



The Cullean Legacy

"After this I know not who will come"

By

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For Linda

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Eskby

The fingers of the rising North Sea gale invaded the narrow streets of the old close fishing town of Eskby, which had been precariously ensconced upon the North East coast of England for centuries. The long rollers borne of the bitter 'blow' started to rise and explode with unbridled force against the outer rocks and harbour defences in walls of white water, driven by the wind over the town as flying spume. As each roller spent its thunderous anger, it crumbled into a smother of white foam and spray, trying as it would to pull the hard, black rock back with it as it retreated seaward. A full storm as it would become in the North Sea, was a sight to behold.

Number One Lifeboat Cottage, Denmark Street, situated at the end one of a line of similar dwellings that ran parallel with the harbour side was shaken almost imperceptibly by the force of the waves. This was the home of Richard Ebenezer Cullean. The low two up, two down stone-built cottages were built with coarse walls of salt abraded stone and typical of fishermen's cottages found on the East Coast of England, and particularly in Eskby where it had stood as long as anyone could remember. Indeed, the elevated land fronting the small harbour upon which they had been erected had been used for habitation since man first set foot in the area countless generations before. It had been an ideal haven with a sweet water supply that had sustained the early hunters and gatherers, the first true settlers, and the same water supply that enticed salmon to run here even before the arrival of humankind. Even the name of the town was loosely translated from the Old Norse as a fisher's haven; the occupation had been pursued for as long as the earliest chronicles of life here had been recorded.

The town of Eskby faced east, directly into the harshest weather that the capricious North Sea had for millennia been able to throw at it. Direct assault by the sea itself, however, was prohibited by an outer defence consisting of outcrops of rocks on the north. This was a continuation of the end of a rough, low headland jutting seaward but separated by a deep channel cut through it to the open waters. As a naturally fortified harbour from before antiquity, the rocky protection to the north had been improved during the early medieval period. A small fortification had been erected against marauding Scots from the cold northlands and other ne're-do-wells who frequented the coast with their long ships, fire and sword. Although the fortifications, by all accounts, had given a good account of themselves during these troubled times, they had eventually fallen into disuse and the stone was robbed for building work in the early town site. Now only a trace of the actual fortifications

themselves, a few lonely and isolated assemblages of ancient masonry, remained for the ore curious minded to explore. However, where the rock gave way to the north of the town, the coast was gentler and indented by small semi-enclosed sandy embayment's. This was in contrast to the hostile coast to the south, hedged by a ragged rock and clay cliff backed by fertile and rolling agricultural land of inhospitable aspect.

At Eskby, successive generations had built upon the natural defences to provide a relatively secure harbour, with two entrances from which fishing and a now defunct coastal trade had once been conducted for generations. Further out, beyond the outer sea barrier, was the infamous 'Iron Scar,' a partially sunken assemblage of rock ledges and other outcrops that ran parallel to the shore. Geologists claimed that these treacherous submarine menaces had once been part of a pre-Ice Age land bridge to the distant mainland of Europe, eons before the level of the seas rose. Not surprisingly, these formidable hazards had claimed many vessels over the centuries, and still presented a major obstruction to navigation. Indeed, it was inscribed in local folk law that the Devil himself had built the Iron Scar for the purpose of wrecking ships. Because of this, an engineering marvel, a lighthouse dubbed the North Iron Light had been built in the early 19th century at no small cost in lives and national treasure. Though originally manned and ensconced on a lonely outcrop of rocks separated from the scars by a channel, it was now a fully automated light station.

Swept by vicious currents and several diurnal 'sets' of the tide, the coastal scars of Eskby had claimed not only countless unwary vessels that had the misfortune to become acquainted with them, but many would-be salvors in search of the profitable remains of wrecks lying in the deeper waters surrounding them. Most knowledgeable local fishermen had treated the Iron Scar with great respect and caution. Eventually, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution had established and maintained for many years an offshore lifeboat station at Eskby, until superior modern technology and aids to navigation had reduced the requirement for these operations.

Eskby had evolved gradually over the ages both naturally and under the tutelage of both benefactors and Lords of the manor who saw a reason to invest in the port to enhance their wealth and status. Unlike more naturally endowed coastal towns, Eskby had never reached its full potential until the brief heyday during the late Victorian period when the railway came to the town. Hitherto, the old fishing community to the north had thrived comfortably alongside the bucolic farming community to the south, which had taken advantage of the fertile land there. The railway changed everything. From then onwards the arrival of outsiders and the establishment of businesses began to develop almost as separate entities, estranged from the parent society both psychologically and to some extent geographically. At the height of the herring fishing at the onset of the twentieth century, the fishing community and its ancient harbour had enjoyed some success as the herring drifters yearly followed the shoals down the North Sea every year. Boats from the Moray Firth and more easterly coastal fishing havens annually packed Eskby's small harbour to take advantage of the railhead to transport their catches to market. But, as more and more vessels began to harvest the finite bounty of the sea, the golden age of Eskby was doomed to a short life. Almost overnight, during the mid '30s, the herring fisheries collapsed and hardship and poverty became all pervasive along the coast. Starvation and death among the fisher folk of the Moray Firth followed closely behind.

The Eskby communities were still joined by old Quay Street and the south entrance to the harbour. But the old divisions between them had been blurred in modern times though it was

still common for the fishing community to refer to the newcomers as ‘uptowners’ and the newer inhabitants to call the fishermen ‘oldtowners.’

By the 1980s the Coastal trade had long since disappeared. Harbour traffic had been reduced to inshore fishing by means of a ubiquitous high prowed vessel type called the Yorkshire Coble, whose ancestry traced back to Viking time. Now, but a handful of larger composite hulled inshore trawlers and shellfish vessels built of timber and steel still ventured out into the cold, grey North Sea to glean a living. Some of the older warehouses along the quay to the south of Denmark Street had been granted a new lease of life and redeveloped into expensive flats for the wealthy retirees. The remainders of the harbour and commercial premises served as storage and net houses, or were empty and silent. In time, the harbour itself had become the haunt of the day-tripper and summer visitor who tarried on the outer wall in the warm summer sun and revelled in the seemingly quaint local heritage amidst the ever present tumbling litter of the seagulls. Strutting like Spanish Dons, the quarrelsome older birds contented themselves with stalking the flat areas of the harbour, noisily challenging each other for space and fish scraps left by the fishermen.

Denmark Street, physically elevated from the quay on its raised grass bank that ran from the north side of the harbour, terminated where Quay Street ran down from the town centre and intersected the line of cottages running along the quay at a right angle. Richard Ebenezer Cullean’s abode, Number One Lifeboat Cottage, situated at the end of the terrace on the corner of Quay Street stood directly opposite an old public house called the Weather Glass (or the “Glass” as it was locally known). The majority of the two storey cottages had been once been owned by Richard’s ancestors, the ancient Cullean clan, a successful fisher family which had once exercised power and authority in the region. Over the years, a number of cottages at the north end of the terrace, assailed by fire or weather had been cleared or reduced. Though some had their upper rooms incorporated into part of their roof space, or were otherwise substantially altered, they all were deemed too cramped for the modern families they were meant to attract. Most had never been rebuilt, leaving open grassland and a perpetual storage ground for spare crab pots, old trawl nets, engines, the bric-a-brac of the fishing trade and parking for the holiday cottages. Out of the remaining three cottages, Richard lived at the end of the terrace as he had done since marrying May. The other two were rented as holiday lets and managed by his only daughter Frances May. The rent money and income from his now reduced Fish Merchant business on the quay provided his only income in semi-retirement.

Though in his later years, Richard was a quiet but still powerful man, of more than average heavy build and height, and with a face likened to tanned leather. His lively light grey eyes often crinkled into a kindly smile below the bushy eyebrows that belied the quick but determined mind, and he could still apply a vice like grip that many at sea could testify to. He was a man of few words who delivered his opinions and judgments with a quiet authority that few would challenge, even today. Over the years, his occupation at sea had not been kind to him and he now walked with a slight stoop. This was the product of hauling up the long lines and heavy crab pots by hand before the advent of the hydraulic hauling machines. He still wore the traditional fisherman’s garb of dark blue Guernsey, dusky trousers with polished black shoes and the occasional flat cap to one side over his thinning black hair, now greying at the temples. His hands were scarred by the years of heavy work and the occasional long-line hook that had to be sliced from his flesh at sea with a cutthroat razor. In his heyday, he had owned three boats used seasonally in long-lining for cod, potting for crabs and lobster, and salmon fishing. He was also a distinguished Lifeboat Coxswain and had served in the

town's lifeboat service for nearly all his life, graduating from the launching team and following his father's footsteps to the top position that of Coxswain - as family tradition required. He had held this position for over twenty years, after succeeding his father who had been drowned at sea in a severe storm.

Unlike Government owned and run organisations, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution was a registered Charity, separate from the Coastguard and relied upon public subscription and community resources to supply and man the boats. The public charity work provided the financial resources for the boats and infrastructure, and the community provided the blood. And so it had been since the Lifeboat Service was founded in 1821.

When Richard retired from the 'Institution,' the Coxswain's position had been taken over by his nephew as Richard had only one daughter and no son to carry on the line. Eventually, under the Institution's reorganizations, the big lifeboat was taken away from Eskby and replaced with a modern, fast, hard-bottomed rescue boat with inflated sponsons. Younger men, all geared up like spacemen now crewed the boat, but no less determined in their effort to go to the aid of their fellow man when called upon. Not long after the arrival of the new rescue boat, it was reckoned by higher authority that during foul weather, access to the sea from Eskby was a problem, and that the bigger lifeboat down the coast could cover the area better. Richard held his own counsel on this but they all knew his views.

Richard's brothers and their sons had also once fished from the port of Eskby, but as the years advanced and the fisheries declined owing to fewer catches, economics, and politics, the family had broken up and the sons had either gone entered the Merchant marine or the oil industry. A few had 'come ashore' and taken jobs in the local engineering and food processing plants a few miles away. Soon, only two Culleans fished out of Eskby and what remained of the port's once substantial fleet was operated by other fishing families or 'in comers' – people who had moved to the town from outside trades.

Richard lived a quiet life. His regular routine started before dawn with a visit to the quayside to see the boats away, followed by a walk to the corner shop for the morning paper. He then returned home to complete a few jobs and then wait for his daughter to arrive to 'tidy up' although there was rarely a need to, as he usually had the housework done before she arrived. Then depending on whether the boats were at sea, he would go to the office and open the office, ready for the day's fish selling.

