

CHAPTER FIVE

On that drizzly Saturday evening in early December, the car park at Stanegate village hall was full to overflowing. Young Farmers and their supporters from hamlets beyond Ayburn to the west, Whiteburnmoss to the north and Whinrigg to the east, lured by the prospect of good food and even better crack, had turned out in force.

Inside, the atmosphere was hot and stuffy, a heady mix of lamb stew, strong local ale and raw tobacco smoke. The quiz had reached a satisfactory climax. Tension was running high.

“Right then,” said Dougie Watson, delegated the responsibility of being the quiz-master for the evening, and enjoying his moment of power. “Last round. Current affairs.” Groans from all sides. “Tom Moray ahead of the game like – but only just. Let’s see if Duncan Robson can knock him off his bawk!”

Tom fluffed out imaginary feathers and clucked like a hen to general amusement and good-humoured banter.

Duncan was leaning forward, hands clasped tightly on the table in front of him, his brow deeply furrowed in concentration. Eighteen months older than Tom, this was

his last chance to compete – and he visibly wanted to win.

A burst of applause. Duncan had answered correctly. Relief flooded his face. They were neck-and-neck now. Success hung on the final question. There was a buzz of excitement. Speculation. Would Tom snatch victory from under his rival's nose?

“All right then, everyone. Settle down. Settle down.”

The hubbub died away. A tense silence filled the room.

Tom felt strangely calm: prepared to be the victor. And why not? Facts stuck to him like flies to flypaper. The quiz was a doddle, always was, when he took the trouble to enter it. School exams had never been a problem for him either, something that had irked Jamie in the past because he had always had to work hard to achieve. But then Jamie had always wanted to be an academic, like his Moray grandfather – another Robert – whereas Tom only wanted to run the farm. “You’ve got the brains to go to university, Tom Moray,” Mr Gregson, his form teacher had said during a sixth form parents’ evening, exasperated by this stubborn youth who had set his sights instead on Hawkrigg Agricultural College. “Don’t sell yourself short,” he had urged. “You could turn your hand to anything.” To which Robert, ignoring this exhortation, had commented, “Do what you feel is best for you, Tom.” And his mother, Tom remembered, had just smiled and said nothing. Perhaps she was thinking of John Rufford at the time.

The thought cut across his concentration.

“Which prime minister’s statue was recently unveiled in London by ex-PM Harold Wilson?” Dougie was asking him.

Tom knew the answer. He looked across at Duncan, feeling the surge of triumph of someone on the brink of winning – and saw the desperation etched deep into his rival’s honest face. Duncan knew the answer too.

“I’ll have to hurry you like,” Dougie was saying.

There were shouts of encouragement from all sides of the hall and then a breathless hush.

Tom hesitated – then made his choice. It seemed the right thing to do. He shook his head and threw up his hands. “Sorry,” he said, feigning ignorance, “ – it’s gone.”

Oohs and aahs to right and left. From the corner of his eye, Tom saw Robert raise an eyebrow.

Dougie paused, cranking up the tension and wanting to make the most of it. The room fell silent. “Duncan?” he asked.

Duncan, his face the picture of triumph, blurted out, “Clement Attlee!” to whoops and wild applause from his supporters round the room.

Tom felt a profound sense of relief. He offered his hand to the victor and stepped away from the table, happy to melt into the crowd of disappointed supporters back-slapping him while Dougie made a little speech and presented Duncan with the silver cup to much cheering and applause.

Supper was called, and to the inviting aroma of lamb stew everyone trooped into the adjoining room. Tom held back.

Sarah pushed her way through the press to reach him. She linked her arm through his, patting his hand reassuringly. “Never mind,” she said looking up at him

with an encouraging smile. But that was Sarah – always prepared to make the best of things. “Can’t win every time,” she said.

Tom nodded. Duncan deserved to win, he thought. He belonged to this place with his Douglas features, characteristics that had effortlessly come down through the generations of the Robsons and Morays: the red hair of varying hues; the fair skin; the similarity of facial structure, and with very few exceptions – the intensely green eyes. Duncan was part of the clan, whereas Tom now knew that he was not – and never could be. He felt apart: separate, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Somehow he got through the remainder of the evening, making mock of his forgetfulness. With Sarah amiably chatting to those around them at the table, he could make noncommittal comments here and there while his attention wandered off on its own.

Two tables further down, he noticed Wallace with Robert in earnest conversation. He was in no doubt what the topic was: every now and then, Wallace would cast a quick glance in Tom’s direction. Robert, Tom noted, was just listening, nodding every once in a while, his concentration fixed on the bowl of jam roly-poly and custard in front of him. What he was thinking was a closed book. Sarah meanwhile was oblivious, too busy chatting with Alison and Beth Liddel from Hopeslaw Farm over Ayburn way.

“Close thing this time,” Duncan said, bursting in on Tom’s thoughts and grabbing a spare chair to sit down next to him. He planted the quiz trophy squarely on the table

between them, a bald reminder he had won, in case Tom had forgotten.

