



ROBERT GODDARD

HIS CLASSIC BESTSELLER

Never Go Back



About the Book

Harry Barnett thought he had left his military career behind, so he is startled when two figures from his past turn up on his doorstep after fifty years. An old friend has organised the reunion to end all reunions: a weekend in the Scottish castle where the ex-comrades took part in a psychological experiment many years before. They haven't seen each other since.

As they set off on their all-expenses-paid jaunt to Aberdeen, the old friends are in high spirits. But the cheerful atmosphere is quickly shattered by the apparent suicide of one of their party.

When a second death occurs, a sense of foreboding descends on the group. It appears that the past is coming back to haunt them, a past that none of them have ever spoken about. Their recollections are all frighteningly different. So what really happened?

Then when one of them uncovers an extraordinary secret, he becomes convinced that they will never leave the castle alive ...

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About the Author
Also by Robert Goddard
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NEVER GO BACK

Robert Goddard

In memory of Daisy Taylor, a dear and kind friend

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to John Brooks for sharing with me his memories of life in the Royal Air Force. Needless to say, his experiences bore no resemblance whatsoever to those of Aircraftmen Barnett and Chipchase.

Chapter One

IF HE HAD flown back with Donna, of course, it would have been all right. If her flight had been delayed by a couple of hours, it would have been enough. If he had simply turned right instead of left coming out of the cemetery, he would probably have got away with it.

But it was not all right; it was not enough: he did not get away with it. In the end, the ifs and therefores amounted to nothing. Fate had set a trap for him that day. And he walked obligingly and unwittingly straight into it.

Thus did a decade of good fortune for Harry Barnett come to an end without him even realizing it. Marriage and fatherhood had proved during those years to be the sweetest of surprises. He regretted coming to them so late, but the circumstances that had brought Donna and hence their daughter Daisy into his life made the delay inevitable. He had never been one to dwell on missed opportunities. The present – and their future as a family – were his to enjoy.

The recent death of his mother had failed to puncture his contentment. A swift and gentle exit at the age of ninety-three was no cause for anguish. Her race had been run to a dignified finish.

Harry's links with his birthplace had effectively died with her. He had returned to Swindon to arrange her funeral and to clear out the house she had lived in for more than seventy years. The Council would want to put another tenant in as soon as possible. The fact that 37 Falmouth

Street held so much of Harry's past could not stand in their way. Nor would he have wanted it to. It was time to move on.

That morning, Donna had flown back to Seattle, where Daisy had been staying with her grandparents. Mother and daughter would drive home to Vancouver tomorrow. Harry planned to join them in a week or so, when he had disposed of his mother's clothes, crockery and furniture. It was not a task he was looking forward to. But it had to be done. And there was no one to do it but him. Such was the lot of an only child.

Seeing off Donna at Heathrow and travelling back alone to Swindon had left Harry feeling sorry for himself, however. He was in no mood to begin emptying cupboards and filling bin-bags. He walked away from the station past the boundary wall of the former Great Western Railway works, then crossed the park and made his way up to Radnor Street, where his old primary school, now converted into offices, stood opposite the entrance to the cemetery.

For the first time in Harry's memory, the gravestone commemorating his father, Stanley Barnett, killed in an accident in the GWR locomotive-erecting shop when Harry was three, no longer stood in its familiar place near the highest point of the cemetery. It had been removed to have the name Ivy Barnett added at long last to the inscription. Harry stood for a few minutes by the flower-strewn mound of earth that marked the spot where his mother's coffin had been lowered in on top of his father's two days ago. He breathed the clear spring air and gazed towards the flat horizon. Then he turned and slowly walked away.

Leaving the cemetery on the far side, he seriously considered making for the Beehive, his local in those distant days when he had been a Swindon householder in his own right and co-proprietor of Barnchase Motors. But he reckoned a descent into beery nostalgia would not be a

good start to a week of solitude and toil, so he headed downhill instead to the market hall, where he bought a couple of lamb chops for his supper before returning to Falmouth Street.

It was a mild April afternoon of watery sunshine and warbling birdsong. Even the office blocks of downtown Swindon contrived to appear, if not attractive, then at least inoffensive in the restful light. The Railway Village was quiet and tranquil, a condition the average age of its residents generally guaranteed. Turning his back nobly on the beckoningly bright yellow frontage of the Glue Pot - or at any rate deciding he should put the lamb chops in the fridge before allowing himself a swift one - Harry crossed Emlyn Square and started along Falmouth Street.

