

other
The Monarch
of The Glen

peter kerr



CHAPTER ONE

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*EDINBURGH, CAPITAL OF SCOTLAND –
AUGUST 1990*

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Princes Street had never looked more alluring: a cloudless summer sky, the castle towering on its craggy seat above the glen of gardens that form a backdrop to one of the most spectacular avenues in the world. Yes, thought James McCracken, Princes Street was special. Edinburgh was special – unique, a treasure. And that really meant something, coming from a Glasgow man.

At the corner of Waverley Bridge, a clutch of camera-toting Americans gazed awe-struck at a piper as he skirled the strains of *Scotland the Brave* over a scattering of coins in an upturned bonnet. James, wearing his sixty years well (and knowing it!), smiled a contented smile while he weaved his way through the throngs of tourists trudging up the slope from the railway station. He had enjoyed his visit to Edinburgh, having stopped off briefly en route from London to the Scottish Highlands to take in a little

of the cultural atmosphere. Culture was his business, and he liked to 'top up' his stock-in-trade whenever the opportunity arose. The fact that the nearest he'd come to culture on this occasion had been a stand-up comedy gig in a Grassmarket pub mattered not a whit. He'd been in Edinburgh during the International Festival of the Arts and, in due course, would make a point of mentioning this to anyone who might be impressed.

Dressed casually but stylishly in a fine tweed sports jacket and lightweight slacks, James trailed his Louis Vuitton suitcase through the swarms of people coming and going across the station concourse. He paused to buy a copy of *Scottish Field* from the news stand, where he flashed the sales girl a melting smile. It had been said that he bore more than a passing resemblance to Sean Connery. James agreed, and he flaunted it – discriminatingly, of course.

Beneath the main arrivals/departures board, meanwhile, Charlie Skidmore was scanning the information through his sunglasses, a seen-better-days Adidas holdall under his arm, a slightly perturbed expression on his face. Charlie was as macho as they come, but knew from the smirks he was attracting that those around him reckoned he was about as camp as a field full of wigwams. In his mid fifties and looking leaner and fitter than many half his age, Charlie was clad from head to toe in black leather, a studded biker jacket and peaked 'captain's' cap giving him the appearance of a refugee from the Village People pop group. Long, wild hair and a goatee beard added a certain Bohemian

quality to his appearance: a look that Charlie had deliberately cultivated over recent years.

He duly made his way to the booking office, where he lined up behind a small, elderly woman who was nervously gathering up her ticket and change at the window. With her bits and pieces finally tucked into her handbag, she turned to leave. Seeing Charlie staring down at her, she caught her breath and clapped a hand to her mouth.

‘Oh, my God Almighty!’ she twittered. ‘The things ye see at Festival time!’

‘Aw, relax, granny,’ Charlie muttered in a broad Glasgow drawl. ‘Ah only eat the under-nineties!’

She bundled him out of the way and toddled off in haste.

‘Next!’ yelled the ticket clerk.

‘Oh, eh, Inverness return, pal.’ Charlie cast a despondent glance at the money he was parting with. ‘And, ehm, that’ll need to be second class, like.’

He was checking his change with an even more disconsolate look when he walked into the crowded station bar a couple of minutes later. Ignoring any derisory reaction to his garb, Charlie took a few moments to survey the scene, wheels turning in his mind. He raised an eyebrow as he noticed the immaculate form of James McCracken sipping a glass of wine at the far end of the bar. Charlie edged his way through the crush until he was standing next to him. Then, faking a shove by one of the nearby scrum of customers, he stumbled into James’s shoulder, causing his drink to spill down his jacket.

‘Aw, heh, sorry, pal. Ah mean, Ah just got bumped in the...’

‘Please don’t worry about it,’ James replied in a refined Scots accent. He calmly pulled a handkerchief from his top pocket and started to dab his lapels. ‘These things happen, and I’m sure it wasn’t your –’

‘That’s right,’ Charlie cut in, while flicking the front of James’s jacket with his fingers, ‘but Ah just hope it’ll no stain – know what Ah mean?’

James gave Charlie a reassuring smile. ‘It’s only white wine. Absolutely no problem.’

‘Aye, well ... as long as ye’re sure and that.’