Richard's homely living room had a sash window that overlooked the harbour, and from the building's elevated position he could look out beyond the outer sea wall and to the North Sea to take in all its moods and graces. The room was clean and simple. Indeed, its major adornment consisted primarily of a dark mahogany German pendulum clock on the wall, which had once been described as a valuable antique. The clock's carved spread eagle on the fascia glared balefully with its one dark eye into the room. Below this was a highly polished ship's clock, a present to Richard's father from a grateful Captain for rescuing his crew from their stranded vessel. Overall, hung the not unpleasant smell of coal smoke and polish which melded with the faint aroma of expended cigars. The sole source of brightness came from the yellowing wallpaper, which took on a golden glow when lit by the rising early morning summer rising sun that flooded the room on especially clear days.

Family photographs and pictures of boats that Richard's family had once owned shared the wall space with pictures of rescued crews and vessels firmly stuck on the rocks. Serious

faces, with cigarettes dangling from the corners of their mouths and wearing flat caps stared out of the lifeboat crew group photographs. The centre piece of these pictorial assemblages were the framed certificates from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, prized possessions acknowledging the deeds of gallantry completed over the years. Also taking pride of place was an enlarged black and white photograph, now yellowing, taken by a visitor and given to Richard some years past. In the picture a younger Richard was showing his daughter how to mend a salmon net on the green at the end of the cottages. Standing with his characteristic stoop and oblivious to the fact that the picture was being taken, he was showing the young Frances how to use a netting needle. Barely ten at the time, the girl was wearing a cut down fisherman's smock several sizes too large for her. As Richard was opening the meshes of the net for her, she had turned toward the photographer who was invading their private moments. Her piercing eyes were wide below frowning eyebrows, with a tight-lipped jaw framed with an unruly shock of black hair bespeaking volumes. Even at that early age she typified the Cullean family, revealing in her captured countenance all the grit and determination of her forebears. Richard often marvelled at how, from these early beginnings, she had developed into such a beauty.

Beside the large open fireplace with an array of polished brass boat fittings lovingly arranged on the mantle, was a cupboard. Behind its polished mahogany doors removed from a long forgotten shipwreck, its upper shelves were filled with bottles of various spirits that Richard called his 'Bond.' Not that he was a hardened drinker, mind you, but he had, over the years, indeed developed a taste for the Islay Malt whiskies and was occasionally partial to a drop of rum as well. Every year at Christmas, the local newspaper sent a bottle of whisky to the crew at the Lifeboat House; but they never forgot Richard who received a special bottle of blended spirit for himself.

Below the shelves containing the bottles was a lower level where boxed cigars and unused ornaments were stored. The cigars were a gift from a grateful skipper also rescued by Richard and his crew many years before. Although the skipper was now very elderly, his son continued to ensure that two boxes of Havana's finest were annually sent by special delivery to Richard, one at Christmas time and the other six months later. A simple hand-written note of thanks, which Richard had retained, accompanied each box. Over the years the formidable hand written script on many of the early notes had degraded owing to age and infirmity, but the warmest thanks contained in them never lost their power. These days, the son wrote the notes, but still written with his father's fountain pen. Richard appreciated these gifts and each hour it took to consume a whole *Cohiba*, as well as the vestigial aromatic air left behind upon completion.

Apart from an old cloth-covered settee, two armchairs, and a bureau, the room also contained a dark oak sideboard with that rare patina that comes of loving care and great age. This had been a wedding present to him and May, and although she had passed away some years before it always received its regular weekly polish. On the corner of the sideboard was an old decommissioned 'trawler band' shortwave radio set, 'liberated' from one of the many shipwrecks on the Iron Scar. In the old days such sets could be found in nearly every maritime household on the coast, and in bad weather they would be religiously monitored for signs of emergency or distress. Boat skippers at sea would use them to pass greetings and updates on their fortunes to their families by a pre-arranged code. In later years, when the emergency services and their boats acquired modern VHF equipment, the shortwave fell into disuse. Thus, not surprisingly, alongside Richard's antiquated trawler band shortwave stood a newer VHF frequency-scanning receiver he had acquired while a Coxswain and still

maintained for keeping an ear on local Coastguard and the fishing activities. Lately he had begun to use it just to listen in for interest, and to deduce the times that the boats were due so he could go down to the office. On the back of the white painted four-panelled door from the kitchen hung a selection of coats and a pair of aged binoculars in a battered case.

Not as prominently displayed among the family photographs and ornaments on the sideboard, but nevertheless in an obvious place of honour, was a polished rosewood box. This had once contained a silver serving knife but now, nestled firmly in the folds of the green velvet lining, was a piece of metal known as 'Richard's brass'. This piece of rectangular metal measured four by three inches and half an inch thick. In its original form it had been a fine piece of polished workmanship, but now it showed the scars and pits of ill treatment. Its edges were bevelled and on its surface was engraved an exquisite and aristocratic design of unknown provenance. To his family, the artefact was believed to be a brass packing piece from the marine steam engine belonging to the ill-fated freighter *Deerhound*. In an easterly gale in the dead of night, the *Deerhound* had the misfortune to strike the Iron Scar full tilt in spectacular fashion. All hands had been lost as the vessel was pounded to scrap and then swept off the scar into deeper water by mid-morning the next day. The site was well known, as more commercial fishing gear had been lost on the wreck than most cared to remember. Surprisingly, no one ever enquired as to exactly how Richard had come by this trinket ensconced now in the rosewood box in Number One Lifeboat Cottage. Perhaps, it was just as well, for 'Richard's Brass' was not brass at all but solid gold. Moreover, also hidden inside in a cleverly constructed false bottom in the sideboard, were other trinkets that seldom saw the light of day. And none had come from *Deerhound*.

2

Richard Cullean

It was very early in the year and the weather was cold on this particular morning as Richard faced the raw wind and sniffed the air. His eyes watered in his weathered face as the wind shifted from the east to the north and increased in strength. This was bad news as the boats would be hard pressed to get back to the harbour before foul weather closed the north entrance. This fact alone would give rise to the anxiety of those of their families on shore. The calls of the seagulls had become more strident as they were tossed around in the rising wind, and loose paper and plastic cups were buffeted clumsily along the harbour side. The boats at sea that had taken a chance on the rising wind were on their first fishing trip since the Christmas holiday, and their crews would no doubt be working hard to get their crab pots moved into deeper water, or even getting them on board to bring home. The forecast for the following week was not good, with unsettled and strong winds developing further as the weather front came through. The air had the cold taste of the edge of steel about it. It was going to be a cold January.

Richard paused for a while, closed the sash window and turned the radio scanner on. It would be a while before Frances, or Francey as she was known would visit, and he would sit awhile and listen to the boats. He reached into the cupboard and took out a cigar, perhaps a little early for a smoke but he would catch up on his work later. As the wind strengthened, white tops were starting to show on the leaden sea and the scars were now showing their teeth. While noting the changing condition, his eyes strayed from the greying ocean to the certificate from the lifeboat service - the same certificate that gave him the first encounter with the man whose cigar he would now smoke. At that moment the rising wind started to move the curtains behind the sash window. In these dark days, the winter gales blasted the cliff top grass flat and left a sugar coating of white salt on the cottage outer walls and windows as a reminder to the overarching power of nature.

Richard was no stranger to bad weather; the coastal communities lived with its eventuality and unpredictability and coped with its retribution on the seafarer. Strong communities and a strong bond between humanity were forged by this common enemy. This unbreakable bond was tested to the limit many years ago, when, one night as the rain and wind rattled around the streets that sent the dustbins bowling down the hill, the Coastguard and the lifeboat launching authority had telephoned him. A wooden motor sailing vessel to the east of Eskby had lost an engine and, with failing electrics, had called for assistance in heavy weather. Water down below was surging across the vessel's lower decks and making her unstable and if she did not capsize, from her given position Richard he knew that she would eventually hit the Iron Scar. There was no time to lose.

The large fine lined Watson class lifeboat was on moorings in the harbour and rose and fell in sympathy with the sea surging through the harbour mouth, an elegant craft but with no self-righting capability of the modern lifeboats. There were two entrances to the harbour, one to the north and one to the south with the prevailing wind direction deciding which one could be used to allow the lifeboat to clear the coast. On this night there was a full easterly gale and a high sea running. Richard judged that the best entrance was the northerly one and his only chance to get out was to run hard and fast from the entrance, and turn straight into the sea with as much speed as he could before the high seas turned the boat over - as it had done many years before. All the crew had absolute confidence in him, and with few spoken words he indicated his plan as they all crammed into the cabin and dogged down the main hatch.

With both engines running full he careened out of the harbour entrance and turned into a wall of water running like an express train towards him. The lifeboat shuddered almost to a stop. It was buried in the maelstrom and then rose clear with screaming engines, gradually winning the dual with the sea until she was well free of the land and beyond the scars. With little information to go on and only intermittent radio contact with the motor sailor, all aboard looked out for a light from the stricken vessel. In the early morning grey light they located the boat. She was laid low in the water, a hulk making no progress only trying to keep its head to the waves but falling back time after time under the weight of the seas. A pale smudge of a face in the wheelhouse window told him that there were still people aboard and they were about a mile and half from the scar. The rotating beam of the North Iron Light briefly turned the darkness into stark relief. Caught in the glare of the iced beacon frozen in time were the towering seas breaking onto the Iron Scar on the inside of them. Richard knew that he had one; maybe two chances to get the crew all off the doomed boat.

He steamed the lifeboat as close as he could to the vessel, and in the half-light the Second Coxswain indicated by a pointing, crossing and chopping action of his arms what Richard

intended to do. By luck the skipper understood and waved his acknowledgment through the wheelhouse door. Richard then headed the lifeboat around into the seas and came about, and in the traditions of the Service he completed a manoeuvre that had been used by other Coxswains in the past – he ran the lifeboat up and over the deck of the stricken vessel. For a while both boats ground together and the motor sailor was driven down by the force of the rescue craft. All hands were out with boat hooks and lines and deftly hove up and hauled aboard the three crew. With the engines now full astern, and in the hope that the propellers were not fouled by loose ropes, the lifeboat pulled back off the wreck as she settled quickly in the seas. Unable to get back to Eskby they set course for a long haul to the nearest accessible harbour down the coast.

For this daring rescue, Richard had been awarded the Institution's Silver medal for gallantry and his service had gone down in the annals of the history of the Station. The group photograph of the crew taken by the press when the lifeboat got into harbour showed the stress and tiredness etched in their faces. Those days had long since gone and the deeds had passed into history and folk law. With the improvement of navigational aids and the decline in shipping, such incidents were thankfully few and far between: fewer calls, fewer losses, and fewer bodies to recover for grieving relatives.