He saw the two men ahead of him before he realized it was his mother's door they were standing at. They were about his own age, which he would once have described as old, but, now he had attained it, seemed merely a bemusingly high number. One was short and tubby, anoraked, track-suited and baseball-capped. The other, though scarcely much taller, was thinner, his clothes shabby and old-fashioned - beltless raincoat, crumpled trousers, laced shoes in need of a polish. He had a full head of white, tousled hair, a beak-nosed, bony face and a put-upon stoop. His companion looked contrastingly at ease with himself, staring at the unanswered door of number 37 with his hands thrust idly into his anorak pockets, sunlight flashing on his glasses in time to the gum-chewing motion of his well-padded jaw. They were debating something in a desultory fashion, or so a shrug of his shoulders suggested. A battered leather suitcase and a smarter, newer holdall stood beside them on the path. Harry did not recognize them, nor could he guess what they wanted. Whatever it was, though, he felt certain they had not come to see him.

Then the thinner of the two spotted him and touched the other's arm. A word passed between them. They turned and looked at Harry. As they did so, he stopped. And everything else stopped too, even the chewing of the gum.

'Ossie?' the fat one said after a moment of silence and immobility. 'That's you, isn't it?'

No one had called Harry Ossie since his National Service days, which had ended fifty years ago and been largely forgotten by him for almost as long. While his brain sent a none too nimble search party off in quest of memories that might explain this turn of events, he opened his mouth to speak – but found nothing to say.

'It's Jabber. And Crooked.'

The words lassoed Harry's scrambling thoughts and wound them in. Jabber; and Crooked: the nicknames of two of his comrades from the strangest and most memorable episode of his spell in uniform. Mervyn Lloyd, dubbed 'Jabber' on account of his talkative nature; and Peter Askew, whose sobriquet 'Crooked' counted as a salutary example of National Service wit. For Harry's part, 'Ossie' was a reference to his middle name, Mosley, inflicted on him by his father in tribute to none other than Oswald Mosley himself, much to Harry's lifelong chagrin.

'Don't you recognize us?'

Technically, the answer was 'Just about'. The years had wrought their changes with a heavy hand. Lloyd's Welsh lilt survived, but his spry figure had not. If he had denied being Mervyn Lloyd, Harry would not have argued. Askew meanwhile had been bleached and bent by time, like some potted plant left outdoors through too many winters.

'Bloody hell,' said Harry at last. 'It really is you two.'

'Good to see you, Harry,' said Askew, who had never been one of the most assiduous deployers of nicknames, perhaps because he resented his own.

'Well, it's ... good to see you.' Harry shook them both by the hand. 'But ...'

'You look surprised,' said Lloyd.

'I am.'

'Didn't you get Danger's letter?'

Johnny Dangerfield was evidently a party to whatever was going on as well. It had to be some kind of reunion to mark the fiftieth anniversary of their demob. Harry could think of no other explanation, though left to him the anniversary would have been allowed to pass unmarked. 'I've had no letter,' he said, frowning in puzzlement.

'You must have. This is the address Danger gave us.'

'I haven't lived here in years, lads. Decades, actually. It's my mother's house. She died recently. I'm only over to clear the place out.'

'We struck lucky, then, didn't we, Crooked?' Lloyd grinned. 'Danger asked us to drop by on the off chance, Ossie, seeing as we were both coming this way.'

'Sorry to hear about your mother, Harry,' said Askew.

'Thanks, Peter.'

'Where are you over from, then?' asked Lloyd.

'Canada.'

'All right for some. How'd you end up there?'

'It's a long story.'

'I'll bet. When d'you go back, then?'

'A week or so.'

'Perfect. How d'you fancy a couple of days north of the border?'

'The border?'

'Scotland, Ossie. Johnny's arranged for us to get together at Kilveen Castle this very weekend.'

'You're joking.'

'No. All the old crew. Well, those who are still in the land of the living. Those he's been able to track down. We'd given up on you.'

'My mother must have forgotten to forward the letter,' Harry mused. 'Or else it went astray.'

‘Well, you know what the post is like these days. But never mind.’ Lloyd clapped Harry heavily on the shoulder. ‘We’ve found you now.’