James took his handkerchief and mopped some drops of wine that had splashed onto Charlie’s arm. ‘I’m very sure. In fact, the wine’s more likely to damage *your* jacket. After all,’ he winked, ‘we wouldn’t want to rust the rivets, would we?’

Charlie feigned a laugh. ‘Yeah, right enough! So, no harm done, then, eh?’

As Charlie made to leave, James grabbed his wrist, shook his hand and gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder. ‘Think no more of it, friend.’

‘Aye, right,’ Charlie replied, smiling uneasily as he attempted to free his hand from James’s grip. ‘Nice meetin’ ye. And, uh ... all the best, all right?’

With that, he turned tail, elbowed his way through the crowd and left the bar with a self-satisfied smile on his lips. James watched him go, a knowing smile on *his*.

Charlie made a beeline for the gents’ toilets, where he nipped smartly into one of the cubicles and locked the

door. Breathing hard, he slipped a hand inside his leather jacket and pulled out a wallet – a fat one. A grin of delight lit his face as he surveyed the contents. ‘Ya fuckin’ beauty!’

But, as Robert Burns once said, ‘The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft a-gley.’ And those were the very words quoted by James McCracken as the cubicle door burst open. He still had that knowing smile on his lips. Charlie could only stand open-mouthed as James calmly removed the wallet from his hand.

‘Mine, I believe?’

‘Aw, heh, listen, pal – Ah never took nothin’. Ah mean, ye can check – there’s nothin’ missin’, like.’

James ran a thumb over the wad of the banknotes. ‘Yes, well, everything seems to be tickety-boo.’ He put the wallet into his inside pocket, tweaked Charlie’s cheek, wished him a pleasant bowel movement, and left.

Gobsmacked and shaking, Charlie slumped back against the cubicle wall. ‘Bugger me!’ he gasped. ‘Ah never saw *that* comin’!’ But what was the point in standing there feeling sorry for himself? There was a train to catch. He pulled back the cuff of his jacket to check the time. No watch there. He tried the other wrist. Ditto.

‘What the hell...!’ Sensing a bad penny poised to drop, he felt the breast pocket of his jacket. ‘Nah, it couldnae be!’ But it was. He gave the same treatment to his trousers. Ditto.

‘Ma bloody wallet! A hundred quid – ma holy all! The lousy, thieving bas–’

He was cut off in mid expletive by a Tannoy announcement: ‘*The train about to leave Platform Three*

is the 11.30 to Inverness, calling at Perth, Pitlochry, Aviemore –'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah!,' Charlie growled, scrambling out of the cubicle. 'Hold yer damn horses! Ah'm comin'! Ah'm COMIN'!'

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As Charlie scurried panting past the Inverness train's first class coaches, he failed to notice James sitting in solitary comfort inside, reading his copy of *Scottish Field*. The guard's whistle blew the very second Charlie clambered up from the platform. But there was nothing solitary about conditions in the second class carriage he found himself in. With the train gathering speed, he ricocheted his way between row after row of full seats, paying no heed to the who's-this-weirdo? glances he was attracting from the broad mix of nationalities on board. And the same situation prevailed in every carriage he passed through. It was the height of the tourist season, and there wasn't a single empty seat available throughout the entire length of the train. Not in the second class parts at any rate.

'Ach, well, at least the view's good,' Charlie grunted, having ultimately resigned himself to slouching against a bulkhead wall outside one of the toilets. Through the window of an adjacent door he could see that they were passing between the cat's cradle of steel that forms the world-famous Forth Rail Bridge. And the view was indeed good. Peering through the network of girders,

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he could make out every detail of the Firth of Forth, all the way down to North Berwick Law, rising behind the shore like a giant molehill some thirty miles to the east.

But there was still a long journey ahead, and spectacular views weren't going to help take the weight off his feet. On the other hand, the mundane view of a toilet door just might. Or, better still, a glimpse of its 'Vacant' sign actually could. And it did.

Eureka! In a trice, Charlie had locked himself in and was making ready for a rest – his backside on the lavatory seat, his legs splayed out in front, his old holdall serving as a pillow for his head. He leaned back and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

'Ah-h-h-h ... it's maybe no five-star, feather-bed luxury, but to my aching arse this is the Presidential Suite in the fuckin' Waldorf Astoria.'