3

The Weather Glass

The Weather Glass Inn was formerly known as Denmark House, but took on its present name when a mercury barometer in a glazed case was affixed to its weather worn wall for the benefit of poor seafarers, who could not afford such weather forecasting instruments of their own. The cost of the instrument and its maintenance was raised by subscription by the local Masonic Lodge. The current landlord of this very old and established business was one Murdo McAllister, a lowland Scot who came to the town and bought the lot, lock stock and barrel, just prior to the previous owner filing for bankruptcy.

Originally, the Glass, as it was now referred to, was one of the oldest buildings in the town. The site on which it stood had been a hostelry and tavern from antiquity. In time, the original buildings had been reconstructed using building stone robbed out of the old fortifications and had been a focal point for the old maritime community for generations. Smuggling, the occasional death in unusual circumstances, and other nefarious activities had all taken place within its doors. As such, it had accordingly suffered the fortunes and declines of the community. The Glass was, of course, haunted. Whether it actually was seemed neither here nor there, but the rumour did no harm in enhancing the attraction of the old place. The original story centred around an old seaman who sat alone in front of the fire on a winter's night in the early hours of the morning. Seeking to light his pipe, he was handed an ember from the fire, and only when he had accepted it, did he realise that he was alone in the room.

The story had been had been told and retold for as many years as anyone could remember, and was firmly embedded in local folklore. The story might well have been short on fact, but there was no denying that there had been many unusual happenings in the Glass in the past.

The interior of the taproom had been the same since anyone could remember. There had been talk of getting a Preservation Order on the original part of the building, but this had been resisted by Murdo. The inn was situated in the corner property at the junction with Quay Street and the harbour, but after Murdo moved in he had purchased the adjoining store from Richard's father and extended the pub along the quayside into the two properties. He had also created a lobby entrance to the two rooms from the single entrance door off the harbour side with doors to each room, but retained the traditional corner tap room replete with its stone flagged floors and trappings from the past. This old place was the haunt of the locals that had ensured a business turnover during the winter period. In the new room he created a small restaurant to catch the tourist trade and extended the bar so that it served both the dining area and the taproom. In a thoroughly enterprising manner, he made use of the separately converted accommodation above the restaurant as a Bed and Breakfast business, and it had paid well. By now, the building was full of contrasts for to move from the restaurant into the taproom was a transition into another world. Such were the comparisons and the attractions of the Glass.

The taproom was straight out of a story book. It was not a modern 'themed' pub so common to many seaside towns. Everything within it had been retained for as long as anyone could remember, including the dark oak tables and ancient chairs and stools. The aged doors and woodwork in the taproom had been recovered from the wrecks of large ships, and showed off the winking brassware that festooned the walls and beams. Most of the decorations were fittings and nautical instruments removed from the many wrecks on the scar, and the Glass had the reputation of having the most complete documented collection of maritime artefacts on the coast. The gimballed light fittings that had once adorned the saloons of fine boats, and copper speaking tubes from the wheelhouses of large ships, all hanging from the ceiling and fixed to the walls, glowed warmly in the subdued light. Navigational instruments were either enclosed in a glass case or screwed to the panelled wall to deter the light fingered patron, and a ship's telegraph stood by the bar with its levers set to the 'Full Astern' position, just as it had been discovered on the original tilting ship's bridge from which it was recovered. Dotted around the walls were many nameplates from ship's accommodation and engine rooms, and although they were sad relics of disasters gone by, they served to keep alive the names of the vessels to which they belonged. A complete small varnished rowing boat, stained by many years of nicotine, hung upside down from the beams in the ceiling and two long fishing coble oars, or 'sweeps' were secured to the wall over one leg of the corner window. At the end of the bar, a large open fireplace extended across much of the back wall, which was always kept lit with shifting coals in the winter months. It proved to be a big draw for the local fishermen who gathered there until late into the night, sometimes well after closing time. Above the fireplace, in specially formed holders, were a harpoon and a blubber flensing knife with their deadly blades painted black. These were trophies recovered from one of the Whitby whaling ships that had been wrecked on the scars in the 1860's. Above these was an early masterpiece of the photographer's art. This large black and white photograph of a tall smoke-stacked steam drifter fully loaded with herring was frozen in time as she took a broadside sea coming through the harbour north entrance.

The remaining space of the taproom walls were taken up with pictures of fishermen, lifeboat crews and of forlorn and derelict shipwrecks out on the scars. Over the bar and

behind a thin layer of nicotine-stained glass was a framed letter from a lone yachtsman. A certain Captain Johnson from many years before, thanking the regulars of the Glass after he put into the harbour in an old gaff rigged yacht following a bad 'blow.' They had marvelled at how he had navigated around the scars in such bad conditions, and for this he had gained their immediate respect. The fishermen had gathered together and ensured that he had been victualled and re-rigged for his eventual departure without proof of payment. Such was the bond between these men of the sea and the stranger, and the letter and payment in full had been forwarded on later. The whole of the room had, indeed, a comfortable and conspiratorial feel about it and was beloved by its regulars. The old walls and woodwork had absorbed the smoke and conversation of generations and each mark and shape in the dark polished wood had a secret to tell.

It was to this room that the old timers gravitated to when the winter gales marched across the North Sea and blustered up into the town on a howling wind, rattling the sash windows and smearing sleet across the glass. As their gurgling pipe bowls glowed asthmatically, the tobacco fug thickened in spite of the draught wafting through to the open fire. There were fewer of them now as the years went by, but they kept regular company there, more so than in the Church or the Chapel.

Two generations before, this was the room that the Culleans had held court to dispense summary justice or alms. As a powerful fishing clan of the day they were both respected and feared in equal measure. Richard was recognised as the only rightful descendant of this family and when he walked in the taproom, the old ones dipped their heads or held up a hand in deference to him without a word being spoken. Not only had Richard earned their respect for his legendary achievements at sea, but all of the older ones and their fathers had had cause to thank the Culleans at some time in the past. Richard had the 'mark' about him, which bred a deep and abiding sense of loyalty that was not to be found in the younger ones. Times and the culture had now changed.

Murdo's wife Sarah was a stout, fair-haired big-hearted woman with a bosom to match, and her culinary skills ensured that the restaurant was always fully booked in the summer. They fared well from of the Thursday night steak specials and marvelled how she completed these minor marvels in the small kitchen to the rear. But it was her boundless energy and skill that ensured the restaurant business would remain buoyant. Her husband, Murdo, was a small, wiry man with bright deep set eyes, a fleeting gaze and a permanent six o'clock shadow. He also had an enormous capacity for work and was a shrewd businessman. Both he and Sarah had laboured long and hard to build up the business which his youngest son would one day take over. He was also Richard's long standing friend as he had been the first incomer to be accepted into the lifeboat crew because of his availability for service during the winter months. Both he and Richard would sit for many and hour in the quiet taproom and swap stories about the old days and their common interest in boats and fishing.

Murdo's baptism into the lifeboat service had not been without its difficult moments. For generations the lifeboat crews had been drawn from the fishing families, but mostly from one particular family. As the lifeboats had become more complex and required more technical knowledge and the fishermen were reduced in number, it became necessary to recruit 'landsmen' and yachtsmen into the service. Murdo was the first of these new crewmen and he adapted well. There had been some resentment to this at first, but it had helped that he was the landlord of their favoured public house and he paved the way for others to follow. When

the big lifeboat was taken away from the town, most of the older crew members ceased to participate in the crew of the smaller boat – it was a young man’s game now.

Murdo heaved a barrel up on the stocks in the cellar and then went up into the bar to pull the beer through the pipes. He wiped his hands on his stained apron and reflected that last night had been busy in the taproom. A couple of the fisher lads had got a bit rowdy just before closing time, and he had got them firmly through the doors before the local Police turned up. They had spent well but Murdo kept a good house, which was why the Police did not bother him and turned the occasional blind eye to the times when he dispensed his own justice to keep his house in order. By now he had the bar stocked up and was about to start on the pump lines when a small tap on the window from Richard caught his attention. He went to the lobby that divided the restaurant from the taproom and opened the door for his friend and raised an eyebrow.

“Bit early for you isn’t it?” he enquired,

“Fed up of waiting for Francey, and anyway I’m out of coffee. Have you some in that fancy machine over there?”

Murdo poured two mugs from the coffee dispenser and the two men sat down at the corner table with the view of the harbour through its Georgian light window.

“Who kicked off last night? I could hear you sorting them out from over there.”

Murdo took a sip of his coffee, thankful for a break from the work.

“George and Pete got a bit too much in ‘em. Pete got paid off yesterday and he had been at it since lunchtime, it got a bit out of hand, nae trouble though, not for me anyways.”

Richard shot him a knowing look and Murdo saw that there was something on his mind. He did not always come calling so early and it was not on account of the weather either! Outside the mast tops of the first returning fishing boats rolled past them as the rising swell surged through the harbour mouth.

“Bad weather coming,” he ventured.

Richard nodded and shifted his leg for comfort.

“I have a favour to ask of you Murdo...”

4

Francey

Frances May Cullean or Francey as she was known was in her late twenties, a tall girl with a pretty high cheek boned face with an upturned nose and deep dark eyes. Framed by long blue black hair that was clamped under a blue head shawl against the rising wind, she was graced with the good looks of her family line, and the strong determination of her father. She had almost a continental complexion that was a throwback to her Celtic roots. Although May had always wished that she had more of a graceful disposition like her own sisters, she was a Cullean through and through. She was the son that Richard and May never had and she had adapted to the fisher way of life like the boys of her age. Although she could not beat them at arm wrestling at school, she could bait a line, splice a rope and bleed an air locked diesel engine with the skill of her male counterparts. Although the fishing had now gone, she still remained a strongly independent and capable person around the boats.

Francey was late visiting her father today. After checking the emails for holiday bookings, she was completing her weekly errand of placing fresh flowers on her mother's grave while on her way to Number One. After exchanging pleasantries with the owner of the flower shop in the narrow street, she scraped the heavy glazed shop door shut and turned right near the top of Quay Street, up the short lane to the ruined church and its ancient graveyard. Framed against the darkening sky, the church and the graveyard sat on the high ground that extended seawards to the cliff edge. There, past the low stone walling, it fell away over the remains of the old fortifications to cliff edge above the north wall of the harbour. It had served the old town for generations, but by the late 1800's it was falling into disrepair before a lightning strike in a violent storm reduced the west gable wall to rubble. There were those who said at the time that this was judgment on the Culleens, but no one offered an explanation as to why. Taking this opportunity, a sort of divine intervention so to speak, the Ecclesiastical authorities took this as a cue to build a new place of worship to serve the rapidly expanding community. The church now stripped of its vestments and timber work now stood as a ragged memorial against the grey sky, testament to the generations who had gone before.

The churchyard was closed to burials except for existing owners of the plots and occasionally, to those who had a long connection to the old town. The church remained derelict.