Chapter Two

THE ROAD THAT led young Harry Barnett to Kilveen Castle in March 1955 began at Swindon Labour Exchange two years previously, when he passed a perfunctory National Service medical and asked to enlist in the RAF, commonly believed to be a softer option than either the Army or the Navy. The half a dozen weekends he had spent gooning around in the RAF Reserves out at Wroughton swung it for him and six weeks later his third-class rail warrant to RAF Padgate dropped through the letterbox of 37 Falmouth Street.

After the trauma of basic training, he was despatched to Stafford, where his suspended career as a filing clerk in Swindon Borough Council was regarded as suitable grounding for work in the stores. There was to be no soaring across the sky for Aircraftman Barnett, for all his boyhood fantasies of Battle of Britain derring-do. His unit had its feet firmly on the ground.

It was amidst RAF Stafford's cavernous repositories of the equipment and effects of disbanded wartime squadrons that Harry met his future business partner, Barry Chipchase. Though the same age as Harry, Chipchase had acquired from somewhere a maturity beyond his years, one feature of which was his unerring eye for the main chance. The moment when Barnchase Motors collapsed under the strain of his wheeler-dealing and Harry finally saw his friend for what he was lay nearly twenty years ahead of them. For the present, Harry was happy to follow Chipchase's lead where the pursuit of female company and a fast buck were concerned. What could have been a

tedious sojourn in the Midlands became under Chipchase's tutelage an education for Harry in the wilier ways of the world.

At first Chipchase funded his activities through straightforward black marketeering, but the demise of rationing forced him to resort to other methods of turning a profit. During 1954, he reigned supreme as the station's fixer, trading everything from weekend passes to cushy postings and, beyond the gate, more or less anything that had not been bolted down. Harry was his trusted assistant at the outset and, by the end, his loyal partner.

That end came early in 1955, when, with only a few months left to serve, Chipchase overreached himself. Siphoning off fuel from the station tank to sell to local farmers and smuggling out surplus mess furniture to flog round the pubs of Stafford was not enough for him. He wanted to go one better – and bigger. The stores held several collections of silver belonging to squadrons unlikely to be re-formed short of a Third World War. Much of it, Chipchase calculated, would never be missed and could be put to better use providing him and Harry with what he called 'demob dosh' – a nest egg for a fast and loose future on civvy street.

The plan foundered, as such plans often do, on bad luck. When Air Chief Marshal Bradshaw saw a silver salver bearing the insignia of a squadron he had once commanded for sale in a shop in Birmingham, he initiated an inquiry that led the RAF Police by a winding route to the barrack-door in Stafford of Aircraftmen Barnett and Chipchase. The game was up.

It was useless for Chipchase to protest to Harry that the deal he had struck with a certain nameless individual had been based on melting down the silver, not selling on items intact. He should have realized he was doing business with people he could not trust. It was a point Harry had ample opportunity to expand upon during the weeks spent in the

guardroom cells awaiting court martial. The prospect, as the witless flight lieutenant appointed to defend them explained, was bleak. For such an outrageous offence against the honour as well as the property of the Air Force a sentence of six months or more in detention could be anticipated. And those months would then be added to their service. With a conviction for theft round his neck, Harry would probably find he had no job to return to in Swindon. His future suddenly looked far from rosy. And Chipchase's stubborn insistence that he would somehow contrive to get them off the hook failed to improve the view.

Then, *mirabile dictu*, came salvation. Chipchase tried to claim credit for it, but Harry was more inclined to thank his guardian angel. The station CO, Group Captain Wyatt, summoned them under close guard to his office a few days before the court martial was due to be held and offered them, much to Harry's incredulity, a way out. Volunteers were needed for a special project of three months' duration. No details were forthcoming beyond Wyatt's dry assurance that it would not involve being parachuted into Russia. If they signed up for it, did as they were told unquestioningly throughout and generally kept their noses clean, the charges would be dropped. If not ...

But refusal was scarcely an option, as Wyatt must have anticipated, since he had already arranged for their kitbags to be packed. He wanted them off his hands. And they were happy to go. Chipchase theorized later that retired air aces might have cut up rough if they had discovered how little care was being taken of their old squadrons' silverware. A court martial would have attracted unwelcome publicity. The top brass had probably sent a message down the line that it was to be avoided at all costs. He and Harry should have held out for a better deal.

