobbes guessed. They were meant to be shut into the farrowing huts at night, but occasionally some were born after

the farmer had done her rounds: easy prey for a fox, or even for a crow or a large rat.

Hold breath, close left eye, squeeze trigger. The recoil jerked his shoulder and he saw the fox drop soundlessly. Excellent. With a sudden adrenaline rush of exhilaration he swung the door open and ran over to where the animal lay. He scanned the ground with his Maglite until he found it. As he had thought, it had been an good shot, just above the forelegs. With a grunt of satisfaction he took his military knife out of the sheath he always wore at his belt and started to hack at the fox's brush. The animal's warm blood gushed over his hands, cooling and coagulating. A good feeling. The brush would join the eleven others hanging outside his croft.

He rolled the body over to get at the brush better - there was an awkward joint he couldn't quite get the knife into - and the torch was on the ground now, because he was using both hands. The grass threw long shadows, so that for a moment he thought the white thing underneath the fox, the thing it had been carrying, really was a piglet, before he saw that it was too small. He had picked it up for a better look before he knew that something was wrong - not because the severed thing in his hand was unfamiliar: on the contrary, what was wrong was precisely that it was too familiar - but his brain was slower than his eyes and even with the beam of the Maglite it was a moment before he realised, before he could put a name to what it was. A hand, he thought dumbly, a girl's hand; the flaking scarlet nail varnish catching the torch beam in the few seconds before the whisky in his stomach rebelled and came snorting out through his nose and throat, hot now and acrid too, emptying in a steaming torrent onto the grass and the half-dismembered body of the fox.

16A Greencroft Gardens

West Hampstead

London NW6 4RJ

Mr Magnus McCulloch,

Babcock Castle,

Babcock,

Nr. Inverness.

Dear Mr McCulloch,

I have been given your name by Professor Jennifer Atlee of London University, to whom I believe you expressed an interest in making available for academic research certain family papers relating to your ancestor, Catherine McCulloch. She has suggested to me that they might make a suitable subject for a doctoral dissertation. Would this still be acceptable to you? I understand from Jennifer that you would like to see Catherine McCulloch's letters and other material from her trial published in some way. Obviously I cannot guarantee this but I believe there is a good chance that my thesis might find a publisher - I enclose a note to this effect from an editor at MoonWaves, a respected academic publisher which specialises in books on feminist and lesbian topics.

If you are still interested in this project, do you know of anywhere nearby where I could stay whilst I examine the documents? I expect this part of my

research to take at least a month, so it would need to be somewhere fairly cheap - a boarding house, rather than a hotel, would be ideal.

Yours sincerely,

Therese Williams M.A (Oxon) M.Litt.

*

Babcock,

April 24

Dear Therese,

Sounds good to me. And no need for a boarding house - I rent out rooms myself, and since we're out of season, you can take your pick. We can discuss terms when you get here.

Give me a ring when you're coming, and I'll collect you from Inverness.

There's a good sleeper service from Euston - leaves around midnight.

Regards,

Magnus McCulloch

Part One

One

The woman who stepped shivering off the train onto Platform Two of Inverness railway station was in her late twenties. Her hair - a mop of black ringlets, dishevelled by sleep - had been pulled back roughly and stuffed through an elastic tie. The suitcases and backpack she was manoeuvring onto the platform were evidently heavy: her arms shook as she picked them up and staggered towards the ticket barrier. A small knot of people had gathered there, some holding cards on which were scribbled the names of those they were meeting, and she scanned them slowly.

"Therese Williams?"

She turned. The question had come from a man of about forty five or so, wearing jeans and a waxed jacket.

"Yes. You must be Mr. McCulloch."

"Magnus, please." He offered his hand and she put down the cases to shake it.

"And most people call me Terry." She spoke politely enough; but her handshake, he noticed, was listless and brief, as if she did not care to touch him for longer than was absolutely necessary.

"Pleased to meet you, Terry. Here, let me." He took one of the cases and swore jovially in a soft Scottish accent. "Jesus! Feels like you've packed an entire wardrobe in here."

"They're books," she said flatly. "For my research."

"Oh, of course. Anyway, the car's out here."

Slightly taken aback by the coolness of her manner, he led her to an old Land Rover, parked on a double yellow just outside the station. Rain pattered softly on the canvas roof. She shivered again.

"Hop in, won't you?" he said, noticing. "I'll see to these." He started to hump her luggage into the back of the Land Rover.

"My coat's in one of the suitcases. I wasn't expecting - it wasn't raining in London."

"Oh, this isn't rain, lassie," he said cheerfully. "This is highland mist." She said nothing, picking up the second suitcase herself and hoisting it with some difficulty next to the first. He grabbed the backpack and was about to swing it in when she stopped him and said, "Careful. That's got my laptop in it."

"Rightio," he said. She winced as it landed with only slightly less force than the suitcases on the wet floor of the Land Rover.

As they put their seatbelts on he took the opportunity to take a closer look at her. A pretty enough little thing, but painfully thin. Only the faint curve of her breasts, defined by the strap of the seatbelt, gave a hint of sensuousness to the angular body. And, if first impressions were anything to go by, as quiet as a mouse. A shame: he'd been looking forward to some adult company, and this ice maiden didn't look as if she was going to be much fun.

He turned the key and pulled out into the traffic. "Good journey?" he asked conversationally.

"It was fine." In fact she had found being in a sleeping compartment with so many other bodies only feet away, privy to their dream-murmurs and their snores, their mutterings and - in the case of one young couple - their muffled love-making, strange and slightly unsettling. It brought back memories of school dormitories, and something more as well; some atavistic recollection of pre-civilised cave-dwelling. Or perhaps it was just that sleeper trains reminded her of wartime films. She'd even woken in the middle of the night and found that they were at Crewe, a name somehow deeply redolent

of old black-and-white movies. She had not in any case been sleeping well since her illness - she still couldn't bring herself to give it the blunt and somewhat melodramatic term her doctor used - and at Crewe someone had got on with a baby, which had cried intermittently for the rest of the journey. For the rest of the night Terry had lain awake, as she so often did these days, not angry or restless but simply numb, her eyes open but staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

"I've got some news on the publication side," she said. "A magazine called *Slant* are definitely interested in a series of pieces on Catherine."

"*Slant. Slant...* Don't think I've come across that."