She passed the old walls of the church and went east into the churchyard where the good, the great and the poor of old Eskby were now laid to rest. Those who could afford elaborate markers had done so, but more often than not, the graves were marked with the standard markers of the day. The weathered and algae covered stones told stories of tragedies at sea and of on the land. Testament to a tide of grief in an almost forgotten marginal way of life. From simple stones that recorded the mason's grave art of sinking fishing vessels and fouled anchors, to the grander structures recording the passing of the town's fathers. Some of the stones were so old and weathered that it was impossible to determine who was buried beneath them or when. One of the grandest of all bullied its overbearing presence upon the observer, it had an impressively large and tall headstone enclosed by a pillar carved on each side of it and surmounted by a lintel. The triangular arch above this was embossed with a skull and crossed bones overlooking the sombre plot and carved into the lintel of the arch was an inscription in Latin "*Nil nisi clavis deest.*" Below the Latin inscription was carved a small single design, a design that she could not recognise but not out of context with the other iconic designs on the stone. The headstone enclosed by the pillars and the lintel were decorated with many other symbols that she did not understand and gave the impression of

being pagan in origin; one in particular depicted a shovel and a pick. The burial area below was enclosed by low stone pillars with a single weathered chain barrier strung between them. This was the site of the last resting place of the forebears of the Culleans.

The large enclosure had three plots within it, with the last 'internee,' Richards' grandfather, laid to rest in the left hand side plot, which was now closed for further burials. The plot on the right hand side was still 'open'. This was where Richard's father was buried. Between them was a central plot with a large stone slab. Adorned with a simple inscription, this marked the site of an infant born many years ago who had died of disease while still very young. With a clear view to the sea, the inscription on the monument recorded the dates of birth, death and occupations in life of those interred there. From Master Mariners, Fishermen and Lifeboat Coxswains, they all had their script. On the pedestal of the monument were the inscriptions "*I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from thence cometh my help,*" and below it "*let not the bar be angry when I cross over.*" The monument was not so much a marker stone, but an arrogant statement that bore witness to the latent power of the Culleans and of their once proud standing in the community. It was indeed an oppressive and overpowering statement made by Francey's hardened and sometimes embittered forebears. She felt uneasy with this onerous looking memorial and it was clear that Richard harboured reservations about it as well, as May was not buried in the main Cullean plot, but in a separate, simpler plot close by that she and Richard had owned.

May had come from the Thoresby farming family to the south of the town. A gentle, religious and hardworking people who had originally harboured reservations about how long her early marriage to Richard would last, and if truth be known, they feared the Culleans. But they had been proven wrong and Richard and May enjoyed a long union together in which they had shared the shortcomings, hardships and rewards of a maritime life. She had dutifully and lovingly supported Richard until she had been diagnosed with a serious heart complaint when Francey was a young girl. Helped by his father from that time on, Richard had finished with the sea, concentrated on his lifeboat work, taken on the remains of the family's fish merchant business and had been devoted to her until her passing. Nowadays, Richard continued in semi-retirement, and was comfortably able to do so once his father had passed away leaving him a good legacy that subsidised his income from the business. As not only in the past had the Culleans been successful fishermen, savers of life at sea and investors – they had been wreckers.

Francey carefully removed the old flowers and dainty posy from the simple grave and placed the fresh posy in its place, for all her independence and tough outer shell she felt deeply about the loss of her mother. She straightened up the pot of flowers, and with the smell of fresh soap clinging to her wet hair, stood up and looked over the weathered and irregular memorials out to sea and the gathering gloom. The North Iron Light glanced wanly in the distance and she suddenly felt the cold and an inward unease. What an exposed place this was, especially fitting for those who were the permanent sentinels of the ocean and its moods. A place of a thousand ice laden gales and where a breeze blew even on the brightest of days. In the distance where the grey of the sea and the sky merged she could see the faint points of the masthead lights of the fishing vessels returning to port, and felt saddened that her side of the family had almost given up that way of life. When the fishing had finished she had taken on her mother's role making sure that her father was looked after. She managed their cottage lettings efficiently and this had led to a part time job in the office in a local Estate Agents. This had supplemented her income and given her additional financial

independence. She had only once dropped her guard, and that was with Colin and she still could not understand why that had lasted as long as it had.

Francey was as yet unmarried, but not without plenty of admirers although some felt intimidated by her. But she had taken up with Colin from the newer part of town a while ago. The relationship had gone well to start with and there had been talk of an engagement. Richard had had his reservations about all this as he viewed Colin as immature, but had held his counsel. He was unwilling to speak his mind and alienate his daughter, as these matters in close families were often the cause of deep rifts. What Richard did not know was that Colin was predisposed to violence especially after taking drink and these incidents had occurred when there were no witnesses. On one particular occasion late one night Colin had given Francey a backhander in the street, and this time it was witnessed by Murdo who had left the pub for a breather. Murdo had taken Colin to task and meted out a sustained and violent retribution. A former lightweight boxer of some distinction in the Army, Murdo was more than able to give Colin a lesson that he would never forget and this had driven him out of town. No Police were involved and Colin was last heard of in Aberdeen working in the oil industry, where he was safer and he was never likely to return to Eskby. It also served Murdo's purpose to remove Colin from the scene, as his own son Campbell had been sweet on Francey for some time now.

5

Meeting with Murdo

While Francey contemplated the greying ocean, in the quiet taproom at the Inn, Murdo turned over the slab of bright metal and weighed it gently in his hands. The grey winter's light from the mullioned windows turned it into a thing of beauty. He did not recognise the elaborate and distinctive monogram impressed in it but he noted that it overlaid another equally impressive design, very similar to the swastika. He raised his eyes at Richard and said nothing. This was going to be an interesting morning as Richard's brass was a lovely thing to behold, and more to the point, Murdo knew that it was not brass at all but gold. He carefully examined the metal with its attractive and dangerous glow and knowing that an interesting explanation was about to follow, wordlessly, he laid it carefully on the worn oak table between them. The semi gloom of the room enveloped them like a cloak, and the only sound heard was the ticking of the taproom clock with the souging of the rising wind in the background. For this occasion Murdo left his coffee untouched, rose and produced a bottle of fine Malt whisky from behind the bar with two glasses and a small jug of water. He then set them down between the both of them, and waited for Richard to speak. Murdo had contacts in the jewellery trade, notably through his Uncle and this is why Richard had brought the metal to him. Murdo was no fool, he had heard the rumours surrounding the belief of hidden wealth and he knew a little about the history of the family of his friend. He also knew enough not to

ask Richard where the rest of it was. He poured two glasses of the fine amber spirit and without the addition of water he pushed one across to Richard, and it was he who spoke first.

“This is to be Francey’s dowry Murdo, I have had it for a long time but I can’t do anything with it, you know the problems that would arise if I tried to trade it in on the open market so I’m asking if you can get this valued and maybe find me an outlet for it when the time comes.” Murdo nodded and Richard went on, “You are the only person I can trust and you have contacts in the trade – no questions.”

As a pub landlord, Murdo had received a lot of strange queries in the darkened bar and was the keeper of many secrets, however this had to be the most unusual and interesting enquiry that he had received in many a year. He drew on his glass and felt honoured to be trusted by this request from his friend, but also it had to be admitted, he was also a little apprehensive as Murdo had his own secrets to keep.

“Ok Richard, I’ll make an enquiry and then let you know, don’t give me the weight of it until then, can I ask where it came from?”

Richard hesitated, already expecting the question, which was a fair one given the circumstances. “My father,” he replied, “old Richard, he came upon it and he never explained just how, apart from that his father gave it to him, and it caused a lot of trouble many years ago.”

Murdo pursed his lips and nodded. He accepted what he had been told and had agreed to make the enquiries, which he would do so straightaway. He also knew of the need for discretion and Uncle Austen would give him guidance on this interesting situation.

The meeting over, they finished their drinks and Richard left his old friend. As the outer door closed behind him, silence returned to the room as Murdo thought awhile before returning to his tasks. Despite his long friendship with Richard, there were aspects about this that were troubling. Obviously the rumours about the hidden wealth in the town were true and it would seem that it had been a well-kept secret. This would now not be the case and he feared that trouble would reach down from the past because of it; he noisily rubbed the stubble on his chin before rising to make a telephone call...

Richard stepped out into the cold wind that was now laced with rain and moved quickly to his house on the corner. He collected his papers and a heavy jacket before he went quickly to his office on the quay to see how his part time office girl was progressing. He reflected on his last conversation with Murdo. He had told him only what he needed to know for the moment, the details would come later, but the time had now come to resolve his legacy. The bar of metal in Richard’s possession had a dark and worrying history and over the years, local legend had it that a hoard of Spanish gold had been recovered from the wreck of a ship of the Spanish Armada. The great Armada had been dispersed by Drake in 1588 and the survivors had been lost in isolation as they fled up the North Sea and around the north coast of Scotland. But there was not a shred of evidence of a wrecked Spanish vessel, or a cargo or crew ever having come ashore in the area. The story passed into local folk law and no one paid much attention to it, apart from the visiting amateur historians who soon lost interest. As such it had become a good ripping yarn for consumption by the holidaymakers and, given the reputation of the Iron Scar the story was quite believable. The truth was that Richard’s metal was not Spanish at all and the history of its existence was out of the annals of fiction.

Richard knew most of his family's chequered past and where their income had been derived from. The Culleans or indeed, anyone in the community at the time had no need to set false lights to lure ships ashore as had been ascribed to the Cornish communities. The work had been done for them by the bad weather. It was God and the Devil that had sent ships in abundance to be either stranded on the shoreline or to either spill their guts out onto the scars as they were disabled, or were driven ashore as they made for the harbour. In the early years the grim harvest of drowned sailors of unknown faiths were buried on the shoreline to the north of the town. They had come ashore in such numbers, which was why the next low lying spit of land to the north of the harbour was named Sailors' Grave. From the 1700's onwards to comparatively modern times, life on the coast had been at subsistence level and in times of poor 'fishings' and miserable returns for fish, life was at starvation levels. Families subsidised their incomes by part time farming and what could be gleaned from the shoreline. The community had fought hard and bravely to save life at sea but once this had been achieved then the wreck and her cargo were up for grabs.

The fishermen would go to sea and offer their services to the master of a stranded vessel by means of carrying an anchor and cable out to sea, so that the vessel could be pulled off on the next rising tide. But more often than not, a broken and abandoned hull would be discovered, and all exertions would then be directed to salvage her cargo and anything of value before it was taken by the sea. During the following morning after a wreck, cargoes of timber, wool, wines and spirits, tobacco, salt and a host of commodities would be found surging in the breakers or carpeting the waters offshore. As the area was inherently lawless, at times like this the Revenue and Government officials would do well to stay at home unless accompanied by a small army. With no life to save, the boats would work hard and compete to each other, and then divide the spoils between their crews. On occasions, an individual man would get lucky on his own account. As had Richard's grandfather and his generations before him, and no one dared to take on the Culleans regarding matters of this particular business.