Before long, the steady rhythm of the rails had lulled him to sleep.

*

Back in first class, James McCracken laid aside his magazine as a steward arrived carrying a small silver tray.

'Your dry Martini, sir.'

'Ah, marvellous.' James gave the steward an enquiring smile. 'Stirred, not shaken, I take it?'

'Just as you ordered it, sir.'

'Excellent – thank you!'

James took a sip of his drink, then settled back to admire the passing scenery.

*

In the interim, a potential state of emergency was developing outside Charlie's toilet. A myopic Japanese couple were standing muttering to each other, while gesturing irately towards the toilet door. They were muttering in English, but with a pronounced Japanese accent. The man finally raised his wrist watch to his wife's face and pointed at the dial. 'Nearly thirty minutes already,' he spluttered. 'Bloody ridiculous!'

His wife was standing with her legs crossed, a pained expression distorting her features. 'Mmm-ee-oo-ee!' she yodelled.

Totally unaware of the drama unfolding only a few feet away, Charlie Skidmore was snoring away blissfully under his cap.

'Oh please, *please* hurry,' the Japanese woman whimpered, looking distinctly distressed, and writhing a bit as she stared rheumy-eyed at the 'Engaged' sign. 'I *absolutely* desperate!'

His patience exhausted, her husband started to bang on the toilet door. 'Open up! Lady need use bathroom! She completely frantic already!'

A string of profanities emanating from within eventually revealed that Charlie had been roused from his slumbers. And he was not amused. 'OK, OK, OK!' he growled. 'Tell her to hold onto her doughnut!'

Charlie opened the door just as the little Japanese man was about to give it another thump. His fist hovered in

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mid air as he stared up slack-jawed into the darkness of Charlie's shades, while his wife barged past them both and slammed the toilet door behind her. A forefinger unwound itself from the man's still-raised fist and pointed trembling in the direction of her retreat. 'No got doughnut problem,' he quavered through a sheepish smile. 'Got dy-horia-hi-hay!'

*

While all this was going on, James McCracken had repaired to the first class dining car and was sitting at an immaculately-set table, tucking into a succulent steak with all the trimmings. The waiter poured him a glass of red wine.

'Everything to your satisfaction, sir?'

'Absolutely excellent, thank you.' He gestured towards his plate. 'Um, this steak...?'

'Aberdeen Angus, sir.'

James nodded, smiling. 'But of course. Marvellous!'

*

Charlie, cap on the back of his head, had now resumed his former position, standing slumped against the bulkhead by a door. He was gazing glumly out of the window, taking in the magnificent Highland scenery, but in no mood to appreciate it. With a sigh, he dipped his hand into a trouser pocket and pulled out a few coins and four crumpled one-pound notes.

‘Stuff it!’ he shrugged, ‘In for a penny...!’ He picked up his holdall and trudged off in the direction of the second class buffet car.

The cramped, smoky bar was packed with chinwagging, guffawing male customers, all swaying to the motion of the train and nearly all pissed, or getting that way. Empty beer bottles and used plastic tumblers littered every horizontal surface, while the floor was a flotsam of spilt drink, dropped peanuts, fag ends and potato crisps.

‘Jesus!’ Charlie grumped. ‘A public shit house with a booze licence!’

As he made his way to the counter, silence fell like a wet blanket on the assembled clientele – eyes on sticks, wisecracks being muttered behind cupped hands. The barman was drying glasses, unfazed and indifferent. He’d seen it all before.

‘Help you?’ he said to Charlie.

‘Yeah, bottle o’ beer, pal. Aye, and better gimme one o’ yer sandwiches and all, like.’

‘Boiled ham do you?’

‘Hmm ... what else ye got?’

‘That’s it.’

Charlie gave him a might-have-bloody-well-known-it look. ‘Aye, well, better make it the boiled ham, then, eh!’

He leaned both elbows on the counter and stared blankly at the barman while he was fixing his order. After a few seconds, someone in the still-hushed pack behind him started to sing the Village People’s *In the Navy*, prompting an eruption of communal laughter. Slowly, Charlie turned round and eyeballed the mickey-

taking culprit, a young drunk who was standing at the back of the crowd, gleefully accepting the accolades of two giggling mates. The rest of the customers, meanwhile, were happily resuming the rhubarb of banter that Charlie's arrival had interrupted. For them, the comic interlude was over. But it was only just beginning for Charlie...