The one they had got was still pretty good, though. Forty-eight hours later, they arrived at Kilveen Castle, an

outstation of RAF Dyce, near Aberdeen, and met their fellow volunteers for special duties of an unknown nature.

There had been fifteen of them in all, three of whom were drinking tea and taking their ease fifty years later in the kitchen at 37 Falmouth Street, Swindon. Ease was of course a relative term in Peter Askew's case. It occurred to Harry that he was one of those people who had never quite got the knack of life, which was a pity, given how much of it had now passed him by. Mervyn Lloyd, on the other hand, was a stranger to inhibition. And to silence. He was currently living up to his nickname by summarizing for Harry the contents of the letter from Johnny Dangerfield he had never received.

'Seems Danger made a packet in the oil business, which took him back to Aberdeen. The castle's been turned into a hotel. That's what made him think about staging a fiftieth anniversary reunion of our little band of brigands. Got the University to approach the MOD for our discharge addresses and started writing round. There was a good bit of forwarding and phoning after that. One or two have fallen off the twig. Well, you have to expect that at our age. And one or two - like you, Ossie - were hard to track down. But Danger's done a bloody good job, all things considered. I'll leave you his latest round robin to take a shufti at. The long and the short of it is he's booked the castle for this weekend. Just us. And it's a freebie. Danger's paying. His treat. Well, he's probably got a bargain price this early in the season, but it's still bloody generous of him. Seven of us are going up on the train from London tomorrow. I'm staying with my daughter in Neasden overnight. She doesn't know it yet, but she's putting up Crooked as well. Turned out he and I both live in Cardiff, so it made sense for the two of us to travel up today. Plus it meant we could stop off here and see if you really were a lost cause. Which I'm happy to say you aren't.'

'You'll come along, won't you, Harry?' Askew asked plaintively. 'It wouldn't be the same without you.'

'No more it would,' said Lloyd. 'The invitation's too good to refuse.'

'Is Barry going to be there?' Harry asked, guessing as he spoke that Chipchase would have proved peculiarly elusive.

'Who?' Lloyd looked confused, wedded as he was to the nicknames of fifty years ago.

'Fission,' said Harry, recalling with a mental turn of speed that surprised him the punning handle that had attached itself to his friend early in their Aberdeenshire exile. (Nuclear fission had been much in the news at the time, though fish and chips had been more often in their thoughts.) 'Barry Chipchase.'

'Yes,' said Askew. 'He'll be there.'

'Right. Your best mate. I remember.' Lloyd levelled a podgy forefinger at Harry, apparently considering this clinched the matter. 'Wouldn't want to miss out on the chance of catching up on old times with Fission, would you?'

'He's already up there, actually,' said Askew.

'He is?'

'All covered in the round robin, Ossie,' said Lloyd. 'No stone unturned.'

'Well, I—'

'Can't say no?' Lloyd cocked one eyebrow expectantly. 'That's it, isn't it? Same as us. You just can't turn down old Danger when he wants to throw his money around.'

Harry had more or less promised to join the expedition by the time he saw Lloyd and Askew off on the train to London later that afternoon. An all-expenses-paid jaunt to a Scottish castle of which he had mixed but by no means harrowing memories won out over a weekend of house-clearing in Swindon every time. He was confident Donna would not begrudge him a brief amble down memory lane.

He could never be accused of living in the past. But a fleeting visit to its poignant purlieus could surely do no harm.

Chapter Three

OPERATION TABULA RASA - or Clean Sheet, as its participants more commonly referred to it - was the brainchild of Professor Alexander McIntyre of Aberdeen University. He wanted to test his theory that anyone could be taught any academic subject to a reasonable level of proficiency, given the right environment and the right methods. Kilveen Castle, thirty miles inland from Aberdeen and available at a bargain rent, was deemed by him to be an ideally secluded location for such an experiment. And a group of National Servicemen who had kicked over the traces of Forces discipline constituted appropriately unpromising material. Through the good offices of a cousin of his, an Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Air Ministry, the RAF agreed to provide fifteen such bad boys, hoiked from punishment units, detention centres and guardroom cells at short notice in March 1955, for a three-month trial. If Professor Mac wanted them, it was implied, he was welcome to them.