"It's an academic magazine specialising in lesbian studies. It's got quite a small circulation."

"Really?" She felt him take his eyes off the road to glance at her. Was it her imagination, or was he suppressing a smile? But all he said was, "Babcock's a small place, Terry, but you'll find us a pretty broad-minded lot. We take people pretty much as we find them."

"What if they don't want to be found?" she murmured, half to herself.

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing."

A sudden downpour pelted the Land Rover with raindrops the size of gobstoppers. The stubby little windscreen wipers were soon rendered completely useless, and visibility shrank to a few yards. They were beyond the outskirts of Inverness now, the granite houses giving way to open countryside. Magnus didn't slow down. Terry - who knew perfectly well that to criticise a man's driving was tantamount to criticising his performance in bed, but who had a rather well-developed sense of her own safety - decided

she might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. "Could we slow down a bit until the storm's over?" she asked.

He glanced at the sky. "This isn't a storm. It's a shower."

"Slow *down*," she snapped.

"For Christ's sake, lassie," he muttered, "I'm only doing forty." But he reduced the Land Rover's speed a little.

"Thank you."

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said carefully, "but I would also prefer it if you didn't call me lassie."

He said nothing, though the Land Rover's speed increased again.

"This has nothing to do with feminism," Terry went on. "It's simply that to me, Lassie is the name of a small and rather repellent sheepdog."

Right, Magnus thought. Two can play at this game.

"You know, you're not the first English visitor we've had up here," he said conversationally.

"Oh yes?" she said indifferently.

"Have you ever heard of the Iron Lords, Ms Williams?"

She shrugged. "No."

"They were Englishmen who came up to smelt iron in the nineteenth century. They weren't allowed to chop down the oak forests in England for their furnaces, so they came and used ours. We had mountains of oak - literally: the mountains were covered with the stuff - but of course no one in London was going to worry about preserving *them*."

Some response seemed to be required of her. "I thought Scottish hills were covered in heather."

"They are now, Ms Williams. They are now. But three hundred years ago they were covered in forests. Beautiful oak forests, that had been there since the beginning of time. There weren't any forests in the valleys, of course, because that was where the farmers had their crofts." He paused expectantly.

"And what happened to the crofts?" she asked dutifully.

"The English landlords cleared them for sheep," Magnus said. "These were the same Englishmen who invented the kilt, incidentally. Not a lot of people know this, but that famous article of our national dress was actually provided by our oppressors, because they were too fucking mean to sew trousers for their workers."

Terry was rapidly getting a very bad feeling about this conversation.

"Oh, and then there was Queen Victoria. Another polite English visitor. She fell in love with the whole mist-and-mountain bullshit that Walter Scott dreamt up. You have heard of Walter Scott, I take it?"

"Of course. A hugely popular nineteenth century Romantic novelist. *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy*..."

"The fact that it was fiction didn't seem to matter to her," Magnus went on, ignoring her. "She decided to buy a castle and live the fantasy for herself. Only when she got here, she found the place a little more civilised she'd been led to expect. So she built a castle herself, the way she thought the Scots ought to have built them, and decreed that everyone on her estate should wear clan tartans, just like the savages in her favourite books. And where the Queen led, all the other English landlords followed. Imagine: it's like an American president building a wooden fort in Mayfair and deciding that from now on all Londoners have to wear woad. This isn't a country, Ms Williams, it's a fucking theme park. Scott Land, with two t's, as in Walter fucking Scott. So before you come up here with your English condescension,

just remember that we've had a lot of practice at being condescended to, eh? About five hundred years' worth."

There was a brief silence.

"What makes you think I'm being condescending?" she said, puzzled.

"Well... let's just say you seem less than delighted to be here," he said dryly.

"I see." She rubbed her hand over her face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to appear rude. It's just that..." she struggled to explain, but couldn't find the words. How could you describe a feeling of complete indifference to every human being, whatever their sex or nationality? "I didn't sleep very well on the train," she offered at last.

There was another long silence.

"Tell me," she said, "why did you invite me here if you hate the English so much? You knew what nationality I was."

He shrugged. "History's important to me."

"Evidently," she muttered.

"None of the Scottish universities were interested, and I want Catherine to get the attention she deserves." He glanced across at her. "What about you?" he said aggressively. "Why are you so interested in my ancestor?"

She saw no reason to be polite. "I'm not, especially. My previous thesis didn't work out, and I needed to find another one in a hurry, or I'll lose my grant. It's not that easy to find subjects for a doctoral dissertation - the idea is that you have to cover something that hasn't ever been done before. So a bunch of unpublished papers is ideal. Besides, there's a lot of interest in witchcraft trials at the moment - particularly hers."

"The gay angle?"

"Possibly," she conceded.

A month ago, all Terry had known about Catherine McCulloch was that she had been burnt as a witch some time towards the end of the seventeenth century, and that it had been suggested - by no less a person than Jennifer Atlee, Professor of Women's Studies at London University, in her groundbreaking book *Sisters of the Sabbat* - that her real crime was not witchcraft at all but lesbianism. Jennifer had found one of Catherine's prison letters in an obscure book published in the 1950's by a local historian, and drawn attention in her introduction to two key sentences - "*My only crime is not to have loved who or how as I should have been more wise*", and "*I neither need nor desire the attentions of men: my desires are other.*" The reviews had followed Jennifer's lead and focused on Catherine more than any of her other examples; partly, Terry suspected, because the eminent professor's prose style, whilst undoubtedly erudite, was also so dense as to be almost unreadable, and Catherine's story had the advantage of being at the very beginning of the volume.

Since then Catherine had become something of a folk hero to a certain sort of feminist academic. Naomi Wolf had mentioned her in an article, and Camille Paglia had included a brief biography in a television series. Like Mary Shelley or Sylvia Plath, hers was a name that could be annexed to many different shades of feminist opinion, if only because so little was really known about her.

"Anyway," Terry said, "I'm not convinced yet that Catherine was really what today we'd call gay."

She had his full attention now. "Why's that? The stuff in the letters seems clear enough to me."

"You've read them?"

He shook his head. "Only the odd snippet - I find her handwriting almost illegible. But what's been published already seems pretty conclusive."