The barman tapped him on the shoulder, drawing his attention to the sandwich and bottle of beer he had brought to the counter.

'Four pounds, fifty-five!'

'For *that*?' Charlie retorted.

The barman indicated a price list behind the bar. 'What you ordered, isn't it?'

Mumbling to himself, Charlie shook his head in dismay. He dipped into his pocket, fished out his miserable stash of cash and threw the whole lot onto the counter. 'Keep the bloody change!'

*

In stark contrast, James McCracken was downing the last of his wine in the pampered comfort of the first class dining car.

'Excellent, thank you,' he said to the waiter.

'Something from the sweets trolley, sir?'

'No, um, just coffee, please. Oh, and a cognac – *Hine*, if you have it. Yes, and I'll have a look at your selection of cigars, if I may.'

*

Back in the buffet car, Charlie was still standing at the bar. He took a bite from his sandwich, squirmed, dropped it onto its plate and shoved it away. After taking a slug from his bottle of beer, he grimaced, looked at the label, then said to the barman, ‘What the hell’s this for a Highland brew – stag’s piss or somethin’?’

The barman shrugged, but said nothing.

‘Aye, and they reckoned Sid Snot snuffed it with Kenny Everett,’ bellowed the young drunk who’d made the Village People connection a bit earlier. He and his mates dissolved into cascades of laughter.

Calmly, Charlie lifted his abandoned sandwich, ambled over and stuffed it into the lad’s mouth. ‘You and the ham were meant for each other, pal. Enjoy!’ As the lad spluttered, Charlie gave his mates a manly slap on both cheeks, posed hand-on-hip, pursed his lips and whispered, ‘See yiz at the YWCA, girls!’

At that, he cocked his cap at a jaunty angle and swaggered out of the buffet car, not bothering too much about who he collided with in the process.

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CHAPTER TWO

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*AN HOUR LATER – INVERNESS, CAPITAL OF
THE HIGHLANDS...*

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Outside the station, Charlie looked up at a large sign which read: ‘*CEUD MILE FAILTE – A HUNDRED THOUSAND WELCOMES*’

As long as they were of the folding variety, he mused, he’d settle for a helluva lot less than that right now.

In the swarm of to-ing and fro-ing travellers, James McCracken was now making *his* way out of the station, following a man in chauffeur’s uniform who was carrying his suitcase. Charlie caught sight of them just as James was climbing into a vintage Rolls Royce, parked nearby...

‘It cannae be! But it *is*! It’s the sticky-fingered wide boy that nicked ma watch *and* ma wallet!’ He started to run towards the Roller. ‘Heh, you!’ he hollered. ‘Stop! Gimme back ma hundred quid, ye thievin’ piece o’...’

But he was wasting his breath. James was completely oblivious. The fact of the matter was that he didn’t

even know Charlie had been on the train, and doubtless wouldn't have given a toss anyway. The car glided off, with Charlie left standing on the pavement – puffing, perplexed and penniless.

‘...Shite!’ he said, in delayed completion of his failed appeal for reimbursement. ‘Shite! Shite! *Shite!*’

* * *

The image of sun-lit mountains reflected on the surface of Loch Ness would have lifted the spirits of all but the most morose of souls. And Charlie Skidmore saw himself as a fully paid-up member of that hapless club as he shuffled along the road towards Drumnadrochit. He had only been walking for an hour or so, but already his feet were giving him gyp, and, despite its dearth of contents, that damned old holdall of his felt like it was full of bricks. All the while, a lark was singing high above the roadside heather, its song jarring Charlie's ears like Louis Armstrong on helium. Not that he disliked Louis Armstrong. He was a big ‘Satchmo’ fan, in fact – but not today, not here, and not doing an impersonation of a bloody skylark.

‘What a wonderful world?’ he muttered. ‘Aye, Ah don't fuckin' think so!’