Professor Mac was afterwards heard to complain that three months was not enough. Six was the minimum necessary. But the University, who were paying the rent and supplying the teaching staff, would not go beyond three. Nor would the RAF, who reluctantly seconded a flight lieutenant and a warrant officer from 612 Squadron at Dyce to ensure the fifteen recalcitrants did not run amok.

Thus, in a sense, the experiment was doomed to failure from the outset. From the point of view of the participants,

however – the students, as Professor Mac called them – it was a resounding success. Three months lounging around a classroom in a Scottish castle studying art, literature, history, algebra, geometry, psychology, philosophy and suchlike with less than determined zeal involved a modicum of mental effort and occasional bouts of cataleptic boredom, but was so vastly preferable to the alternatives that not a single voice was raised in protest. Nor did anyone abscond, disrupt the proceedings or steal so much as a teaspoon. In disciplinary terms if in no other, they were model students. The three months passed uneventfully and ended with few signs of startling intellectual progress, at least as far as Aircraftman Harry Barnett was concerned, although one or two of his fellow students succeeded in developing scholarly habits if not attainments. It was, nonetheless, not what Professor Mac had been hoping for. He went back to the drawing board. While Harry and the other Clean Sheetters went their separate ways.

Harry found himself posted to RAF Records, Gloucester, for the remainder of his service. Chipchase was despatched to a battery-charging station on the south coast. They did not meet again for several years. And they did not even dream of meeting the thirteen men with whom they had shared a Nissen hut in the grounds of Kilveen Castle, Aberdeenshire, for the three months in the spring of 1955.

The Nissen hut was happily long gone. Accommodation for the Clean Sheet reunion was going to be in the Kilveen Castle Hotel's luxury guestrooms. This was just one of the nuggets of information contained in Johnny Dangerfield's latest round robin, which Harry perused over a pint in the Glue Pot on his way back from the station. Dangerfield had clearly done extremely well in the oil business to judge by the lavishness of the entertainment he was laying on. But he had always been a generous soul, quick to offer the loan

of a quid or a drag on his cigarette. It was, to that extent, in character.

The e-mailed photographs of Kilveen Castle suggested it had hardly altered outwardly. The original sixteenth-century building was a stocky, mean-windowed tower sporting turrets at the corners and battlements between, to which had been added, a couple of hundred years later, like a smart new growth from a gnarled tree stump, a plain but well-proportioned Georgian gentleman's residence. The interior in Harry's day had been more than a little dilapidated, especially in the tower. The rooms had had a bang-up-to-date designer makeover since then, however, with rich-toned fabrics and fine-lined furniture much in evidence. The dining room where they had eaten frugal meals in draughty gloom had been transformed into an elegant restaurant, while the classroom where they had blunted their wits on Cubism and calculus was now a stylish conference centre equipped with every technological aid known to corporate man.

If Kilveen Castle was wearing its years lightly, the same could not be said of all the veterans of Operation Clean Sheet. Dangerfield had supplied notes on their careers and accomplishments since, though in some cases these were distinctly sparse. He described himself as 'pensioned off by an oil giant and divorced by a man-eater', but his address – Sweet Gale Lodge, Pitfodels, Aberdeen – did not sound like a hovel and Harry saw no reason to doubt Lloyd's assertion that 'Danger's rolling in it'.

Lloyd himself had spent forty years shuffling paper for the Cardiff Port Authority and boasted a wife and three grown-up children. It was not a life story to set the pulse racing. Nor was Askew's. Crooked had apparently worked with animals in assorted zoos and vets' practices. His relations with humans were a blank.

A blank was nonetheless preferable to a full stop. Mike 'Three Foot' Yardley had written himself off in a motorbike

accident in 1964. Les 'Smudger' Smith, double-glazing salesman, had succumbed to a heart attack while explaining his employer's unique beading system to a client in Chatham in 1993. Leroy 'Coker' Nixon had drowned (circumstances unknown) in 1983. And Lester 'Piggott' Maynard, after making something of a name for himself as a radio comedy scriptwriter, had died of AIDS in 1987, which some – not including Harry – had already realized on account of a couple of newspaper obituaries at the time. In addition, Ernie 'Babber' Babcock, long emigrated to Australia, was reported to be gaga following a stroke. Thus the original fifteen had been shorn to ten for the reunion Dangerfield had taken it into his head to arrange.