"I'll need to look at all the material before I come to any conclusions, obviously. But you have to remember that even if she hadn't been extremely beautiful, as I understand she was, a single woman in control of a large estate would have had a lot of suitors vying for her hand. Perhaps she just got fed up with being courted. A bit like that film star - "I just want to be alone." She stopped, wondering if it was still Catherine she was talking about, or herself. "What about the other lassie? Catherine's companion?"

She shrugged. "Rich single women had unmarried companions in those days. It doesn't necessarily mean anything. One thing I will check, obviously, is whether there was any allegation of sexual impropriety at the trial."

Her attention was distracted by the scenery. Outside Inverness had been a valley like any other valley - flat fields of yellow rape and green pasture, pleasant but no different from the valleys she had left behind in England. Now, as the rain cleared, she saw they had left that landscape behind and were climbing alongside a mountain, its peak dark as charcoal. Rastafarian cattle and impossibly shaggy sheep dotted the lower slopes, and a shimmer of rainbows chased the dark rainclouds.

"There must be material like this closer to home, though," Magnus was saying.

"I would have thought a man with an interest in history would know the answer to that one."

"What do you mean?"

"In England we didn't have witchcraft trials. Well, one or two, but there were no outbreaks of mass hysteria like those you had in Scotland. In England torture was illegal and any charges had to be proven in the courts, in the

usual way." She spoke evenly, but there was a note in her voice that hadn't been there before. "In Scotland a woman, once accused, would be tortured until she named the other members of her so-called coven, who would then be tortured in turn. And then they would all be burnt alive. They used green wood, you know, so that the fires would burn more slowly and death would take longer. They even burnt pregnant women - there's one record of a girl who actually gave birth as she was burned, from the shock and the pain; they scooped up the baby and threw it back onto the flames to die with her. Until the Act of Union finally brought Scottish procedures in line with England's, over four thousand women died at the stake or in burning pitch barrels - and those are just the ones there are records of." She paused. "Still, I'm sure it was a great satisfaction to them to know that they died in the noble cause of national self-determination."

"Well, of course that was a long time ago," Magnus said defensively.

"So were - what were they called? - the Iron Lords."

"Touché," he admitted. She really wasn't so bad once you got her going, he decided. There was plenty of fire underneath the ice.

"Stop the car, please," Terry said suddenly.

"Sorry?"

"Stop the car," she hissed.

"Look, I didn't mean -"

"Let me out," she shouted at him. Turning to look at her, he saw that her face was covered in sweat. Puzzled, he pulled over to the side of the road.

"If you're feeling sick, the best thing's to -" he began. But she was already outside, bent double, sucking great mouthfuls of air into her lungs.

He waited patiently in the car until she got back in. "Better?"

She nodded, too exhausted to speak.

"Car sickness, was it?"

"No. Not exactly."

"What, then? Are you pregnant?"

"God, no." She sighed deeply. "It was a panic attack. I thought I was over them. Evidently not."

"What triggered it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. They just happen out of the blue." She managed a feeble smile, and he was amazed by the way it transformed her face.

"Perhaps I'm just not used to all this countryside."

He didn't ask her to explain further, for which she was grateful. "Come on, then. If we hurry we can get to Babcock before the storm."

"What storm?" she wondered. For the first time since they left Inverness, the skies in front of them were clear.

He pointed out of the driver's side window, and she ducked her head to see what he was indicating. For a moment she saw only mountains. Then she realised that one of the dark peaks was itself moving: not a mountain at all, but a black crag of cloud, sweeping inexorably along the valley.

"Now *that's* a storm," he said, as he put the Land Rover in gear.

They reached Babcock just as the heavens opened, so that Terry's impressions of the little village were glimpsed through a sheet of water. Raindrops as big as rocks hit the road and shattered into fragments. Under the metal roof of the Land Rover the din made conversation impossible. She would not in any case have wanted to distract Magnus from driving. It was suddenly so dark that Terry could see steam coming off the Land Rover's headlights, and flash floods had appeared at every dip and drain. She half-saw a street of granite-grey houses, a couple of shops and a pub, before he swung the car onto an unmade track between two sagging gateposts.

"Welcome to Babcock Castle," he said. "Home of the McCulloch family for five hundred years."

She saw the house in front of them, and almost laughed out loud. She'd been expecting - she didn't know what, exactly, but ever since she'd announced that she was off to stay in a castle her friend Mo had been teasing her about being served tea on the lawn by the butler and getting the chauffeur round with the Bentley for a spot of shopping. Terry hadn't quite gone that far - she knew that the upper classes weren't all stinking rich these days - but she'd certainly had a kind of platonic understanding of the word *castle*; something old, certainly, with a moat, and possibly a drawbridge: something big, too, with arrowslits in the walls and plenty of draughty rooms where one could whisper behind the arras and search for the ghost of Hamlet's father.

The building in front of her was a Victorian fantasy, quite small, but with a profusion of nineteenth-century turrets and decorative crenellations. The facade was dotted unevenly with sash windows, and the whole thing had been rendered in some kind of white plaster. It looked like a cross between a school sanatorium and something you'd put in a goldfish tank.

"It's very nice," Terry said doubtfully.

"It's hideous," Magnus said curtly. "Since you're wondering, it used to be quite a good-looking house before the English arrived."

Not that again. "You just said it had been in your family for centuries. How do the English come into it?"

"More of Queen Victoria's poisonous influence. We're just up the road from Balmoral here. Once Victoria had built her own hideous pastiche of what she imagined an old Scottish castle should look like, she encouraged everyone else to do the same. So all the local lairds took their perfectly authentic castles

and slapped these disgusting facades on them in a pathetic attempt to be fashionable. The style is called neo-baronial, in case you were wondering."

"Why don't you take it all off again?"

"I'd love to, but it would cost a fortune. There's no money in the estate now - we've gradually sold off everything except the fishing."

"Hence the need to take paying guests?"

"Exactly." He pulled up in front of an imposing porch. "Come on, let's get your cases in and you can come and meet the children."

Remembering the baby that had kept her awake half the night on the train, Terry said cautiously, "How many do you have?"

"Two. Flora's fifteen, Alex is seventeen." Oblivious to the rain, Magnus jumped out of the car, shouting. "Alex? Come and give us a hand, please."

"It's OK, I can manage." The shouting seemed to have had no effect anyway, other than to rouse a rather stooped and balding deerhound, which tottered lethargically to the front door to see what was going on.

"That's Dougal."

"Very neo-baronial."