In keeping with local tradition, for generations Richard's male line had all been called Ebenezer until recent times. Also in keeping with this tradition, they had been fortunate to outwit the Revenue during their nefarious dealings. They had carefully invested what they had gained into boats and property, which had amounted to quite a tidy sum. However, one of his antecedents was lucky, or unlucky enough to be the illegitimate son the Lord of the Manor who was descended from the de Percy clan (whose first borne male line of each succeeding generation always took the forename of John). The Lord of the day was of course John de Percy, who presided over an impoverished and semi lawless domain that barely sustained the lifestyle that he wished to attain. As such, by necessity he was very creative when it came to generating income. One of Richard's forebears, a local beauty, was engaged in service at the 'big house' when she bore a son to the Lord. John de Percy wished to keep her with him while maintaining an outward appearance of normality, and by dint of his manoeuvrings, she was entered into a marriage of convenience with the Culleans while still remaining in his employ - and his mistress. This arrangement was somewhat unconventional, but it avoided a scandal. Despite the lowly status of his birth, the young Ebenezer had enjoyed the patronage of his wayward father which continued in later life. Eventually his unofficial social status was sufficient for him to be placed as a go-between for the local wealthy landowners, landlords and magistrates in the matter of the valuable commodities wrested from the sea. This had become another local tradition which few were brave enough to challenge. As the landowners and magistrates had a vested interest in the continuance of this illegal trade, a form of protection was afforded by these gentlemen to the wreckers. As

such, in the old days there never was a successful prosecution of a wrecker or a smuggler in that area of the County. Eventually, the wreckers and smugglers who engaged in this untraceable and illegal trade graduated to be the same ship and warehouse owners who, cloaked in respectability, carried out legitimate maritime transactions in the harbour. This is not to say that they were totally unscrupulous, as many had invested fairly in the community over time. This influx of wealth had at one time transformed Eskby into a relatively wealthy town, until the decline of trade and other fortunes.

For generations before Richard, his family had entered Freemasonry, or the 'Craft' as it was known. They had been allowed to join the fraternity because of their rising status and value to the community. This indemnified the recipients of illegal goods and cargoes against exposure as, once entered into the Craft they were most unlikely to turn the gentry in to the authorities or blackmail them. The skull and crossed bones on their memorial stone was universally known to the uninitiated as the emblematic sign of death. This icon can be found on many of the older grave stones in most churchyards. The emblem actually portrayed the rank of a Master Mason of the Third Degree, a position that the Culleans had graduated to in their unusual careers. It also was an emblem of the Knights Templar who were closely associated to the Masons. However, it was during his grandfather's time that a rift between the family and the Craft had occurred. Exactly what this rift entailed Richard did not know, but at that time the family withdrew from the Eskby Masonic Lodge. From that time onwards no Cullean had asked to join the Eskby Lodge, and a combination of other social and political events and wars influenced the fate of Eskby, to a point where this situation had become inconsequential. When Richard was a young man he had wished to follow in his father's footsteps in Freemasonry, and had joined a Masonic Lodge out of town. During his time there, he had been an active member of the Fraternity and was well respected. He was also fortunate, as the family Fish Merchant's business allowed him to participate in their charitable work. But, as his own family situations had changed; he had put all this aside and become a lapsed Mason who had never kept up with his old associations.

Now in his office and looking out through the salt smeared windows, he saw that it was time for him to go down to the harbour side. All the boats had now returned safely, and the quayside was a flurry of activity. Yellow clad men hauled their catches up ready for the waiting Lorries in the driving rain, with shouts and curses in abundance. The harbourmaster looked on from the shelter of one of the doorways to a net store and he irked at having to spend a few more hours in the cold. He noted that as the boats had recovered their gear from the sea in a hurry, some of the crab pots were being emptied on their decks as they tied up. When all the boats had landed their catches, he accepted his customary offering of a couple of lobsters. After placing the blue shelled crustaceans into a supermarket plastic bag, he shambled off to his small office at the north end of the harbour to complete his returns for the day.

Over the course of the next twenty four hours, the January gale swung around to the northwest, increased in strength and blew even colder. Winter had now well and truly arrived in Eskby as the cold blast announced itself to the iron coast. Offshore, a large cargo boat made poor headway into the heavy seas as it staggered its way steadily northwards with grey seas tumbling over her bows and decks. Onshore, the force of the wall of wind took the breath away while white tearing walls of water spent their force on the sands to the north of the harbour. On the strand, the gale raised a light drift of blown sand smoking down from the dunes behind the beach, trailing like mare's tails in the wind's eddies. On this morning, Francey took a walk into the wind with a flying banner of long black hair trailing behind her, her footprints merging with the beach as the blown sand ghosted them away. The cold seeped through the layers of her substantial clothing and she drew her coat tightly around herself. At this time of the year she had the sands to herself as only the hardiest dog walker or ornithologist would venture out in these conditions. Bending into the blast, with her long charcoal coat secured with a red belt and wearing black boots, she cut a stylish figure amongst the otherwise windblown surf and lonely beach. Looking up with watering eyes she saw in the distance a large black and tan Alsatian dog coming towards her followed by the familiar figure of Campbell McAllister. Campbell was returning from Sailors' Grave from the north and with his broad physique and a shock of fair hair no one could mistake him. He took after his mother for his build but he had Murdo's piercing gaze and business acumen, this meeting was fortuitous for Campbell and he made towards Francey.

"The Woman in Black," he called with a laugh as they drew closer, the dog, Jess, ran breathlessly to Francey then back to Campbell again.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"Looking for you," he said and she cocked her head as she replied.

"You're wasting your time, go and find a nice girl who can cook you your dinner."

"I've found one but she doesn't want to play."

Knowing the comment was meant for her she smiled as she replied, "Maybe I will and maybe I won't, but don't push it, the last one ended up bad."

Campbell smiled, he was pleased with the old man's handiwork, not often he had seen it before but he knew not to cross his father, and for good reason. From memory, Colin was also suitable impressed.

"Colin got what he deserved and you know it."

She now relaxed and changed the subject as the dog bounded off after a piece of wind borne rubbish. "If you want, I have a stew in the slow cooker, bring the wine around at seven - but you are out by eleven," she said firmly with a frown. Campbell nodded and shrugged inwardly, accepting the terms and conditions without a word. For all the years that he had known her she was incorrigible, she was a good friend to him but there was no way she was going to let him into her life. They linked arms and continued to walk back the town with the wind in their backs, making small talk until they parted on the quay. Francey to go to her

terraced cottage halfway up Quay Street and him to the Glass. Behind his curtains Richard watched them amble by and reflected that she could do worse in life than Campbell, and couldn't really understand why they did not get together.

7

Austen and Murdo

After taking Murdo's telephone call from the Glass, the man on the Isle of Skye delicately put the telephone receiver down deep in thought. Austen was not only an Uncle of Murdo's but a necessary contact. Many years ago, it was through Austen that Murdo had learned of the pending bankruptcy sale of the Glass and this knowledge was for the benefit of both of them. Even though Austen was many miles away from Eskby, he made it his business to acquaint himself with the affairs of the town for good reason. All of Austen's side of the family were blessed with a highly developed knowledge of what was 'going down,' some would say second sight but it had more to do with connections in the right places. In his day, Austen had been a highly successful jeweller in Glasgow who had played on both sides of the law, but times had changed. In mid-career he had sued for peace with the Constabulary, and sold up to run his business interests on the Isle of Skye before coming semi-retired, making and selling small items of jewellery with the Scottish theme – *went down well with the visitors you see*. At that time, the bolt hole on Skye suited him. With the only contact via the ferry from the mainland it gave him a degree of isolation, but now they had built that damned bridge access was so easy, and the place was overrun with strangers in the summer months.

Austen was a widower with a weatherworn complexion and thinning grey hair. A small slightly built man who favoured the country style of dress excluding the kilt, for which he reserved for special occasions. With thin bony hands he could still turn out a finely worked and engraved piece of art, and he was also a skilled model maker and engineer. He had worked many years with a magnifying glass and this had caused some deterioration of his eyesight. It would not be too long before he would be unable to make the finer pieces. But, until that time came he was happy to carry on in isolation. He was in his eighties now and was extremely fit for his age. He regularly took long walks on his beautiful island, always with one eye over his shoulder although this had become less important as time passed. His two storey whitened stone built house sat by the side of a single track asphalt road that overlooked the stunted, wind ravaged turf down to the sea Loch below. This location afforded him direct contact with all the elements that nature threw at him and discouraged casual access to his property. His house formed part of an extended community of farm cottages, retirement and holiday homes and old crofting families scattered along the road that were snuggled into the low clefts in the landscape. Too far to be close and intimate with the neighbour's but close enough form a loose bond between them all. The community was served with a small general store and post office within stout walking distance, and had been sufficiently located in the backwaters of society to satisfy Austen's need to keep out of sight.

On the telephone, Murdo had explained to him in brief that a valued friend had a small amount of metal to dispose of, for as good a price as he could get in the circumstances. He had described the design impressed in it, and could Austen help with this matter? Yes, of course Austen could help and looked forward to finding out the weight of metal his friend had so he could provide further advice. But the truth was that Austen was uneasy about what he had been told as, if his suspicions were proven, then a prophesy was about to be fulfilled. If that were to be the case, then a door would open onto his life and release forces that could engulf him. Normally he would not bother with the risk of dealing with small items of this nature but he knew there was more to this matter than he was being told. At face value, the matter of the gold had the makings of a good scheme, but perhaps not this time. He had dealt with the underworld of Glasgow many years ago, and was well placed to provide this kind of service, as few jewellers would not touch dodgy metal with a barge pole. However he had special responsibilities and obligations in other areas and this news had to be dealt with swiftly and confidentially. Although some old names were in contact with him, with the advent of modern policing many had died out, moved on or retired, and he would have to deal with this request very carefully indeed. This called for a different approach as the old ways had changed; the good honest criminal had been replaced with drugs smuggler with high tech deals, a nasty way of doing business and an underclass that did not have scruples. So, if it was a small amount of metal to be disposed of then he could use it for himself providing there was no provenance. But if there was more of it perhaps the only one he could trust with this matter was the Dutchman, Van der Peet. But first of all, the provenance – and it was all down to the design impressed in the metal, and this troubled him.

