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# **Heads or Hearts**

Written by Paul Johnston

Published by Severn House

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# HEADS OR HEARTS

Paul Johnston



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*To my sister Claire,  
with love, admiration and gratitude*

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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## PROLOGUE

**W**oke up this morning, got myself a croissant. And a cup of half-decent coffee. And a banana.

Actually, I've been waking up numerous mornings and getting those previously unavailable comestibles from the corner shop. Independent Edinburgh in 2033 has become almost citizen-friendly. That doesn't make up for the previous three decades of austerity and gritty bread, but it means life for the masses has become more tolerable.

Which, of course, is the point. The Council of City Guardians is full of wise guys and dolls. Widespread unrest and verbal, even physical abuse of the tourists were completely unacceptable. First they tried locking people up. Then they realized that the way forward was to bring a little happiness into the long-suffering citizens' lives. It didn't take much: a smattering of democracy ('Elect Your Own Ward Representative!'), the opening up of the tourist zone to locals on Sundays, better food and drink. Cinemas even show films that were long banned on the grounds that they would incite civil disobedience – *The Wild Bunch, 1900, Alphaville* . . . As for books, almost anything has come into the city's libraries. Elmore Leonard is popular, probably because his criminals are so convincing – Edinburgh folk have a taste for people who break the law. Then again, the sainted Elmore didn't approve of prologues.

Even the blues, previously prohibited as subversive, have been made available, the Council's thinking no doubt being that twelve-bar wailing and bawling is more to be pitied than bothered about. Their loss. It turned out that blues enthusiasts are all over the place, nursing battered cassettes and the ancient machines to play them. Exchange clubs immediately sprang up and my ears were blown, both by songs I hadn't heard since I was a student and by musicians I'd never come across. Life is almost worth living again.

Here's the but. Nothing good or even mildly bearable lasts. There's always some genius who thinks he – and males are inevitably the overwhelming majority – can take things to the next even more wonderful level. Actually it was several demented specimens,

not all of them from Edinburgh. Suddenly the ‘S’ word was back in fashion. Since the Enlightenment Party won power in the last election thirty years ago and cut the city off from its neighbours, Scotland had become a ghost, a fossilized memory, a cry of anger and frustration carried away on the wind.

Now it was back in a big way. Initially I was with the old bluesman Taj Mahal – ‘Done Changed My Way of Living’ often enough, thanks. Then sitting on the fence became hazardous as the pointed posts dug in. It was make your mind up time. There was to be a referendum on whether the former capital should take its place in the reconstituted nation. That’s right: citizens who for decades hadn’t been allowed to choose their sexual partners were going to be trusted with voting for their and the city’s future. People in high places were either smoking top-grade tourist dope or there was something distinctly fishy going on.

As a detective I’ve always had a nose for herrings – red (or any other colour), kippers (we get those now, once a month) and salmon (don’t be ridiculous). In this case everything came down to heads and hearts. Fish have them. I’m not so sure about the people wielding power in the country where I was born and raised; born, as it happens, in 1984.

# ONE

**T**here was a pounding on the door.

‘It’s open, ya loud lout,’ I shouted.

Davie appeared, his black hair turned to rat’s tails by the deluge outside, and careered across my small living room.

‘This is for you.’ He dropped a package in brown paper on my belly.

‘Ooh-yah!’ I extracted the contents. ‘Talisker? Where did you get that?’ Even City Guard barracks weren’t supplied with whisky not made locally.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ The big man sat down hard on my armchair, recently given new covers by the Supply Directorate but still sprung like a Model-T Ford with 200,000 miles on the clock. ‘Shit!’

‘Not there, if you don’t mind. My bathroom, resplendent with new fittings and fitments, is at your disposal.’ Until recently, citizens had been forced to use communal bath-houses because of water shortages brought about by the Big Heat, climate change’s version of the Edinburgh summer. Now that the Big Heat had become the Big Wet, flats have been re-plumbed and we can use as much water as we like. Until the two-minute timer kicks in.

‘I don’t need any more water, thanks,’ Davie said, shaking his head and leaving spatters all over the wall behind him. ‘Bloody summer.’

‘It’s symptomatic of life in the city.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean, Socrates?’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s no way for a senior auxiliary to talk. I know Plato debates are only monthly and non-compulsory now, but still . . .’ The Council of City Guardians had originally consisted of university professors who followed the Greek philosopher’s thinking – at least, the bits that suited them. None of the original rulers were on the Council any more and flux was the rule, even when it came to the Edinburgh Enlightenment’s most hallowed principles.

‘Everything’s turned into its opposite,’ I said. ‘Summer, until a couple of years ago as dry as the Mediterranean in August, is now

wetter than the Indian sub-continent in the monsoon season. The Council doesn't imprison many people these days – it just gives the average criminal a month in the luxury New Bridewell rehabilitation facility, with as much pampering as they can take. Citizens can start their own businesses and vote for their own ward reps – not that the local barracks commanders let the said reps do anything to rock the rowing-boat of state. Citizens can even walk round the tourist zone and marvel at the things they can't afford.'

'They have vouchers to spend, and not just on food,' Davie said. He pointed to the ugly beige device on my wall. 'And they all have telephones like that one.'

'Which aren't tapped by the Guard, oh no, never.'