"Named after the dog in the Magic Roundabout, actually. The kids used to love it when they were younger." Soaked, Terry picked up her laptop case - she certainly wasn't leaving that to the tender mercies of the McCullochs - and followed Magnus into the entrance hall.

"I take it they weren't so keen on Bambi," she muttered under her breath, looking around her.

The room was entirely lined with row upon row of severed deer heads. Most were stuffed, with huge glassy eyes and leathery black noses; but some were bleached down to their white skulls.

"And these are Boyle, Gallileo and Archimedes," he said, indicating the cats asleep on a chaise longue that had been roughly covered with a tartan rug. A fourth cat rushed in from the room beyond. "That's Newton."

"Why did you name them after scientists?" Terry asked.

"Because they're a law unto themselves."

"Boom boom," she muttered under her breath.

But though she preferred the bad jokes to the hostility she'd initially provoked in the car, Terry couldn't help feeling that both were, to some extent, play acting; a deliberate attempt on the part of her host to impose his own authority, and perhaps even his own agenda, on her work. Despite what he said about the importance of history, Magnus McCulloch clearly had his own reasons for getting Catherine McCulloch's papers edited. She wondered what on earth they were.

Two

"Thanks," Iain Pullen told the WPC who had driven him out from Inverness.

"I'll walk from here."

The WPC smiled. "No problem."

He pulled his knapsack and a portable CD player out of the back of the car and hurried along the rutted track towards the taped-off area he could see at the end of the field, squinting against the driving rain.

A casual passer-by might be forgiven for mistaking the scene ahead of him for an abandoned campsite or a rained-out fete. White tapes delineated a muddy car-parking area, and a path that led towards a collection of white canvas tents, a generator truck, and some portable toilets. The field had evidently had pigs on it recently: mounds of soggy ordure still littered the grubbed-up earth, and further up the field dozens of the animals were patrolling pens made out of two or three strands of electric fencing.

A uniformed constable stopped him as he approached the first of the tapes.

"No admittance, I'm afraid, sir."

"Iain Pullen. The archaeologist. Detective Superintendent Talbot's expecting me."

He waited, getting steadily wetter, while the constable went off to find the Senior Investigating Officer he would be working for over the next few weeks. After a few minutes he returned with a man of about fifty.

"Adrian Talbot," the older man said. "Thanks for coming."

They shook hands, Talbot regarding the newcomer curiously. He'd never worked with a forensic archaeologist before. Iain Pullen was young, about twenty five or so, and his pony tail unnerved the policeman a little, but he came highly recommended by one of the pathologists who'd examined the

body. Apparently Pullen had done good work on some skeletons that had been found during building work in Edinburgh.

"And this is Detective Inspector Nicky Heron," Talbot said, indicating a young woman who was coming briskly towards them with an umbrella. "Acting Crime Scene manager."

Together the three of them walked towards the largest of the canvas shelters. "I don't know how much you've been told," Talbot said, "but I'll tell you again anyway. The body - or rather, part of it - was discovered last Tuesday by a local gamekeeper, man by the name of Hobbes, who was out shooting foxes for the farmer. He shot one carrying off what turned out to be a human hand. Uniform came and searched at first light, and found the half-eaten body of a young IC1 female in a pit full of dead pigs."

"How did she die?"

"Cause of death was a broken neck. But the pattern of decomposition indicates pre-mortem lacerations around the back of the torso, the wrists, and, to a lesser extent, the genital area. The implication is that she was tied up and mutilated in some way before she died."

"Couldn't that have been the result of dragging the body across stony ground?" Iain asked. He looked around. "Not that it's stony here."

"I asked about that. The pathologist reckons post-mortem wounds, which wouldn't have bled as much, wouldn't have decomposed to the extent these have."

Iain nodded thoughtfully. "Was the hand gnawed off or severed?"

"Gnawed, presumably by the fox."

"And the pigs? How did they die?"

"Natural causes, mostly." Talbot grunted. "When I say a pit full of dead pigs, I mean very full. It's the farmer's death pit - where she chucks all the spare carcasses. There must be dozens of the bloody things in there."

"She? The farmer's a woman?"

"Yes. She's only a tenant, though - she rents a cottage and a couple of fields from the landowner."

"Why does she throw the dead pigs away? I thought the whole point was to turn them into bacon."

"I asked about that, too. Apparently animals that die of natural causes on the farm - diseases and so on - the slaughterhouses aren't allowed to accept. And of course there's all the stillbirths and piglets that get sat on by their mothers. So rather than have a mound of decomposing pork leaking into the water table, the Environment Agency requires all stock farmers to have a death pit, dug into non-porous soil and sealed with a lid. In this case she's covered it with a few sheets of corrugated iron, held down with breezeblocks. Not quite as per guidelines but," he shrugged, "we're a long way from any EA inspectors."

"I gather the corpse isn't *in situ* any more?"

"No. We took it to St. Benedict's for a PM. At the time there didn't seem any reason not to."

Pullen nodded. The removal of the body, though understandable in the circumstances, would make his job much harder.

"There was a rucksack buried alongside her with some clothes and personal effects in it - we assumed at first she might be a hitchhiker or a MisPer, but she was identified easily enough from a tattoo on her shoulder - luckily the fox hadn't got round to that bit. Donna Fairhead; twenty two years old; used to live locally, in a sort of hippie commune on the other side of Babcock. She

hadn't been seen for about six months - she'd packed her bags and left for India, according to the people she lived with. Our biggest problem is that we can't establish a date of death. But you probably know more about that part of it than I do."

Pullen nodded. "Decomposition happens at a different rate in a body once it's buried. Unless you can establish whether the body was buried straight after death, it's very hard to estimate when it died."

"So," Talbot said, "Do you think you can help us?"

Iain scratched his head. Despite the rain, the midges were biting already. "It's unlikely I'll be able to give you a specific time of death myself. We tend to talk in terms of bracketing a *terminus post quem* and a *terminus ante quem* - that's archaeology-speak for establishing a time when we can prove the body wasn't there, and a time when we can prove it was. But if the brackets are tight enough, the pathologist should be able to compare it with the forensic evidence to come up with something more accurate." A thought occurred to him. "The pigs - do they wear ear tags?"

Talbot peered around him at the fields. "Looks like it. Why?"

"if there are any records of when a particular pig died, and that pig is under the body, we'll establish a *terminus ante quem*. The *terminus post quem* will be a lot more difficult, though.

