

CHAPTER 1

Lammer Law

The woman was a streak of black against the browns and greens of the broad rounded hilltop. She stood under a heavy sky beside a small copse of birch. Staring northwards, she listened to the wind in the leaves. It was their last song before autumn cast them into the universe.

When she removed her bonnet, dark auburn hair flecked with grey fell down onto her shoulders. She let the breeze enliven her pallid face as she watched a small boat miles away on the Firth, far beneath her to the north. It was bound for Leith, having crossed the German Sea with a cargo from Amsterdam, she supposed. In her mind she saw a sailor on board thinking of his sweetheart in the Indies, a world away. She felt his loneliness as he stared on the grey sky and brown hills of Scotland. Her own daughters had always loved her stories. Their two faces came to her as they were when young girls. They had lived inside her body once, also. She had been able to protect them, then.

She looked over to the Bass Rock, a dark tooth protruding from the sea. It was where the conventiclers were imprisoned; rigid, self-righteous men. Her eyes moved to the cone-shaped Berwick Law where they burned witches long ago. In the far distance to the west was the sleeping lion of Arthur's Seat and the town of Edinburgh. She had not been there for years, not since before Alexander's death. Her eyes focused on a castle in the foreground, perhaps two miles to the north-east of where she stood, but a thousand feet beneath her. It was a fine structure, perhaps more of a great house than a fortified dwelling, for it had been substantially altered by the Earl during her lifetime. Tweeddale was the head of her husband's family, the Hays. But she did not think that he would be able to help her.

A few miles from the castle were the lineaments of her own world. How still and peaceful it appeared from here – the spire of a kirk, a few dwelling houses between the trees, the gables of Lammersheugh House where she had lived since her marriage, all those years before. The House was surrounded by gardens which they had planted together. It seemed like another world, or someone else's life. She saw him as she always did when she thought of him, or when someone spoke of him, walking in the garden in summer. The

image of his body sent a wave of excitement through her. The girls are playing at his feet. He takes one of them by the arms, Euphame, and lifts her off the ground. There are screams of delight. Then the image fades. His arm is round her waist in the lengthening shadows. The memory of the feel of him returns, the memory of happiness – real love, not just desire. They had known each other since they were children, although he was two years older. There had always been something between them. She had watched him standing beside his tall sister in the kirk. But she had not expected that he would choose her. She was the daughter of a decaying house. When he had gone to college in Edinburgh the heart was ripped from her life. The two long years he was in Europe were empty ones when she imagined he had found a rich foreign heiress. But he came back to her, as he had said he would.

She closed her eyes, luxuriating in the bliss of bygone years. It was as if they had lived in a storybook which was not real, a dream maybe. This was real life. She opened her eyes. Pain engulfed her like the tide on a lonely shore.

The vision of the garden was gone. She saw him lying in his winding sheet; pale, cold, but still beautiful. Now he would never return from across the water. And would she ever see him again? In her heart she believed that the minister and elders were wrong. There was still a chance that they might be reunited. She must believe that.

‘Grissell.’

For a moment she thought that he was calling her name, that he had come back to her. But in an instant despair returned. The voice was familiar. But it was not his. She did not turn in the direction it came from. The realisation of the present cut deep. She did not hate the voice, only the thought that it was not his. She imagined the small red heart beating inside her.

CHAPTER 2

A Round on Leith Links

Scougall was suffering from a cold. As he lowered his head to address the ball, his nose dripped onto the ground between his feet. He sniffed loudly before swinging the club. The ball shot off at a terrific speed, but was sliced. Following it in the air, he watched it bounce on the fairway about two hundred yards away, move violently to the right and come to rest in the rough.

‘Confound this cold!’ He had almost cursed. He chided himself. It was only a game, after all, the pursuit of leisure. It should not be taken too seriously, unlike work. He asked God for forgiveness. But he did love golf so much, the feeling he got from striking a good shot. Despite his diminutive stature, he could drive further than most men. He loved the sense of satisfaction it gave him, similar to completing a long instrument in the office. But, although he found it hard to admit, it was even more enjoyable to win.

Scougall was dressed in black breeches and jacket. The short white periwig on his head was a fashion accessory he had only recently added to his wardrobe and to which he was not yet accustomed. His pale face looked disconcerted as he stood back to let his partner play.

MacKenzie was a foot taller and a generation older than Scougall. Bending over to tee up his ball on the best spot, he smiled. ‘I may have a chance today, Davie. Only a slight one, but a chance.’ As he straightened his back, he groaned. An image of himself lying flat, unable to walk for a week, flashed through his mind. Like most tall men he suffered from bouts of back pain. He must try not to hit the ball too hard.