Tom could see his own name inscribed on the winners' plaque for the previous year. "The best man should always win," he said, giving Duncan the benefit of his smile.

Duncan laughed and dug him in the ribs. "Is that so? Hey, Sarah, which one of us do you really fancy, lass?"

She turned, plainly irritated at having her conversation interrupted. "Honestly, Duncan!" she said, tutting at him. "What a question." She put her arm through Tom's, and gave an exasperated little sigh.

"I just thought – to the victor the spoils like."

"Well I'm sorry to disappoint you, Duncan Robson, but I'm not the Quiz Cup to be handed back and forward between the two of you!"

Duncan laughed. "Just checking," he said, dragging himself to his feet before slapping Tom on the back and returning to his table of triumphant supporters, trophy in hand.

Duncan's interest in Sarah was visible for anyone to see. He was a robust young man, hale and hearty like his elder brother, Ross, but as a second son with only thirty acres of woodland to his name, he stood little chance as far as Sarah Armstrong was concerned. When Ian finally retired, High Oakbank and its two-hundred-and-seventy-six acres would go to Ross and Liz, with their two young sons, Scott and Adam. Which was why Wallace was determined Sarah should remain firmly attached to Tom: he would take over Rigg End after Robert, and together, the Armstrong-Moray

holding would stretch from the rough hill country north of the Wall down to the gentle south-facing slopes of The Rigg and the fertile pasture by the river.

But Sarah's attachment, Tom thought, had always been more about friendship than love, even during the past year, when they had been regularly going out together. She readily gave the impression they were very close, but that was all. Maybe it was just her way. Her parents were very protective after all – Mary Wallace in particular, with her staunch Methodism exerting a strong but loving influence over 'Wor Sal'. Sarah, he reflected, never allowed herself to become involved in too much intimacy – even when the opportunity arose. Nights out never ended with a snogging session in the car, for example; dances were always enjoyed for the sheer pleasure of taking part – there was never any smooching when the lights went down; and the back row of the cinema in Wallbridge was for watching the film, nothing more – no groping or fumbling. Sarah would always be loving, but never passionate. That was the deal, and he had never really questioned this in depth before. Perhaps he should have done. What did he really want from a woman? Donna would have known.

Donna. Donna Burdon. Even now, four years later, thinking about her could still rouse him.

They had met at Hawkrigg, she already in her final year – twenty-two to his twenty. She was something of an oddity – stocky, robust, prone to dressing like a man in her over-sized checked shirts and heavy cords, her hair pulled back into a single dark plait that hung down between her shoulder

blades. She had a plain, round face, wore no make-up, and drank and swore like a trooper. From a farming family up in the far north of the county, she was tackling courses girls usually ran a mile from: Forestry and Land Management. She wielded a chainsaw as if it weighed nothing, set fences and handled a tractor with deceptive ease. The lads on her course enjoyed her rumbustious company, cheerfully accepting the possibility she was a lesbian with an eye on the girls taking the Small Animal Veterinary Diploma.

Hawkrigg College was a good forty miles south of Stanegate, just too far for daily travelling. Tom had taken up residence in one of the student halls, confident he could pull his weight back at Rigg End over the weekends and during the holidays. Robert had agreed and encouraged him. "You need to broaden your horizons, Tom." So he had broadened his horizons.

He had seen Donna often enough on campus during his first year, but they had never spoken. When they finally met, it was late one evening in the students' bar at the beginning of the summer term. Tom had become engrossed in the library, reading up on liver fluke and fly-strike prevention and cure. By the time he had turned up at the bar, his usual crowd had left. Donna was there with the lads from her own year, drinking most of them under the table, laughing uproariously at coarse jokes and providing some of her own. She seemed to have an unlimited supply.

Tom, sitting apart from this noisy crowd pondering the contents of his pint, was very much aware of her – and not just because of her raucous laughter. That night there

was something about her: the way she moved if no one was looking; the way she leaned against the bar; the slight tilt of her head when she was listening; her evident ability to weigh up a situation and use it to her own advantage. She was not, he decided after some deliberation, what she seemed, or pretended to be.

Gradually the press in the bar had thinned. Eventually, the members of her group began to drift away, and she dismissed the last two with a hearty thump on the back and the tart retort, “Yeah – and you!”

With only her and himself left at the bar, it was as if she had switched on a magnetic beam and pointed it in his direction. He could physically feel it. With a determined toss of her head, she had flicked the thick plait out of the way and come over to join him, parking herself on the stool next to his.

He had finished his pint, very slowly, and turned to look at her.

“Penny for your thoughts,” she had said in a low husky voice, looking him straight in the eyes, and presenting him with an entirely different persona.

Tom was cautious. Robert had given him sound advice at the beginning of the year. “Tom,” he had said gravely, “You’re going to be with a new crowd at college. There’s going to be the temptation to sleep around. Try to keep your self-respect.” It had proved a timely warning. Away from familiar faces, and by then, Sarah’s willingness to be loosely associated with him, he quickly discovered girls liked to be around him, and he liked to be around them.