Talbot nodded. "Fair enough. I'll ask her. But as well establishing when Donna died, there's another reason for wanting the pit properly excavated. For all we know, she wasn't the only victim of this particular killer. We need to be absolutely sure there aren't any more human corpses lurking under the pigs. It's pretty hellish, I'm afraid - God knows what diseases are floating around in that lot. But we've got you an excavator." He gestured to a JCB that stood like a little way off, its digger curled over the cab like the tail of a giant

mechanical scorpion. "Can you operate one of those things? We can get you a driver if you need one."

"I can operate a JCB," Iain assured him. "But I doubt very much whether I'll need to."

Talbot looked at him anxiously. "Are you sure? Apart from anything else, time is of the essence."

Pullen opened his rucksack and pulled out a stainless steel bricklayer's trowel and a toothbrush. "I've got my tools here, thanks."

He caught the doubtful expression on Talbot's face and laughed. "There's a certain methodology to forensic excavation, Superintendent. Anything that disturbs the soil strata before we can record it, for example, is virtually unusable in court, so your JCB's out of the question."

"Some of these pigs weigh half a ton," the policeman warned him.

"I'll just have to get a few SOCO's to help me, then. We'll probably want to lift them out one by one with ropes."

Talbot sighed. "How long will it take you?"

"Depends. I should think you're looking at a couple of weeks for the excavation itself."

Talbot swore under his breath.

"But even before we start on that, I'll need to make an archaeological plan of the site - water courses, soil types, acidity, that kind of stuff. That could take a day or so." He gestured at the tent. "Is this the inner scene?"

Talbot nodded.

"I'd like to take a quick look while you're still here."

"Of course. The changing tent's over there."

Talbot and Heron waited while Pullen went to change into the sterile white overalls and overshoes that ensured the burial site, or inner crime scene as it

was now called, would remain uncontaminated by fibres from his clothing.

"Two bloody weeks," Talbot said despairingly. "There goes my budget."

"Why are we using this bloke, anyway, sir?"

"Him in particular, or why are we using an archaeologist?"

"Both."

"Forensic archaeology started after the Dennis Nilsen investigation. There were some photos in the press of coppers digging up his garden - "

"I remember that. Melrose Avenue, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Anyway, a couple of archaeologists wrote to the papers pointing out that they weren't doing it properly. Luckily Nilsen confessed, so CID never had the humiliation of having their work rubbished in court by an expert witness, but ever since there's been a standing order to bring in a forensic archaeologist when there's any excavating to be done. Hamilton's worked with our man before, seems to think he's all right."

Pullen returned, covered from head to toe in whites and with a breathing filter looped round his neck. His ponytail was tucked into the neck of his overalls, and he carried a spotlight in one hand.

"You'll be watching on the video?"

Talbot nodded. As an investigating officer he wasn't himself allowed into the inner crime scene, since he might find himself interviewing suspects who could claim cross-contamination if forensic evidence linked them to the site. A video monitor had been set up just outside the scene shelter, a long canvas hood protecting it from the rain. Heron wiped some drops off the screen with her sleeve, fiddled with the buttons, and the image came to life.

"Not the most pleasant dig I've worked on," Pullen said, looking at the monitor. Dead pigs lay curled up against each other in various states of decay. In some cases their intestines spilt messily onto their neighbours.

Access to the death pit was down a narrow taped-off path. Again, this was to limit the amount of disturbance to the site. Either side of the path was a mass of violets. Pullen paused and knelt down to examine them. Then he picked one and sniffed it appreciatively.

"Hello flowers, hello sky," Heron muttered in Talbot's ear. "What's he up to now?"

"Interesting," Pullen said, standing up and brushing earth off his knees. He put the flower carefully into one of his pockets.

He pushed aside the tent flaps and climbed down inside the scene shelter, stepping on something soft. Immediately, despite the mask, he almost gagged on the foul air. Shit, he thought: it was even worse than he'd anticipated. He might need an aqualung if he was going to be working down here for any length of time. He picked up the spotlight and played it over his surroundings.

The space he was in was perhaps twelve feet square, its sides sloping gently towards the bottom of the pit. It had been dug with a mechanical excavator: he could still see the tooth marks left by the JCB's bucket in the death pit's walls. One wall had recently been partially destroyed, and a six-foot-deep trench dug to allow access. This was where the police had themselves used a digger to get to the body.

Having come down this access trench himself, he was effectively underground now, looking up at what had once been the roof of the death pit. All around him were strewn the corpses of pigs, floppy in death, their long jaws stretched open. Most seemed to be adults, but dotted amongst them were tiny piglet corpses, filling in the spaces between the sows so that it resembled one perfectly-assembled jigsaw puzzle. He moved his feet slightly, and felt the corpse beneath him spring and shift as he did so.

Donna's body had been to one side, its position marked by a further series of tapes. He sighed. He had hoped to establish exactly where the fox had gained entrance, but it could only have been where the trench was.

Going back out to the trench, he walked along it, examining it closely. As well as the clean cuts made by the JCB, he could just make out a rougher-edged piece of digging bisecting it. There was a root sticking out of the soil, which he examined carefully. As he'd thought, it had been bitten rather than cut. He rummaged around until he found some spoor. He didn't know himself if it was a foxes', but a laboratory would be able to tell him. He bagged it carefully and took them back to where Talbot and Heron were watching him curiously. "We need to get this analysed," he said.

Talbot raised an eyebrow.

"If it's fox shit, and *if* the lab can date it, and *if* it contains traces of digested human flesh, it's a possible *terminus post quem*," he said mildly.

Talbot nodded slowly. "Good," he said.

"The other thing I need to know," Pullen said, "is exactly where the fox was shot."

"Over here," Heron said. He led them up the hill and into the pig fields proper. "Mind the electric fences," he warned. "She uses truck batteries. They carry a hell of a crack."

Pullen crouched down to examine the point Heron indicated, then looked up at the layout of the field. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"What is?"