As he concentrated, his expression became deeply serious. Touching his periwig with his right hand, a golfing mannerism, he placed it beside his left on the handle. At the apex, the club stopped for just too long to give the swing fluency; it presented a staccato appearance which lacked the natural elegance of his young companion’s. MacKenzie was not a natural golfer like Scougall. Despite having played the game for fifty years he had never managed to improve a swing moulded as a child. Indeed he often joked that he had played his best golf as a twelve-year-old student in Aberdeen in 6 , the year the Scots signed the National League and Covenant, a foolish document if there ever was one. Interfering in the affairs of another nation was always a bad idea, leading to nothing but trouble.

The result on this occasion was a pleasing one. He made sound contact, launching the ball into a perfect parabola. It landed about a hundred and eighty yards away in the middle of the fairway.

The two men gathered their clubs. The weather was fine, the day possessing the freshness of autumn, the sky a glorious blue, the grass of Leith Links a lush green.

‘Is this not a day to treasure, Davie?’

‘It is a grand one, sir. I might appreciate it better if this cold would lift.’

‘Now, before I forget. I have been asked by Sir John Foulis of Ravelston and the Lord Clerk Register to make up a party,’ said MacKenzie. ‘I have told Sir John that I will bring a partner. I mentioned your name.’

‘I would be most honoured, sir.’ Scougall was thrilled to hear of an opportunity to show off his golfing skills in such exalted company.

‘Excellent. I may wager a pound or two on the result.’

‘I do not gamble, sir,’ Scougall said seriously.

‘I did not expect that you would, Davie. But you would not deny another man his pleasure?’

The conversation stopped when they reached MacKenzie’s ball. He addressed it with an iron, swung inelegantly and threw a large divot into the air. The ball came to rest about thirty yards away.

He swore angrily in Gaelic, before continuing in English: ‘The frustrations of golf! Always raising expectations only to crush them the next moment!’ He walked forward to play his third shot. ‘Have you received your invitation?’ he asked casually.

MacKenzie’s question lowered Scougall’s flagging spirits further. It was three months since he had heard the news of Elizabeth’s engagement to Seaforth’s brother, but it still caused a sinking feeling. He knew he had no right to feel jealous. After all, he was only her father’s clerk and of lower standing in society. She was the great-grand-daughter of MacKenzie of Kintail. But he had fantasised about a future with her.

‘I am most honoured, sir. I look forward to it very much,’

he lied. 'How do preparations proceed?'

'They go well, Davie. Of course Elizabeth takes great care with everything. The Earl and I are still negotiating about the tocher.'

Scougall was now addressing his ball, which was snugly encased in thick grass. It would be a challenging shot. He put Elizabeth to the back of his mind. After a couple of practice swings he played, but made heavy contact. The ball landed on the fairway a dozen yards away. He closed his eyes. This was most unlike him. He had not played so badly in years.

Before MacKenzie could return to the subject of his daughter's marriage, Scougall moved the conversation in another direction. 'I hear the execution is to take place tomorrow, sir.'

'Poor creature,' replied MacKenzie.

'But she is a witch. She has confessed to her crimes.'

'She is just an ignorant woman, Davie.'

'She has sold herself to Satan!' Scougall grew animated, forgetting his cold. 'Three confessing witches saw her at meetings with the Devil. Her magic caused the deaths of two women and a child. And...' he hesitated as his face reddened, 'she confessed to copulation with Satan.'

'Copulation with Satan!' MacKenzie replied mockingly. 'Well, well. I do not believe she is a witch, Davie.'

'But Satan, sir...'

'I have grave doubts about the crime of witchcraft. I believe it is nothing more than superstition. There are also a number of legal concerns. I assume you have read Rosehaugh's Criminal Law on the subject.'

'I have not, sir.'

'The Lord Advocate, or should I say ex-Lord Advocate, may be of a gloomy disposition, but he is a perceptive lawyer...'

'These are dangerous times for Scotland,' Scougall interrupted. 'The Devil is amongst us. He seeks to lead us astray.'

Noticing Scougall's morose mood, MacKenzie decided to

say no more on the subject for the moment. The young lawyer's words had brought back dark memories. He saw himself standing at the edge of a crowd in Edinburgh in 1658, almost thirty years before. He could still hear the screams as she was dragged to the stake, recanting her sins, begging to be saved. For the alleged crime of changing herself into a great dog, meeting with the Devil and fornicating with him, she was burned to ashes. MacKenzie shook his head. That same year a hermaphrodite had been executed for lying with a mare, and two young boys burnt on the Castle Hill for buggery. The superstitious nonsense that was believed in Scotland! The witch-hunt following the Restoration of Charles in 1660 had been, if anything, even more vicious. The words of Cicero came to him, as they often did: 'Nam, ut vere loquamur, superstitio fusa per gentis oppressit omnium fere animos atque hominum imbecillitatem occupavit.' He looked at Scougall and shook his head. The young man had much to learn.