The truth of the matter was that Austen was a key link in the chain that had been in place for many years. The purpose of it was to give warning of the discovery of the cargo of a vessel called the *Western Star* to the Edinburgh Templars. Only a very few people really knew what the vessel was carrying, and yes, he did know that the consignment contained incredible wealth, but that was all. He only knew enough to be able to make a balanced judgment if the occasion arose, and this ‘cut-out’ was partly for his own safety. All he needed to know was that once he was sure it had appeared, he had to report to the Edinburgh Preceptory. Prior to this, he would open securely hidden information that would give him the justification for the elaborate and highly secret procedures that had been adopted. Alistair knew there was more to this than a straightforward loss of wealth, but he was never tempted to search for the missing information. Now Murdo had called him, he had to open his orders, not merely by slitting open an envelope, but by decoding them from files securely held and protected in his strong room.

The long living room and study smelt of peat smoke, books and leather as he went across to his well-stocked bookcase. The wall of books extended the full length of the room and from floor to ceiling, and it was from this collection of aged and darkened volumes that he pulled out a couple of special books. He then went to the massive steel walk-in strong room built into the structure of the cottage to the right of the study door, and from a specially constructed compartment within it, extracted one of several brown loose leaf folders with many reference documents securely clipped within it. After flipping briefly through the collection of papers in it to ensure it was the right one, he set it on his desk. Carefully he leafed through the pages until he found a fine lined drawing of a decorative design - a monogram. He adjusted his reading glasses and methodically inspected it, and yes, it virtually matched the design that Murdo had described to him, and he noted the name of the person to which it was ascribed. He then leafed through the pages once more until he found line drawings of designs relating to the occult. There he found the design again. The door he

feared had now opened and now knowing that what would unfold before him. He carefully went through the daily procedure of securing his doors and setting the security systems. Sitting in front of an antique oak desk surrounded by the deep shadows of the room, he spent a couple of hours brooding as the light faded and the wind rose. Soon it would be dark and that could bring its own problems.

Back in Eskby, the metal that Richard owned had lain in obscurity in his house for many years in relative security. But once he had decided to have it valued, the circle of people 'in the know' had to be widened, and not everyone was in ignorance of the circumstances of its presence. For some, the story of Spanish treasure at Eskby was not a ripping yarn but an old story that had leaked out many years ago, and had been dressed up in fictitious nonsense to discredit it. For many generations Austen's forebears had been Master Masons, Templars and archivists who commanded high authority and it was to these records that he held that he turned for information - his 'second sight.'

The Templar legacy remained strong in Scotland and most of the story surrounding them was well known. The once powerful Knights Templar, Poor Knights of Christ of the Temple of Solomon were reputed to have discovered fabulous wealth in the Holy Land. What was not in dispute was that in a very short space of time they had become powerful and influential Bankers to Kings and the Vatican. Pope Philippe IV of France was in debt to the Order, and in the hope of ridding his debts and obtaining the Templar wealth, he devised a plan to dispose of this powerful group. On the notorious Friday the 13th 1306, he ordered the Order to be rounded up, when many were tortured and put to death. Despite this, the Templars fled and he never got his hands on the treasure in the Templar Preceptory in Paris. Some of the Order escaped in their fleet to Scotland which was a country sympathetic to them. As fighting knights they were also most welcomed. In Scotland they established a powerful base of business and trade notably on the West Coast and it was also believed that they decided the outcome of the Battle of Bannockburn with their hosts against the English.

When Scotland gained favour with the Pope, the Templars faded into the background and Freemasonry came to the fore. It was said that the Templars only changed their colours and remained as before, and this is probably why attempts to seize Templar lands and assets in Scotland were not wholly successful. The true story was that much of their assets were still intact. In modern times however, the Knights Templar or 'KT's' as they were sometimes known are viewed as a secondary arm or a Side Degree of Freemasonry. However as Austen knew only too well, this story had served the Templars well and they still were a separate and potent force in modern society. Austen answered to the Templar Preceptory in Edinburgh where the Templars had to this day presided over a highly successful and powerful Chapter.

The cargo/passenger sailing vessel *Western Star* left Leith Roads on a bright January morning in 1861 with a mixed passenger list and freight bound for London. On board was at least one important person and an equally important cargo. The knowledge of the nature of the cargo was known only to the special passenger and the Ship's Master. On face value, it was routine voyage that the Master, a portly and rather serious Ian Kirby had undertaken many times before. The fair weather of the day gave no clue to the disaster that was to befall them, and to the ramifications that the cargo would cause down the generations. Kirby cut an unimpressive dash on the deck of the ship, but had many years of experience at sea under his belt. He had the completed confidence of his employers, The Western Company and it had taken many years for him to reach the exalted position of Ship's Master under its strict eye. He looked forward to retiring from the sea in a few years' time with his wife and grandchildren in the more affluent area of Edinburgh. Here, in a life of ease and with some standing in the community, he would spend time recounting maritime adventures to his suitably enthralled circle of friends. But in the meantime, he plied the seas from Edinburgh to London on a regular basis, the dutiful servant and Company man who never spoke against his employers.

Like his vessel, unobtrusive, strong and dependable he had served his masters well, and they were equally satisfied with their choice of employee. The *Western Star* was sturdy, well found and fast and more than capable of handling the difficult weather that the North Sea was famous for. But progress moved ever onwards and she was due to be replaced by one of the newest steam driven vessels that was being built. But this had been delayed until her conservative owners were satisfied that this new technology was reliable. At this time Kirby would then be retired on a generous pension, and one of the up and coming young thrusters would take the new vessel. So, until this happened, the *Western Star* remained contracted for her regular voyages.

Leaving the calm waters behind and gaining the open sea, the weather started to change. The favourable breeze veered round from the northwest to the north east and increased with alarming velocity. This was not unusual and Kirby had no more concerns than he normally would have in the circumstances. He took these things in his stride and as night was coming on, he ordered a new sail plan and doubled the watches. One of his main priorities was to keep a lookout in the inshore waters for the smaller shipping and fishing vessels, the weather he could handle. Before he went off Watch, he made sure his lights were in good order and being a prudent mariner, he made an additional recalculation for a passage to the Humber Estuary where he would shelter if the weather deteriorated.

By early morning the wind had increased to a gale force and the *Western Star* was now running before high seas with an uneasy motion, but she handled well within her capabilities. Most of the passengers on board were suffering from sea sickness and were confined to their bunks. Those who were well enough had the uncomfortable State Room to themselves as Kirby had forbidden them to venture aloft. One of those hardy souls was Jonathan Nash (junior) who grew increasingly concerned about the state of the weather, and was not reassured by Kirby's confidence that the gale would abate. After all, Nash had two Atlantic crossings under his belt and started to fear for their situation. In the meanwhile and unbeknown to the passengers, the crew advised Kirby that there was a new problem. The violent action of the vessel appeared to have caused a structural problem with the vessel's hull and the water in the bilge was rising. Kirby had no plans to share this information with

the passengers, and duly noted this defect in the log. However, he was well aware of the implications, and set the crew to pumping in shifts. The shifts were rotated frequently to keep the men fresh while the ship's carpenter kept a tally of the level of water, which showed little sign of decreasing. Gradually the wind increased and the waves grew higher streaming white combs of water behind them, ever limiting Kirby's options and his control of the *Western Star*.

To make matters worse, the barometer fell still further and Kirby now realised that he had a serious problem. Before the next night and with the vessel handling badly he knew he had to turn the ship around to steer a course away from the land, and head up into the seas. On reflection, he wished that he had taken this course of action earlier but now was not the time for recriminations, he had weathered worse seas than this and he had every confidence in his capabilities and that of his charge. Plans were made, and with all the crew prepared and the passengers informed, Kirby bided his time until the worst of the seas had passed and then trimmed the sails and turned the ship. On making the turn the ship caught two heavy seas and the resulting action laid her over at an alarming angle. With fittings and furnishings torn from their anchor points, the internal cabins became a shambles and people screamed and cowered as fear reigned supreme. The *Western Star* shook off the seas, but water surging on the deck came below increasing the anguish of all concerned.

Now Kirby sailed the vessel on a north easterly course, with her bows as close to the direction of the wind that he could. Too far into the wind and he was 'in irons', or worse, he would go about on the other tack without warning. Under shortened canvas sheeted in tight and rigging banging and cracking under the strain, the bows reared like a stallion against the oncoming seas and avalanched water off her sides. She buried her head up to the storm jib in the next seas sending a shock that went to the very soul of the boat. Tons of water tore aft down her rising decks with the speed of an express train, sweeping the ship's lifeboats and anything unsecured away in a trice. On cresting the seas, the bows then dropped into the void below with water exploding over her head and through the scuppers. With sheets bar tight and accompanied by the banshee wail of the rigging, the *Western Star* was dying, ever so perceptively so, but she was dying as her trim was altered with the rising water below decks. With no sign of the weather easing or relief in sight, if the rocks did not claim her, then the Devil would.

The wind's icy blast increased, and with situation deteriorating faster than Kirby anticipated he ordered all passengers to don life preservers – such as they were. With that, all pretence of normality evaporated. Kirby and his steersmen never left the wheel and Jonathan went above and caught the Second Mate Williams braced against the mizzen stays. As the pair of them held on to the stays and to each other, he learned from Williams that although the ship was heading as close to the seas as was possible, it was losing way and if the wind did not abate the *Western Star* would not be able to make headway at all. Kirby would then have to stream a sea anchor and set the sails 'pilot fashion' so she could lie head to the wind and ride out the storm. Mr Nash was not to make this knowledge known to the rest of the passengers and judging from the demeanour of the Second Mate, Jonathan could see that the situation was worse than Kirby was obliged to admit to. He also suspected that they were closer to the land than they thought.

During the night the wind increased to severe gale accompanied with dense snow showers, and despite the crew's efforts to stop the water from getting between the decks it was slowly gaining on them. With little light below and most of the passengers imploring the Almighty

for salvation, the ship's violent motion only increased their anguish. At this point, Kirby and his crew realised that they were watching their own funerals in slow motion and with nothing further they could do, Kirby sent some of his Senior Officers below to comfort the passengers. He then ordered his crew to set distress signals – *surely there must be another ship out there...* During the night the storm abated only slightly, and the *Western Star* bore onward with the drift of the storm, trying as she would to keep her course with her head into the seas. Gradually Kirby accepted the inevitable. He was losing ground and they would not be able to continue doing this much longer.

All the next day they were virtually adrift, and sustained ever increasing damage with the loss of the few remaining guard rails on the deck to the heavy seas. No food was being prepared and with what dry rations they had nearly expended, those who could eat were at a spiritual low ebb. Also, those who could not take water were dehydrated and in a state of utter despair. No other ships were seen, the only navigation that could be done was by dead reckoning and there was no way of signalling for assistance apart from the distress signals that the ship carried. By now, the sea and sky had merged into a grey gloom and with the snow showers becoming heavier there were no points of visible land to warn them if they came in too close.