He straightened up. "There's a whole science associated with what's called scatter patterning. Broadly speaking, once scavengers have access to a body they start by feasting on it where it lies. They eat the eyes, the intestines, and then the exposed surface tissue. Even foxes don't gnaw off bones before they

need to - but once they do, they carry them away. The longer the exposure to scavengers, the wider the radius in which remains are dispersed. For a fox to bring a hand this far, you're looking at - well, I'd have to check the literature, but I think it's of the order of two months. What we don't know in this case, because your JCB has destroyed the evidence, is whether or not the foxhole was an old one, in which case it had access to the corpse as soon as it was hidden, or whether it dug the hole after the body was put there. The other complicating factor is that any scattered remains inside these electric fences could have been eaten by the pigs themselves. We'll need to have a taskforce do a fingertip search of the whole area."

"Now hang on a minute," Heron said, flushing. "You're the expert witness, I'm the crime scene manager, and Superintendent Talbot is the man in charge. We'll be the ones to decide if and when a full scale search is called for."

"Is it really necessary?" Talbot said. "My budget..."

Pullen shrugged. "It's necessary now you've dug that trench."

Talbot thought for a moment. "OK," he said, "I'll organise it. But not today - the overtime would be stupid at a weekend. We'll do it next week. Anything else?"

"I'll want to talk to the farmer. I take it she's not a suspect?"

"Not so far as we know. She knew the victim by sight, but there doesn't seem to have been any cause for friction between them. That's it?"

"A soil map of the area. Available from any big map shop, or from the National Farmer's Union." He went to his knapsack and pulled out two hazel twigs. "I've got plenty to keep me occupied in the meantime."

Talbot nodded at the sticks. "Are those what I think they are?"

"Water bowsing rods. It's the quickest way of working out where the underground water courses are."

Behind him, Talbot distinctly heard Heron mutter an expletive.

"Oh, and I'll need some accommodation in Babcock. I can't waste three hours going back to Inverness every day."

"I'll organise it," Talbot promised. An idea struck him. "Tell you what, I'll see if you can billet with the farmer. Her cottage is the nearest house to here, and she might well be glad of the company now a body's been found on her farm."

He left Pullen to it and walked back to the car park with Heron. "Christ," he muttered as they passed a field in which a boar was energetically humping a disinterested sow. "Look at the balls on that."

"You mean the pig, or our expert witness, sir?" the woman beside him enquired icily.

"Oh, come on, Nicky. I know he's an arrogant young bastard but he clearly knows what he's talking about."

"Isn't this all a bit of a waste of time, though? Attractive young bit of skirt gets herself killed. Ten to one it's either the bloke who found her or a boyfriend.

What about that commune she was living in? Anything going on there?"

Talbot snorted. "Virtually everything. Toilets flushing all over the house as soon as we turned up. But they're all adamant that she left them six months ago, of her own accord. Their stories match up, so there's not much we can do for the moment."

"Perhaps they're all lying."

"Perhaps. Me, I think you might be closer with your other suggestion. The man who found her. By all accounts he's a bit of a nutter. One of these survivalist freaks. Subscribes to about three different gun magazines."

"We'll be having him in again, then?" Heron asked eagerly. Being a crime scene manager was a shit job at the best of times, but when you were stuck out here in a field it was unadulterated boredom. And the opportunities for

glory were absolutely nil. You didn't get on as a woman in the police service unless you pushed a bit.

"Later, Nicky. For this afternoon, you just concentrate on looking after the SOCO's and Mr Pullen, eh?"

All the same, when Talbot left the scene ten minutes later in his car and he looked back to see the young man pacing slowly up and down in the rain, holding the water divining rods out in front of him like some perambulating Buddha, he muttered "Christ Almighty!" to himself. If Nicky was right and Pullen was wasting their time, he didn't need a lab analysis to tell him that what he'd be up to his eyes in would be pure, grade A horseshit.

Three

From a window at the top of the house, Flora watched her father showing Terry round the outside of the house. "She's here," she called over her shoulder.

Alex didn't look up. A dead hare, its fur encrusted here and there with blood from the shotgun pellets that had killed it, lay stretched on its side on the table in front of him. He eased the blade of his scalpel into the scruff, just behind the shoulder, and pushed.

"Do you think she's pretty?" Flora asked.

"How would I know, doughbrain? I haven't seen her."

"Come and look, then."

He had the skin off the shoulders now, the strangely white dermis peeling away from the animal's limbs with a slight sucking noise, like shrink-wrap. Without it, the hare's bulk was revealed to be an illusion, its muscles scrawny as a greyhound's. He could see the holes made by the shotgun pellets more clearly now, each one mashing the fibres where it had penetrated the meat.

"She *is* quite pretty," Flora said, when he didn't move. "Quite thin. Not very nice clothes, though." She glanced back at her brother. "Do you have to do that in here? It stinks. There is a kitchen downstairs."

"It's a post-mortem, stupid, not a recipe." He glanced at her. "Why are you dressed like that, anyway?" His younger sister was wearing a t-shirt, stretched tight across her tiny breasts and exposing her midriff, and a pair of minuscule shorts. Clothes that might have been suitable for a sweaty club at two in the morning were wildly inappropriate for a chilly spring day in

Babcock: her arms and legs were blue with cold. "Hoping she'll fancy you?" he said witheringly.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know? She's a dyke. I heard Dad warning Tom." He turned his attention back to the hare. Just behind the stomach cavity, from which he'd earlier removed the guts, was an unfamiliar pouch. He cut it open. "Cool!" he breathed. The little sac was full of tiny foetuses, each one no more formed than the very tip of a fern-frond. Delicately he fished one out with the end of his scalpel and laid it on the table.

"He could still fancy her," she muttered.

"Who could?"

"Dad."

He shook his head, his attention still fixed on the tiny shape in front of him. Experimentally he drew the blade across it. He'd been hoping to see all the organs in miniature, like opening up a Russian doll, but either they hadn't formed yet or he needed a microscope: all he could make out were tiny swirls of different-coloured flesh. "What are you on about?" he muttered.

"Dad. Men like dykes, don't they?"

"What would you know about it?"

"I know there are lesbians in Knave," she said. He looked up quickly at that, and she smiled triumphantly. "I found it under your bed. Original hiding place, doughbrain."

He returned to the animal in front of him, his face impassive.

"I thought it was pretty neat, actually. Quite sexy," his sister said.

Alex said nothing.

"God, I'm so bored. Why don't you invite some friends over? Jack Leach is all right."

"He doesn't fancy you," Alex muttered.

"I'll tell Dad about the magazine."

"No you won't," he said, getting up and pushing her towards the door.

"I will."