Some of them had clearly done better than others. Gilbert 'Tapper' Tancred never had been a dullard. Harry could remember him surprising the tutors at Kilveen on several occasions with the breadth of his knowledge. And he had been responsible for the more ingenious of the nicknames conferred on every one of the Clean Sheeters. It was no surprise to learn that he had finessed his way into the City, prospered in the pinstripe-suited world of merchant banking and retired to suburban leisure in Carshalton Beeches. His intellectual equal, Neville 'Magister' Wiseman, had likewise done well and was now a semi-retired art dealer living in London SW1. Bill 'Judder' Judd had risen from hod-carrier to house-builder courtesy of several property booms and still had a hand in what had become a family business in Essex – Judd & Sons. Those three plus Dangerfield counted as definite success stories.

The story was less happy where Owen 'Gregger' Gregson was concerned. He had taken early retirement from Colman's Mustard of Norwich to care for a disabled wife and keep pigeons. It did not sound as if his fifty years since Clean Sheet had been fun-packed. Nor did those of Milton 'Paradise' Fripp, bookkeeper for a laundry in Derby prior to uneventful, unmarried retirement.

It was perhaps as well that Harry remained for the purposes of the round robin a question mark. He could only assume his mother had thrown away Dangerfield's initial letter, mistaking it for junk mail, which she had often complained about. What if she *had* sent it on to him: would he have volunteered about himself anyway? Ten years filing memos for Swindon Borough Council; seven running a garage business that ended in Chipchase-induced bankruptcy; six holding down a desk job with Mallender Marine in Weymouth; nine lotus-eating in Rhodes; six going to seed in London; and ten married to a beautiful, brainy American academic: it was hardly an arrow-straight progression and an explanation of every turn it had taken was best not attempted for a number of very good reasons.

Chipchase could have supplied some of this information, of course, but he seemed to have been as reticent concerning Harry as he had been concerning himself. Dangerfield said that he had 'contacted Fission just as he was about to relocate to South Africa, a move he's magnanimously put on hold so that he can join us at Kilveen, pending which he's shacking up at my humble abode'. There was no mention of anything Chipchase had done in the intervening years, but he was surely going to have to come up with some sort of account of himself when he met his old comrades face to face.

Among those comrades he presumably did not expect Harry to figure. Dangerfield would get a phone call from Lloyd tonight reporting that they had struck lucky in Swindon. Only then would Chipchase realize that Harry was going to reappear in his life. They had last met, entirely by chance, in Washington DC more than ten years ago. At that time, Chipchase had been romancing the wealthy widow of a Yorkshire undertaker. Somehow, Harry suspected little had come of that in view of the old reprobate's imminent relocation to South Africa - assuming such relocation was not a cover story in itself. All in all, he

was looking forward to subjecting Chipchase to some gentle grilling.

And if he did not do it, others might. Professor Mac was dead and gone, so was in no position to be curious about whether his experiment had had any long-term effects. But his gloomy young research assistant, Donald Starkie, now Dr Starkie and far from young but probably still gloomy, was going to join them and might be expected to pursue the question. The fact that he would be accompanied by an old student of his from the University, Erica Rawson, certainly suggested that something more than a simple knees-up was planned. Dangerfield had not quibbled over her attendance, apparently. 'I'm sure I speak for all of us in welcoming some young, intelligent – and, more to the point, pretty – female company. Just don't mention her to your wives/ partners/girlfriends/live-in lovers!'

* * *

Harry did indeed fail to mention Erica Rawson when he telephoned Donna late that night. But that was because there were so many other things to say rather than because he had taken Dangerfield's sexist sentiments on board. Donna, as he had expected, was all in favour of him making the trip to Aberdeenshire.

'You've got to go, hon. I remember you telling me about the place. You absolutely have to find out what these guys have been up to since.'

'Not a lot's my bet. It could be a dire weekend.'

'But Barry will be there, right?'

'Apparently.'

'Well, you'll enjoy seeing him again, won't you?'

'I'm not sure enjoy's the word, but—'

'Go for it. What have you got to lose?'

'A couple of days out of my house-clearing schedule.'

'You'll just have to work harder when you get back.'

‘OK, but—’

‘Daisy and I’ll expect a postcard. And take a camera. I’ll want to see how these reprobates have aged compared with my craggily handsome husband.’

‘You think it’s a good idea, then?’

‘A good idea?’ Donna laughed. ‘Why not?’