The following night came early as what little grey light there was gave way to the darkness. All souls on board hung on until at just after two in the morning when a large sea broached the vessel laying her broadside to the oncoming seas and the weather. The violent motion threatened to capsize the ship but she held on until shortly afterwards, a hard shock went through the hull. This was followed with a long tearing sound of timber and the screams of those entombed below as the awful blackness burst in and engulfed them. The *Western Star* had struck Iron Scar and with cries to the Almighty from the doomed trapped below; she rolled over on her side, broke up and was assimilated into the scars and diffused by the heavy seas of that night. In sight of land and all alone, all on board perished in short order with two other vessels on the coast that night.

In the grim daylight a tide of broken flotsam and bodies were deposited against the outer harbour defences and on the shoreline on either side of the harbour. Because of the two other vessels that had been lost, the loss of the *Western Star* would remain anonymous until documents were later recovered from one of the corpses that identified her. Because of this, it was over a week later before the loss of the *Western Star* was telegraphed to London and Edinburgh and in both cities; a group of men sat with ashen faces with their heads in their hands. Resigned to the enormity of their loss, they ordered their emissaries to Eskby by all means possible. The bodies of many of those lost including Jonathan Nash were never recovered.

Following a Board of Enquiry into the loss of the three vessels that night, it was concluded that a recommendation be made for the construction of a lighthouse on the Iron Scar for the purpose of preserving of Life at Sea. Paid for in blood and a secret treasure, the North Iron Light then became just more than a draughtsman's dream.

Jonathon Nash

Cunningham, Nash and Partners were a long established Law firm in the City, the fact that the elderly Cunningham had retired and his share in the business had been bought by Jonathan Nash (senior) was of little concern to their patrons. For many years they had enjoyed a portfolio of distinguished clients and because of Cunningham, Nash and Partners' long experience in the profession, they were able to advise them all on a range of profitable and financially beneficial activities. The firm was itself in a privileged position as one of its most valuable clients was the Knights Temple Preceptory in London. In fact, all the Partners in the Firm were Templars and they were retained to deal with the Preceptory's business as a priority. Jonathan Nash junior was groomed to follow his father's distinguished legal and financial career but from an early age he proved to be quite a handful. With his father's brilliant mind he soon acquired the knowledge and qualifications to start him on a well-trod and lucrative career. But a long series of minor scandals and embarrassments were to put paid to any notion of him continuing until he had mended his ways and proved himself.

With a tall lean frame and good looks to match he was quite the ladies' man, good with the cards, enjoyed riotous behaviour with drink and was incredibly streetwise. Most of the embarrassments were covered up by his family but some had not escaped attention of those outside, and if he could not be curbed, then the family's business would suffer. The Elders themselves were men of the world but it was made quite plain that there was a limit to the currency of the name that Cunningham, Nash and Partners had in the City as it was then.

Jonathan senior would have far preferred that his son would settle down and marry the lovely Agatha. But eventually he got wind of a major scandal involving his son and the wife of a Peer to the Realm. He was also in the fortunate position to head off the problem at the pass (while parting with not an inconsiderable amount of money into the bargain). In the year of 1849, enough was enough and overnight, Jonathan junior had the strange 'good fortune' to secure the assistance of an anonymous backer to travel to California to seek his riches in the newly discovered goldfields. Jonathan had been bought off and sent away to a place as far as he could be to reform his ways; otherwise any form of position and wealth for him in a later life was nothing more than a poor man's fancy.

After enduring a gruelling passage at sea and then a long trek to California, he absorbed himself in the uproar and confusion of a lawless and booming society and dropped off the radar. He was not a wealthy man but as he had more resources than the majority of those around him, he did not starve. To his credit, he acquired land for prospecting from the State. Through the subsequent gambling and subterfuge he profited well, also being a member of the Aristocracy he had learned to handle weapons better than most men. In the lawlessness of the region being a dead shot came in handy on more than one occasion, and his talent in this line eventually brought him troubles. He lived in part amongst the squalor of the mining camps and long cold lonely times in the wilderness but during his time there he was one of the lucky ones to have a good strike. He not only lost gold while gambling, but by astounding risk taking and astonishing good luck he also won it.

These were a make or break it times for Jonathan and eventually he found himself a partner. Then he diversified his interests and invested in the provision of goods and necessary requirements to the camps while managing his other resources with an absolute ruthlessness. In a short time Jonathan became an incredibly wealthy man and when he found out that his partner was skimming off a percentage of the profits – he promptly shot him dead. It was this incident that made up his mind that it was time to cash in and return home while he was still alive, and could enjoy the proceeds. With his business acumen acquired by dint of hard work, he also felt that he would now be rehabilitated by his family and the society that he had left behind. As a wealthy man in his own right by his own hand, he would be welcomed with open arms by those he had left and after all, he still had the necessary connections.

The year was now 1858 and over the next few months, he travelled by ship from San Francisco to New York and thence across the Atlantic to Scotland with its ancient and established Templar associations. From there he had the assurance that his wealth would be lodged at the Edinburgh Preceptory, which was one of the safest places in the land to securely hold a quantity of bullion. It was here that he took up his new life for a while and whilst with the Edinburgh Chapter, he was appointed a trusted guardian of a transfer of their funds to London at the same time as his own. The choice was wise one as Jonathan was risking all his fortune with the Preceptory's on the voyage, and if this first one went well then he would be well paid. Also, there was the promise of others that would follow - and he knew that to renege on this deal would bring about unthinkable consequences. As the transfer was probably one of the largest outside of the Bank of England absolute security had to be ensured, and it was agreed to have it completed in single separate consignments at different times. For this propose it was deemed that the first transfer should be the largest one and completed by sea while at the same time, transferring a dummy cargo by land. This made sense by ensuring that not all the wealth could be lost at one time and as it was the first transfer, it was less likely for it to be observed. The transfer was to be completed by the *Western Star* which was a vessel in the possession of a Company owned by the Templars and captained by a senior Officer of the Order. The *Western Star* was in fact one of the essential modes of transfer between Edinburgh and London in these matters and as she was an ordinary ship in the commercial market, she enjoyed this cover for the Order's special transactions and passed off unnoticed. In the end, Jonathan never got to enjoy the fruits of his labours and the lovely Agatha was also spared a miserable life thereafter.

10

At Francey's house

Campbell sat low facing the open fire in the comfortable arm chair with the remaining glass of red wine in his hand. While the coals in the fire shifted slowly and shouldered down in the grate, the dog stretched out on the hearthrug and dozed while a contented glow

surrounded them. From the kitchen came the sound of Francey putting the dinner plates into the dishwasher. With an excellent meal inside him and a comfortable warm 'fug' enveloping the room, he was tempted to fall asleep. Francey's terraced house was on the right hand side at the upper end of Quay Street and a recently modernised, but humble affair. The front door opened directly into the living room to an open staircase that led from the living room up to the first floor two small bedrooms. A small narrow kitchen was situated at the rear. She had decorated the plain plastered walls of the living room in cream and on the largest areas of wall space; a couple of tasteful pictures had been hung. The room was simply furnished with a double settee and a single armchair and reflected her simple and singular lifestyle. The open space under the stairs was taken up with a desk and computer; this was the heart of the holiday lettings business that she guarded jealously. On the whole Francey led a fairly lonely existence and seldom entertained guests in her home, more content with her own company and her extensive collection of CD's.

Her tasks completed for the time being, she entered the living room with what remained of the two bottles of the Australian Shiraz in her hand and set it down on the small coffee table. Tonight she wore a pair of close fitting jeans and a tight black top that accentuated her figure and had her hair tied back, falling over her right shoulder. Campbell smiled at her

"Thanks Francey, that was the best dinner yet,"

"Tell that to your mother, I'm sure she will be impressed, she may even pack your bags for you," she quipped.

The pair of them had always got on well together, but his first love always had been the sea and he had left the fishing boats behind and joined the Navy, where he had qualified as a clearance diver. With a failed marriage behind him, he decided to come out of the Services and had moved in with Murdo and Sarah where he alternated between helping at the Glass and fishing. He was a successful fisherman and now owned his own fishing boat in the harbour, and like his father he had also joined the lifeboat crew. When Murdo eventually retired he would take over the pub, but that was into the future and in recent times it served as a safety net if fishing collapsed completely. His elder brother had emigrated to Canada years ago and earned more as a computer consultant over there than he ever could here, so they seldom saw him. On his return home from the Navy he had found Francey still single, and although they now enjoyed a close friendship that was as far as she was prepared to go.

She poured out the remainder of the wine into their glasses and listened to the wind buffeting the roof while they watched the specks of dislodged soot fall into the grate. "No fishing for you tomorrow with this," she said.

"No, it will take a few days for the sea to go down, I have a load to do though and father wants some work doing as well – fancy some decorating at the Glass?"

She returned a wry smile, "On your life! I've this place to sort and then father's lounge wants doing if he will let me, so you can sort your own."

The conversation turned to Richard, "why did he never get married again Francey?" she thought a while about this before replying,

“Well he had his chance but he was very close to Mum, and he never truly got over losing her, he’s happy in his own way and he’s not the best person to live with you know.”

Like father like daughter, thought Campbell, “he was having a heart to heart with dad yesterday, don’t know what it was about but mother said it was a serious matter,”

She pricked up her ears at this. She thought that she knew most of her Dad’s business but clearly she did not. Suddenly brought back to earth her eyes bored into him, “about what?”

”I told you, I don’t know, I was at sea at the time, but after that Dad made a phone call to Scotland, has Richard any dealings up there?”

“No, not that I know of, can you find out?”

Campbell thought a second, there was little chance that Murdo would answer a question like that, he knew that he and Richard were close but there were also things in Murdo’s life that were out of bounds. This was intriguing though, perhaps they had a business deal going down. “I’ll see what I can find out but don’t rock the boat ‘till I get back to you.” She accepted that for the time being; content to let the subject rest. For the remainder of the evening they talked about Campbell’s life abroad until it was time for him and Jess to leave.

“My turn next,” he said as he stood at the door, “and thanks.”

She smiled and handed him the dog lead, “I’ll hold you to that, make it after the weekend,” and with a peck on the cheek, he turned into the night and walked down to the Glass with his coat pulled tightly around him.

Francey closed the door and stood a while with her back to it, yes Campbell was one of the best, but she still did not want to get involved with him - just yet...