Most of what little traffic he'd encountered so far had been travelling the other way, so the sight of a juggernaut bearing down on him from the direction of Inverness produced a much-needed ray of hope. Truckers were decent spuds, Charlie reflected – always ready to help a

traveller in distress. Not this trucker. And Charlie being dressed like a pansified apology for a Hell's Angel might have been the reason. With twin horns blaring, the truck roared past.

Charlie's lift-thumbing hand closed into a fist, which he brandished in the truck's slipstream. 'Away and stuff yersel', bawbag!' he yelled. 'Aye, and Ah bet the Loch Ness Monster turns out to be yer wife!'

But, when one door closes...

The tooting of a car horn drew Charlie's attention back in the opposite direction, where an open-top Jaguar E-Type was now approaching at speed. Hope springing eternal, out went his thumb again.

Up went the Jag-driver's middle finger as he also roared past, grinning.

Even this fleeting glimpse of the fellow, who was wearing a Barbour cap, shades, checked shirt and a gormless expression, suggested to Charlie that he was a typical Hooray Henry: a chinless-wonder country toff, whose pedigree had long since become devoid of even the slightest trace of hybrid vigour.

'Inbred prick!' was the more succinct analysis offered by Charlie as he bellowed once more into a buffeting slipstream. Yeah, he knew the type well...

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While the chauffeur was fetching his suitcase from the Rolls, James McCracken stared admiringly at the turreted facade of Strathsporrان Castle, and marvelled

at its lochside location on the lower slopes of Ben Doon. Just then, the sound of a car crunching up the gravelled sweep heralded the approach of a Jaguar E-Type, horn tooting, its Barbour-capped driver waving delightedly.

‘Ah, James, you old pirate!’ beamed Hamish, Lord Strathsporrán, as he swung a leg out of the Jag, exposing a ribbon of snowy skin between the top of his woolly hose and the cuff of his knee-length shooting breeks. ‘How a-absolutely magic to see you again!’

‘Yes,’ James smiled, ‘it’s been some time – much too long.’

They embraced briefly, then Hamish held James at arm’s length, looking him up and down. ‘Wow, you’re looking bloody – well, er – *fit*, I m-must say, old boy!’

James raised his shoulders. ‘Well, you know – a lifetime of clean living.’

Hamish slapped his back and let rip with a silly laugh: ‘Hwaar! Hwaar! Hwaar! Yah, I bet you could give me twenty years, yet you’d pass for my twin brother any day.’

James thought it prudent to let that speculation pass without comment. ‘Good of you to lay on transport from the station,’ he said instead, gesturing towards the chauffeur, who was now lugging his suitcase towards the castle.

‘Ah, so Hutchinson was on time, I take it?’

‘Absolutely. Took me on a little tour of your estate when we got here too. Very considerate.’

Hamish pulled a that’s-what-I-pay-him-for shrug, draped an arm over James’s shoulder and ushered him

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towards the castle entrance. ‘So, do tell, old fruit – how are things in London? There’s still nowhere quite like the w-wicked old metrollops, don’t you think?’

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Down on the main road a short time later, an ancient tractor pulling a trailer laden with straw bales drew up outside the castle gates. Charlie, who had been squatting on top of the load chewing a piece of straw, jumped down, stretched and surveyed the massive wrought iron gates lying open beneath an elaborately-sculptured archway. A sign on one side read: ‘*STRATHSPORRAN CASTLE – Open to the Public, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Daily – Admission £3.*’

‘Hard-up bunch, them aristos,’ he mumbled to himself. ‘Aye,’ he smirked, ‘but it’s all a matter o’ degree!’

‘This where ye wanted off, son?’ shouted the tractor driver, eager to be on his way.

‘Aye, this seems to be the place. Thanks, pal.’

Charlie threw him a salute, shouldered his old holdall and plodded off through the gateway. Knackered as he was, it took him a good fifteen minutes to wind his way up the rhododendron-lined drive. But it wasn’t the condition of his feet that stopped him in his tracks when he rounded the final bend. He stood, eyebrows arched, as he pondered the E-Type Jag and vintage Roller parked on the castle forecourt.

‘Well, how about that?’ he muttered, smirking again. ‘It’s a true sayin’ – ye never know what’s round the corner!’