"You won't, because if you do I'll tell him about you going out at night."

Flora looked at him guiltily. "What do you mean?"

"I've seen you. Slipping out when you think we're both asleep. Where do you go to, anyway? Meeting a secret lover?"

"Fuck off," she said. She tried to slip out of the door but he caught her wrist and held it. The scalpel was still in his other hand, and he rested the point against the blue-veined flesh of her forearm. A tiny ball-bearing of blood welled from the very tip.

"Where do you go?" he whispered. "Tell me."

"Nowhere," she said, twisting herself free and running out of the room. He smiled. After a moment he sat down again, placed the scalpel delicately on the hare's cloudy eye, and slid it gently under the cornea.

"I've put you in Catherine's room," Magnus said. "I thought it might help with the research."

"Thanks."

"It's the nicest room, as well," he said grudgingly. They were in the kitchen, a dark and comfortable room strewn with clothes, fishing rods, wellington boots and cats, all drying in front of the old Rayburn.

A man of about forty came in through the kitchen door, shaking the rain off himself like a dog. He was dressed from head to toe in tweed, from his deerstalker hat to the trousers he wore tucked into his socks. As he took

the hat off Terry saw that he had a crab-apple complexion and a shock of ginger hair, badly in need of a barber's attentions.

"This is Tom Teare. He looks after the fishing and what little estate we have left."

Terry extended her hand. "Pleased to meet you." Tom pressed it and muttered something in an accent so broad she could barely make out a word.

Magnus looked at his watch. "The children will have eaten already. Do you want anything?"

"Not right now. I'd just like to unpack and wash. The train was a bit primitive."

"Righto. Follow me and I'll give you the quick guided tour."

The house was larger, and older, than it had appeared on the outside. Magnus led her through a family sitting room next to the kitchen and into the main hall. A beautiful white stone staircase spiralled up through the house, flanked by ancestral portraits, ancient weaponry, and yet more deer heads.

"Mmm. Tartan wallpaper," Terry murmured. "Queen Victoria *would* have approved."

"Don't. I'd rip it down if I could, but it's actually quite valuable. Incidentally, this is how you can tell it's a real castle," Magnus said over his shoulder as he bounded up the stairs.

"Why's that?"

"In Scottish castles staircases always spiral to the right, so that a right-handed swordsman defending it has the advantage. Here, this is Catherine's bedroom."

He opened a door off the first landing and waited for her to enter. She whistled. It was quite a room - huge, and dominated by an old four-poster

bed hung with drapes of yet more tartan. But it was the portraits on the walls which drew her attention.

"Is that Catherine?" she asked.

"That's her. Painted the year before she was killed."

The picture showed a young, striking-looking woman dressed in black, her hair pushed up under a bonnet and a blue shawl draped over her shoulders. It was hard to put an exact age to her, because the clothes she wore were so unfamiliar, but Terry knew that she must have been in her late twenties. She had been pictured seated on a garden bench, feeding a dove, but the conventional pose was belied by a cool, almost imperious gaze directed at the viewer.

"One of my American guests pointed out that the eyes seem to follow you around the room," Magnus said.

"Oh, come on. All portraits do that. You'll be telling me she haunts the place next."

"Actually... in some of the rooms associated with her there *are* sudden unexplained changes in temperature."

"Magnus," Terry said, "save it for the tourists, eh? So you've got draughts. Big deal."

He did at least have the grace to look a little embarrassed. "Yes, well, the Americans do seem to like that sort of thing."

"And who's this?" Terry pointed to another, smaller portrait, hanging opposite Catherine's. It too was of a girl, younger and prettier than Catherine, her hair piled on her head in a profusion of ringlets.

"That's Anne de Courcy, Catherine's companion and presumed lover. Here, these'll interest you." Above a little desk were two framed documents. Magnus took them down and handed the first one to her.

"Ah," Terry said. "The famous letter."

She scanned it quickly. *My dearest Anne...*

"You can read her writing, then?"

"We're taught basic palaeography as part of our postgraduate course. It's not too difficult when you get the hang of it."

"I'm afraid her writing gets progressively worse as the letters go on."

"Really? I wonder why that is."

"Thumbscrews, probably," Magnus said with relish. "She was being tortured pretty regularly at the time the letters were being written. I should imagine it's quite hard to hold a pen in those circumstances."

"Oh. Of course."

The letter continued over the page. "You realise I'll have to take this out of its frame at some point?" she said.

"No problem. It unscrews at the back. Here, take a look at this." He handed her the second framed document. This one wasn't a letter: it appeared to be some kind of list. Puzzled, she started to read. *For twenty loads of peat: 40 shillings. For 6 bushels of coal: 24 shillings. For four tar barrels: 26 shillings, 8 pence. For fir and iron barrels: 16 shillings, 8 pence. For a stake and the dressing of it: 16 shillings. For 4 fathoms of rope: 4 shillings. For carrying the peat, coals and barrels to the hill: 8 shillings, 4 pence. To one Justice for the execution: 13 shillings, 4 pence. The whole, £5 8s 4d. Yr. obedient servant, Thos. Varney, executioner.*

"Jesus," she breathed. "It's a bill for burning her."

Magnus nodded. "It was sent to Duncan McCulloch, the cousin who inherited Babcock. My grandfather found it with some old papers in the library."

Terry put the bill down and glanced up at the portrait of Catherine. For the first time she began to realise that this was not just some abstract

academic exercise she was engaged in. Catherine had stood where she stood now, had breathed the same musty smells, had climbed the same stone staircase and slept in the same bed. Perhaps she had slept there with another woman, perhaps not. But she had suffered horribly for weeks, maybe months, before she was finally burnt on a dressed wooden stake, surrounded by tar barrels that had been heaped with coal and peat. She shivered.

Not wanting Magnus to see how spooked she was, she walked to the window. "Nice view," she said.

They were at the back of the house, looking out over farmland towards a dramatic peak which reared out of the valley a mile or so away. "Ben Dubh," Magnus said, pronouncing it *duth*. "The dark mountain. The peat contains phosphates that keep the grass that wonderful rich green."

"It's beautiful," Terry said truthfully.

Magnus pointed. "See that building just beyond the farm? That's Catherine's Tower."

In the distance Terry could just make out a round turret, standing on its own in a field of grass. "Why's it called that?"