11

Austen's decoding

On the Isle of Skye the darkness had long since settled over the wild land and after an excellent beef dinner, Austen took a glass of whisky – one of the Islay Malts, back to his living room and study. In the seclusion of his surroundings, he carefully and methodically continued to search through his documents under the ornamental desk lamp. January on Skye was a long dark time and the heavy drapes to the windows shut out the foreboding weather and cold. Now was the time for him to open his secret information. With the peat fire smouldering in the hearth and one of the two volumes that he had removed from the bookcase at his side, his thin artistic fingers leafed through the pages in the folder he had located from

the strong room until he found, and extracted an Index. Both this Index and the individual reports that he sought were encoded so that the casual reader would not have access to them. The method of encoding chosen for this purpose was not the more readily known Masonic Atbash Cipher. This cipher was a simple substitution cipher that was used with the Hebrew alphabet and had only one possible key, however it could be easily adapted for the English alphabet but it was not suitable for this purpose. Austen used a straightforward Transposition Mixed Cipher system where each letter was substituted by another one, but was encoded and rapidly decoded with a keyword of choice.

Transposition Mixed Cipher would not stand the test of a modern cipher attack, but had been sufficient for preserving the secrecy of the documents at a particular level. This allowed the information to be extracted in as short a time as practicable by using nothing more technical than paper and pencil. It worked like this, in the English language the letter that appears with the highest frequency is the letter 'e', followed by 't', then o,a,n and so on until a letter frequency table is constructed. With a straightforward letter substitution cypher, if the letter 'e' was substituted by the letter 'j', then the location of each letter 'e' could be guessed at by counting the j's from the letter frequency table. By applying this principle to the remainder of the alphabet, the whole plain text could be deciphered quickly by someone who was experienced, but the level of secrecy it afforded was adequate in this case. Both the Index and the particular document that he wished to read both required separate keywords, which increased the security.

So, Austen's first exercise was to find out exactly how the letters of the alphabet had been randomised in the Index and for this, he required the keyword.

The actual keyword he required was concealed within a full page of delicately hand written text. The text itself conveyed to the reader a lesson in morality and exalted him to respect humanity, while quoting texts within the Freemasonic rituals. The text was immaterial because the spelling of the code word was hidden in the third letter after each comma. After extracting the non-repetitive individual letters and combining them, the eight letter keyword for the Index was revealed.

By the use of a pencil and ruler Austen then constructed a table eight letters wide and four deep, and in the top row of the table he entered the key word. Below this key word the remaining letters of the alphabet left to right were written nearly filling the remaining spaces below but with blank vacant spaces at the end. Below this table the full alphabet was separately written out in one line. To the casual observer, this matrix of figures was incomprehensible, but Alistair had carried out this exercise many times before. He then set about the next stage of the decode and read the letters of each column in the table vertically. He then wrote out the newly randomised letters right to left below the alphabet in one line as they were read off. Now, each letter of the alphabet in the one line now had a separate randomised identification. These new letters were the decode to be used on the Index.

The Index page in the file was a matrix of separate eight letter groups neatly arranged in line and above each other with the inclusion of some dummy letters as well. Once the letters were matched with the decode, all the plain text and the obvious dummy letters were revealed and the Index could be read. It took Austen a full hour to decode the Index and when he crossed out the dummy letters he was then left with a list whereby he could navigate around the file. Also contained within the Index was a coded reference to the code word key to each separate report. When he selected the report he wished to read, he would have to repeat the

operation (with the addition of an added numerical key for greater security). These new code word keys had been carefully chosen from words of the ceremonies of the Templars and Masons and as they were not universally known, therefore, the uninitiated could not guess what they were.

It was laborious and painstaking work which Austen had no difficulty with, as he had been indoctrinated in this system by virtue of the services that he had completed for the Templars over the years. He was thankful that the report that he required was not doubly encoded as some of them had been. This had created problems in the past. He then selected the report he required which was again, written out in eight letter groups and he worked on these for another two hours before he was finished. He carefully laid the decoded text over the green leather covered writing pad on the desk and slowly sat back and digested its illuminating contents.

First of all he had identified the mark that Murdo had described to him; it was the personal cipher of one, Jonathan Nash and of this there was no doubt. The cipher should have had other marks with it indicating a date but Austen did not have this information. Its existence would mean little to anyone in the outside world as Nash's business was unknown outside of his claustrophobic group of associates, but his cipher on a piece of un-assayed gold from that particular location in England spoke volumes. It proved that the lost wealth of the *Western Star* actually existed in some smaller or greater amount and not only the wealth belonging to Nash himself, but that of the Templar Preceptory. He now feared what he read. Contained within the information was a line of text relating to the letters E, I, and L. Only a handful of the top echelon of the Templars knew about the deeper meaning of these three letters. Even fewer knew that part of the wealth consisted of an unbelievably powerful symbolic treasure, and knowledge of a deep meaning that many would kill to own, or have destroyed. This situation was way out of Austen's league; he was now but a mere emissary, and perhaps an emissary of his own demise. His few hours of careful research into a hunch had now turned into a major financial and political problem, but he never even considered the possibility of burying the information. He dwelt on this for a while, finished off the bottle of whisky by his side and carefully encoded the original paper with another new personal key phrase. He then placed the papers back within the file and then burned the entire original document and his full notes in the fire grate.

An uncomfortable brush with the past now sat on his shoulders and the room closed around him like a ghost. He now pondered this unwelcome visit. Austen's family had not only been jewellers of renown and high standing in the City, but in the past they had been the Treasurers of the Edinburgh Preceptory with the special responsibility of the acquisition and sale of bullion. He knew about those he now had to deal with in this matter regarding the *Western Star*, and he feared that this knowledge could do him harm as he did not now know whom to trust. He would think about this and make a call to them tomorrow or perhaps the next day, but first of all he would return the call to his nephew.

Richard's secret

The following day dawned with a cold and gloomy sky with the promise of snow on the tail of the bitter gale. In the morning Murdo was in the bar completing his routines before the lunchtime opening and one of the first jobs of the day was to liven up the coals of the taproom fire and get some warmth into the room. Sarah was in the kitchen preparing some food but it was unlikely that this lunchtime would produce many orders. The period just after Christmas was always quiet and with no need to prepare for a busy lunchtime opening, Murdo went casually about his work. However the peaceful routine of the day was about to be shattered. The telephone rang in the distance followed by Sarah's muffled voice when she called for him to take the extension. Murdo was not best pleased with this, he had work to do and he tutted to himself, yet another distraction from his routine for the morning. He set down the small bottles he was stocking the back bar in the taproom with, and picked up the receiver. He recognised Austen's soft voice from Skye immediately.

"Thank you for getting back to me so soon Austen, are you able to advise me on the matter of the gold?" Austen's voice came straight back to him and its tone set Murdo on edge.

"Listen carefully to me Murdo," replied the old man in a quiet, level voice, "I will tell you what I can and I think that the time has arrived for which you were prepared for. You have now fulfilled your obligations."

Murdo was caught off balance and listened more intently.

"How well do you know your 'friend?' do not tell me his name, I do not want to know this now but you must level with me."

"I know him well and he is a long standing friend of mine."

"Can he be trusted, I mean *really* trusted?"

Alarm bells rang in Murdo's head, the confirmation that Richard was a trusted friend should have been enough for normal purposes, just what was Austen trying to tell him? "Yes he can," he replied hesitantly.

"Good, this is good," said Austen, and his voice relaxed a little, "now listen carefully as what I have to tell you must not be disclosed to anyone else as you and your friend may have troubles coming."

Murdo felt uneasy at this point, "troubles?" what was coming next? He knew that Austen did not trifle with warnings unnecessarily, and that now he had been told that his secret role had been fulfilled, he knew his life would change.

Austen then told Murdo that the reason his role had now been realised because Jonathon Nash' cipher had been discovered. He retold Murdo what he needed to know about the circumstances of his special position. He reminded him about Jonathan Nash, his wealth and

the shipment on the *Western Star* and who else would have claim to its cargo. It felt strange to be openly talking about matters that had been secretly buried in his earlier life.

“This is no ordinary lost shipment Murdo, this is fabulous wealth belonging to the very powerful group that you are aware of. Wealth so powerful that even those who are bound by ancient law and obligation to have it returned and protected may feel that they themselves would like to lay claim to some of it. This wealth has the power to turn the minds of men and I know that there are individuals who would stop at nothing to avail themselves of it.”

There was a silence on the line when he had finished speaking. Murdo’s mind was in a whirl as he took in information that he never thought that he would ever have to act upon. Eventually, when Austen had finished speaking he asked an obvious question of his Uncle. “Are you in any danger”?

Austen laughed softly on the line, “my work has put me in danger all my life, what is a little more? However I cannot withhold this information, I have to report something which I am bound to do. So, for me not to do this would bring unbelievable consequences to the family and to myself. I will report that some small item has come my way and that I am investigating it, I will not lie but I will buy you some time, and for this purpose – we have not yet spoken.” Then he added rather ominously, “*after that I know not who will come.*”

There was another long silence before Murdo spoke again, “then you must do this, but first give me some time to prepare my friend.”

Austen agreed and after an exchange of pleasantries, he replaced the receiver. As an afterthought Murdo hoped that Sarah had been too busy in the kitchen to listen in on the other phone. He stood silently for a while in the taproom surrounded by the atmosphere of the room and the ticking of the clock while he took stock of what he had just heard. The light from the livening fire glinted off the multitude of fittings and trinkets on the wall but there was no warmth in it. The ghosts of those who had gone before looked on from the shadows as a door opened and the old days came back to haunt him. A threshold had been crossed and the legend had come to life by the last person who he would have thought would have done so, his old friend Richard Cullean.

His work nearly completed, he made his excuses to Sarah and walked swiftly across to Richard’s cottage. By now the gale was abating but the grey sky gave promise of more bad weather to come, a fitting backdrop to his mood. Campbell had gone to sea in heavy weather with the rest of the fleet, catching up on lost gear and income and the harbour was strangely quiet. He was welcomed into the cottage and sat down and while Richard put the kettle on for a brew. Murdo told him what Austen had said to him about the lost wealth including the reference to the Templars and some of Austen’s special role. He was worried and said so, a warning from Austen was not to be taken lightly and he asked Richard to tell him what he really knew about the gold.

Anticipating some sort of revelation, Richard brought the two mugs of tea into the room, and sat down in his chair by the fire. He did not speak until Murdo had finished his story, and by then he knew that Murdo McAllister not only knew more about the lost wealth, but was somehow intertwined in its story.

“Only you and I must know this,” he said to Murdo. “This is not of my making but I now must deal with the consequences.” Richard knew that it was the time to tell the story of the Cullean secret that had been preserved by fear for many years, the secret of the Cullean gold.