He continued on and climbed the stone stairway to the main door, yanked the bell-pull and took a couple of steps back to gaze up at the towering splendour of castle. ‘Quite a pad, Charlie boy!’ he nodded. ‘Yeah, quite a fuckin’ pad!’

The heavy wooden door creaked open and a stern-looking man dressed in butler’s garb appeared. He did a double-take at Charlie. ‘Yes!’ he barked, clearly unimpressed by what he was looking at.

‘Right, zero hour!’ thought Charlie. ‘Better give this pompous old arsehole the *full* fairy treatment!’ He assumed the hand-on-hip stance he’d employed when wiping the smiles off the faces of those three young drunks on the train. Pouting, he batted his eyelashes. ‘Oh, hi there, sunshine,’ he lisped through a coy smile, his Glasgow accent only just discernible now. ‘Is, um – well, is Lord Strathsporrان about? He, eh, asked me to –’

The butler silenced him with raised hands and lowered brows. ‘Do you have an appointment ... *sir*?’

‘Yes, well, that’s just what I was...’ Charlie started to fumble in the pockets of his leather trousers. ‘Fiddlesticks!’ he tutted. ‘Can’t seem to get it out!’ He tilted his head and gave a girly giggle. ‘Story of ma life!’

‘Get to the point!’ snapped the butler.

Charlie struck a shocked pose. ‘Oo-oo-oo! Bit suggestive that, I *must* say!’

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IN THE CASTLE DRAWING ROOM,
MEANWHILE...

James and Hamish, Lord Strathsporrán, were lounging in well-sat-upon Chesterfield chairs by an open fire, nursing drams of whisky. Although sporting a fair range of antiques, the room had a distinctly forlorn look, made all the more dreary by a long line of Hamish's ancestors staring down haughtily from the oak-panelled walls.

James downed the last of his whisky, then stood up and rubbed his stomach. 'Excellent drop of malt, Hamish. Best aperitif of them all, I always say.'

'Couldn't agree m-more, old chap.'

'Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go and freshen up before...'

'Ah, *dinner!* Yes indeed. I was so enjoying your company I almost forgot.' Hamish tittered nervously as he got to his feet. 'Oh, and there's another thing I almost forgot ... yes, I have some rather – how can I put it? – well, *interesting* house guests I'm just d-dying for you to meet.'

'Really? Can't wait.'

'Hmm, yah – shooting parties, actually.'

James laid down his glass and patted Hamish on the shoulder. 'Two of my favourite pastimes.'

Patently puzzled, Hamish tugged at his earlobe. 'Two, er ... *pastimes?*'

'Yes, you know – shooting and parties.'

Hamish tugged at his other earlobe. The eventual dropping of the penny was accompanied by an explosion

of laughter. ‘Hwaar! Hwaar! Hwaar! Oh, hey – very droll, James. Yah, bloody brilliant, mate!’

As James left the room by one door, someone knocked at another.

‘Come!’ Hamish shouted. The butler entered. Hamish glanced up from the fresh glass of whisky he was pouring. ‘Yes, Farquharson – what is it?’

‘There is a Mr Charles Skidmore to see you, sir.’ The butler walked forward and handed Hamish a business card.

A frown furrowed Hamish’s brow. ‘Interior Design Consultant? Skidmore? I don’t know anyone called –’

‘Forgive me for interrupting, sir, but he gave me this letter, which, *apparently*, was sent by you. To do with providing estimates for redecorating the –’

‘Ah-*hem!*’ Hamish coughed. ‘Hmm, yes, I do recollect something about ... but, er, t-tell him I’m busy, Farquharson.’

‘As you wish, sir.’ The butler cleared his throat. ‘But your letter does mention that he would be welcome to stay ... overnight, sir.’

‘*What?* Oh ... did it? Well, um, ah...’ Hamish was getting into a proper flap.

The butler, meanwhile, remained unflappable. ‘Shall I show him to the former nanny’s quarters, sir?’

Hamish was tugging at both earlobes now. ‘Yes, that should – yes, whatever, whatever.’ He freed one hand to make a dismissive gesture. ‘Just – just carry on, Farquharson!’

The butler bowed a stiff little bow and walked regally to the door, where he turned and cleared his

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throat again. 'Will Mr Skidmore be joining you for dinner, sir?'

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