"According to legend, it's where Catherine used to hold her witches' sabbats. Myself, I wondered if it was where she went to be alone with her lover. Away from gossiping servants."

"If Anne was her lover. What is it, anyway? Some kind of hunting lodge?"

"No, it's a doocot. Dovecot in English. Doves and venison were just about the only fresh meat they would have eaten up here in the winter." He hung the framed documents carefully back on the wall and went to the door. "I'd better let you unpack. When you've settled in I'll show you the library, where the other letters are."

"Thanks," she called after him. They seemed to have reached an uneasy truce, and so long as it continued she wasn't going to be the one to reopen hostilities.

She had started going off the rails three or four months ago. Nothing had precipitated it - indeed, it came at a time when she would have said that she was at last getting over the various traumas that had attended the break-up of her marriage and her flight from the postgraduate degree she had been studying for at Oxford. To begin with she had simply felt lethargic, to the point where she became unable to get up in the mornings: once up, activities that had once interested her no longer seemed worth the effort. After a week or so she went to a doctor who in the absence of any definable illness had diagnosed ME, the so-called yuppie flu, suggesting she investigate various homeopathic remedies. Terry realised he was just trying to get her out of his surgery but, unusually for her, she couldn't be bothered to have a fight about it.

The first panic attack came a few days later, in the supermarket. Suddenly, the simple act of choosing pasta overwhelmed her with its infinite, chaotic complexity. How to decide between hollow tubes of penne, plump cushions of ravioli, and others whose names she didn't even know, pasta in the shapes of shells and bowties and one which the packet informed her was inspired by the belly-buttons of Renaissance beauties? Egg pasta and wholemeal pasta, pasta made from durum wheat and pasta made from corn, pasta died black with the ink of squids; fresh pasta, dried pasta, pasta that could be cooked in only five minutes... looking up, she saw the shelves stretching away from her, each one requiring a thousand choices, a thousand decisions. Waves of anxiety sluiced through her bowels. For a moment she

thought she had food poisoning, then the anxiety turned to terror. Sheer terror. She had heard of panic attacks, of course. Panic: such a cosy little word. "I'm in a bit of a panic today." It was what you said when you'd lost your car keys or were running late for a seminar. It certainly didn't describe this numbing, screaming fear, this certainty that you were going to suffocate; here, now, this minute, choked by fear itself and unable to even breathe, much less cry out.

Somehow she had made it out of the shop and had got herself home. More than four hours later, Mo had found her in the kitchen, still sobbing and shaking.

"Christ Mo, I'm think I'm having a breakdown," she had wailed, clutching her friend for comfort.

"Of course you aren't," Mo had said reasonably. "You're just ill."

But the doctor, when he saw her again, had also used the breakdown word - albeit hedged around with plenty of maybes and medical caveats. He had referred her to a psychiatrist, who in turn had prescribed Prozac. Terry had read about Prozac: it was an all-purpose wonder drug for treating depression. Yet so far as she could tell, she wasn't in the least bit depressed. Numb, yes: disinterested, detached, listless; but no more depressed, she told him, than any sane person would be on discovering that they no longer cared about anything at all.

"Sane... *hmm*," the psychiatrist had said, polishing his glasses with the end of his tie. "That's not a word we use much, clinically. After all, one person in four experiences mental illness at some point in their lives."

"Good God," Terry said, horrified. "Do you mean I might be going mad?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" the psychiatrist said. Really, patients were so paranoid.

So she had left him and gone instead to her old friend Ann Byers, a research psychologist at Oxford. Ann had substituted therapy sessions for the Prozac. The only problem with therapy, Terry soon discovered, was that you were expected to have something to say. They spent hours sitting in almost total silence. Gradually, however, she found herself able to talk a little; and while there seemed to be no cure for the panic attacks, knowing that she had survived them in the past and would doubtless survive them in the future enabled her to confront them with less terror than previously.

She had abandoned her thesis, of course: or rather, it had abandoned her. Whatever mysterious quality in her brain had enabled her to pursue and grasp abstract concepts, to make connections between apparently unrelated intellectual ideas, had left her as suddenly and decisively as the muse was said to abandon a poet. She spent long hours crouched in front of her laptop, staring at the meaningless rows of words, only to switch to a computer game instead, and waste the day in shooting silly alien monsters. Now, as she slowly regained the ability to work, her friends looked around for something for her to do. Clearly, her old thesis was no longer an option. Quite apart from the difficulty of it, they felt that detective fiction was probably too sensational a subject for someone in Terry's delicate state of mind. But putting her studies on hold, even for a while, was also impossible. The rules stated categorically that a postgraduate had only four years in which to finish a thesis: after that, the grant was withdrawn and the student had to find their own means of support. The prospect of choosing a new career filled Terry with dread; yet, if she didn't find and complete a new thesis within twelve months, that was exactly what she'd have to do.

After talking to some colleagues, Ann Byers came up with a solution. Jennifer Atlee, Professor of Women's Studies at Birkbeck and the good friend of a good friend, knew of some letters that needed editing. The work would be fairly dull, but it certainly wouldn't be too much of an intellectual strain. All Terry would have to do was some basic historical research, followed by a scholarly edition with footnotes, cross-referencing and an index, and the faculty would be virtually obliged to give her a doctorate. Luckily she had done the standard post-graduate course on palaeography, or deciphering old manuscripts, so it all seemed relatively straightforward. Even so, it was another month before Terry wrote to Magnus, enquiring whether his ancestor's letters were still available.

In the meantime, Mo had decided it was time for Terry to start dating again. She found her what she described as the perfect woman: gentle, kind, intelligent and beautiful. And it was true: Terry did like Janet. It was just unfortunate that none of those were qualities that Terry found in the least erotic. Somewhere along the way, Terry's sexual circuits seemed to have been rewired in a way that Terry wasn't even sure she approved of. If she was honest, one of the reasons she had finally agreed to come to Scotland was that she didn't yet feel ready to confront the truth of all that.

Magnus found Tom brewing up some tea in the kitchen. "Well? What do you think?"

The farmer took his time before replying. "She's a jumpy wee thing," he grunted.

"Aye. I'd say she's tougher than she appears, though. And somewhat, ah, independent for our purposes."

Tom looked at him from under bushy eyebrows. "Will ye have any trouble?"

Magnus shook his head. "She'll do what we want," he said calmly.

"We'll just have to be careful, that's all."