Flattered by their interest, he had also recognised that while he may give the impression of being the Last of the Red Hot Lovers, he was nonetheless unpractised in the arts of sexual niceties. Advice in leaflets and hectic couplings depicted on-screen were poor substitutes for actual hands-on experience, so to speak. Copying the astonishingly brief coitus practised by tups seemed unlikely to be appreciated. His recognition that he would be gauche, and possibly open to ridicule, had held him back. In the hot-house atmosphere of student gossip, it had been caution that had kept him chaste, not control of his desires. All of which had left him wondering how he could answer Donna's question, because under that over-sized lumberjack shirt was undoubtedly a pair of large, intriguing breasts, and she was deliberately leaning against the bar in such a way it was impossible to ignore them.

He remembered taking his time to answer, quietly contemplating his empty glass while she waited, unusually silent, her gaze never wavering. "I was wondering," he began, carefully picking his words, "why you pretend to be something you're not." It had been a bold statement, considering he had no idea if his assumption were correct.

She had raised an eyebrow. "And what about you, Lover Boy?"

He had not answered her, so she had provided him with an astonishing suggestion. "Perhaps we could work something out between us then?" And they had, on that first occasion finding the deserted boiler room quite adequate for their purpose. Her adeptness at bringing him to a speedy

conclusion had left him breathless and exhilarated. And that was only the beginning.

Once, or sometimes twice, during the weekday evenings of that summer term, they would secretly rendezvous at the top of the long-abandoned miners' road, his Ford Escort bouncing and juddering over the bouldered surface like an untamed horse, until he reached the derelict miners' hut in the worked-out limestone quarry. She always arrived first, her battered 'Farmers' Blue' utility Land Rover parked up behind a massive slab of rock that had never been moved from the spot where it had landed years ago, blasted from its home high up on the quarry face. She had supplied the sleeping bag. He had been expected to supply the condoms. It was a remote and unromantic spot, often draughty and occasionally cold, but Donna had taught him in down-to-earth language and business-like efficiency everything he needed to know to satisfy a woman – and she was, he discovered, very much a woman. He had also learned a great deal about himself. Her 'anatomy lessons' as she liked to call them, had been thorough. But she had made one thing very clear – their encounters were entirely about 'having sex' and nothing whatever to do with 'making love'. "You're bloody good at it," she had informed him, much to his satisfaction at the time, but there was no emotional attachment whatsoever.

Once, after a particularly vigorous session, when she was lying on her back smoking a cigarette, one knee raised so he could still touch her if he wished, he had finally asked her outright, "Why do you pretend to be a lesbian?"

She had tucked one arm behind her head and turned slightly to look at him, her eyes half closed against the curl of smoke from the cigarette. "To survive," she had said, enigmatically.

Her reply had puzzled him.

She had laughed out loud. "Don't be so bloody thick," she had said, without a trace of malice. "I'm a woman in a man's world, doing a 'man-thing'. Besides," she had added, propping herself up on one arm so he could admire the volume of her breasts and their large dark nipples all the better, "– it's safer. The blokes don't see me as someone they want to shag all the time. I'm just one of them."

It was the only time he had ever asked her anything about herself, and she never asked him anything at all. The end of term came, they had met for the last time at the hut, enjoyed a long and exhausting evening together – and parted. They had agreed not to exchange addresses or phone numbers, and that was that. Lessons over. He had returned to Rigg End for the holidays aware of being different; of being able to suss out what made one woman more attractive than another – and it was not always down to looks alone: some women just gave off certain vibrations, some without even knowing that they did. Sarah, he had suddenly realised, was not one of them. She was lovely and good-hearted, but had not a single ounce of sex-appeal as far as he was concerned. Maybe that was for the best, he convinced himself, as the months passed and Sarah and he had drifted into a more permanent relationship. Sarah would be a devoted wife and mother,

and he would be able to make her feel good about herself, because he would know how.

Meanwhile, the demands of the farm sapped the greater part of his energy. But that did not stop Donna invading his dreams with a regularity he had come to accept. And with these exquisite erotic fantasies came the small, but increasingly insistent voice in his head that what he needed was a woman who really wanted him – body and soul. Sarah’s cheerful disposition, he was beginning to suspect, might not be enough.

After the quiz, as Robert drove them back to Rigg End through the persistent drizzle, it was this uneasy thought that lodged in his brain.

Silence was increasingly becoming their companion when they were together, and Tom did not always have the mental energy to break it. Tonight was such a night, because Donna was in his thoughts. He was wondering if his desire to have full-blooded uninhibited sex, and not a pale imitation, had anything to do with his inheritance from John Rufford. Was it in his blood? He suspected that it was.

“You knew the answer, didn’t you?” Robert was saying, breaking the silence between them, his concentration on the road ahead apparently undiminished.

“What?”

“To the last question. You knew the answer.” Robert turned briefly to glance in his direction, his expression masked by the dark.

There was no point in lying.

“Why did you let Duncan win?”

“Because he wanted to. I can always win next year.”

There was a longer silence before Robert observed quietly, “You don’t always get a second chance, Tom. Remember that.”