Chapter Four

SLUMPED BLEARY-EYED AND woolly-headed aboard the 8.30 train to Paddington the following morning, his thoughts as blurred as the passing landscape, Harry winced at a scalding sip of plastic-cupped coffee and wondered if a cigarette would sharpen his mental processes. The answer was almost certainly, but he had forsworn smoking when Daisy was born and his lungs worked the better for it even if his brain did not. Besides, First Great Western in their corporate wisdom did not permit smoking.

That was just one of the ways in which life had changed since he had last travelled to Kilveen Castle, with Chipchase, in a succession of fug-filled third-class carriages, back in the early spring of 1955. They had probably puffed their way through fifty or sixty cigarettes in the course of their tortuous journey, which had begun at Stafford before dawn and had ended, well after dark, at Lumphanan, the closest station to the castle, thirty miles west of Aberdeen on the Deeside branch line. Harry shivered at the memory of stumbling off the train into the bone-numbing chill of an Aberdeenshire night. 'Bloody hell,' he remembered Chipchase gasping. 'They've sent us to Siberia.'

But Siberian their exile had not turned out to be. Far from it. Their three months at Kilveen had been cushier than even they would have claimed to deserve. 'Never mind Clean Sheet,' Chipchase had remarked after only a few days of Professor Mac's gentle regime. 'We've got ourselves a bloody feather bed here, Harry.'

There had in truth been much to be thankful for. 'You've all been given a second chance,' the CO from Dyce had told them during his one and only visit to the castle. 'Be sure you make the most of it.' And so they had, though not necessarily in the way the CO had envisaged. As to whether their second chance had had any lasting effect ... time was about to tell.

Harry headed straight into the ticket office when he reached King's Cross and felt grateful for the twenty minutes he still had in hand before the Aberdeen train was due to leave. The queue was long enough to remind him of the days of rationing. He was not destined to make much progress towards the front of it, however.

'Ossie.' A gravelly voice sounded in Harry's ear. He turned to confront a tall, broad-shouldered, big-bellied man wearing a loose and expensive-looking overcoat over jeans and a sweatshirt. His large, smiling face was familiar, though only faintly so in its current condition of broken-veined puffiness. His hair was even shorter than the day after an RAF short-back-and-sides and Persil white into the bargain. The stud gleaming in his left earlobe was likewise no aid to recognition. But there had been a cockney twang to the one word he had so far spoken, which was as much of a clue as Harry needed.

'Judder.'

'Good to see you, mate.' Bill Judd bestowed on Harry a crushing handshake and a pat to the shoulder that felt more like a clout. 'Come and meet the others. They're out on the concourse.'

'I haven't got my ticket yet.'

'We've got it for you, in case you left it till the last moment to turn up. You always were a tardy bugger. Come on.'

Lloyd had said seven were travelling up on the train. Harry therefore expected to see a sizeable huddle of half-remembered figures ahead of them as Judd piloted him out of the ticket office. What he actually saw, however, was Lloyd and Askew standing together in front of the information screens – and no sign of anyone else.

‘Expect you’re wondering where they’ve all got to,’ was Lloyd’s prescient greeting.

‘Well ...’

‘Tapper’s already on board. Seems he preferred resting his arse on some first-class upholstery to waiting for you on these hard-as-nails benches out here.’

‘They’ve just called the train, Harry,’ said Askew, nodding up at the screens.

‘Yeah. We’d better get a wiggle on, boys,’ said Judd. ‘Some of us don’t move as fast as we used to.’

‘Did you say first-class, Jabber?’ Harry asked as they hefted their bags and joined the general rush towards platform six, where the 10.30 to Aberdeen awaited. ‘Isn’t Tapper travelling with us, then?’

‘We’re all in first, mate,’ Judd shouted over his shoulder. ‘I bumped us up when Tapper showed his hand. I think he was hoping for a quiet journey. We’ll knock that idea on the head, hey?’

‘But—’

‘Don’t worry about it. My treat.’

‘I can’t—’

‘Don’t argue, Ossie,’ said Lloyd in an undertone. ‘You’ll queer the pitch for the rest of us.’ He nodded ahead at the lurching figure of Judd. ‘I reckon bricks and mortar have served him well. Just look at the cut of that overcoat.’

‘All right. I won’t argue. But where *are* the others? You mentioned seven.’

‘Didn’t you read Danger’s notes?’

‘Yes, but—’