He ignored that. 'And they get free holidays.'

'To camps down at Portobello, where the sea is completely unpolluted by sewage, honest. And there's still no TV, smoking or private cars.'

'Are you going to open that bottle?' Davie demanded.

I got up and looked out the window. I could hardly see the tenements on the other side of Gilmore Place through the rain.

'All right, what is it you want? You wouldn't have come here in this downpour just to drink Tali . . . yes, you would.'

Davie laughed. He looked younger, thanks to the Council's reversal of the rules governing male facial hair. Previously male citizens had to have their hair cut to a maximum of half an inch – no metric measurements in the 'perfect city' – and weren't permitted facial hair, while auxiliaries, the Council's bureaucrats and enforcers, had to wear beards as if each one was an ancient philosopher – though at least the females didn't have to wear face wigs. Now auxiliaries have to be clean-shaven, while citizens can wear their hair to any length – even those who work with tourists – and do what they like with their facial hair. That has led to a male civil population with either moustaches Wyatt Earp would have been proud of or beards down to their sternums. Not to be left out, women can wear their hair in any style, leading to an eruption of salons across the city – all part of the Finance Directorate's private business initiative. I've managed to resist temptation, keeping my now worryingly grey hair short, though my stubble is only occasionally under control. I opened the whisky and inhaled.

'Peaty and sweet,' Davie said, picking up a couple of glasses from my dresser.

‘And all the way from the Isle of Skye.’ I added a dribble of water from the jug I always have on the coffee table – although Talisker didn’t, citizen-issue whisky needs heavy diluting.

We imbibed and luxuriated in silence.

‘Which begs the question,’ I said eventually.

‘How did it get here?’

‘Very good, guardsman.’ Although Davie was a senior commander, I’d never got out of calling him by the rank he had when we first worked together in 2020.

‘Patronizing tosser. If you must know, it comes from a crate donated to the Guard by the Lord of the Isles.’

‘For your admirable services in keeping him safe while he was in the city.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Apart from the fact that he’s a scumbag aristocrat who ran away when the crofters revolted back in the early 2000s and has only come back because oil’s been found in the waters off the Hebrides?’

Davie scowled. ‘I just do what I’m told. Unlike the great Quintilian Dalrymple, who plays at being the protector of ordinary citizens while screwing up official investigations.’

I grinned. ‘Love you too, big man.’ It was true that I use what clout I retain to twist auxiliaries’ arms and find missing citizens, put right cases of mistaken identity, get innocent citizens off – there were no courts in the City of Eden, so Guard personnel often did what they liked – and catch the odd ward rep who’d tapped into his inner Mafioso.

Davie took another sip. ‘I know you do some good, Quint, but it’s nothing compared with what you could do if you worked with us.’

‘Oh, so that’s what this is,’ I said, pointing at the bottle. ‘A bribe. Really, guardsman, I thought you were above that kind of behaviour.’

‘Screw you. The public order guardian told me to get you back on board. Council orders.’

‘Does she know about the Talisker?’

‘Er, not exactly.’

‘What if I tell her?’

‘Give it a rest, will you? I’m serious.’ Suddenly my old friend looked troubled, which was not in his character.

‘What’s happened?’



Davie looked down. 'I can't tell you unless you sign up.'

'So it's like that, is it, Hume 253?' I used the barracks number that was formerly the only way auxiliaries were addressed. Now they have their names on badges. Until recently I'd never known that Davie's surname was Oliphant.

'Yes, it is, citizen. Are you in or out?'

'Out.' Although I'd been the Council's chief investigator in numerous major cases over the years, I always went back to my own clients. Working for citizens was generally more fulfilling – and substantially less life-threatening.

'You're just guilty,' Davie said, meeting my eyes. 'Who helped set up the City Guard? Who wrote the *Public Order in Practice* manual that's still used in auxiliary training? Eh, Bell 03?'

I sat back in my man-eating sofa. There was no getting away from my earlier life. I'd joined the Enlightenment when I was a student, fought for it through the drugs wars and been one of the Guard's chief ideologues. Then, a couple of decades back, I lost my faith in the system and dropped out.

'Low blows, Davie.'

'Don't care. We need you.' He fixed me with a fearsome glare. 'I need you.'

I turned my eyes to the cascade of water on the window. 'That's very touching. But you can't expect me to drop everything at some whim of the Council. I've got cases, people who depend on me.'

'This is no whim of the Council, Quint. Trust me, you're going to be stuck with this one way or the other. Why not get in at the start?'

'That big, eh?'

'Potentially.'

'So tell me.'

'No chance. The guardian will have my balls for haggis.'

'How can you be afraid of a woman called Doris?'

'I'm not afraid of her, but she's my boss.'

'The recently appointed Doris Barclay. I remember her when she was Knox Barracks commander. She was wound tight, but no more than most of her kind.'

'She remembers you too. Not hugely favourably, it has to be said.'

'Great. But why no written order?'

Davie shook his head. 'Nothing's being written about this, not even Guard reports.'

I had to admit it was enticing. The Council's Edinburgh is the ultimate bureaucratic state, with information stored about everything – formerly in hand-written archives and more recently, in some directorates, in computers bought on the cheap from the warring states that formed after China tried one economic coup too many and disappeared in the biggest financial crisis in history. If the guardians themselves were avoiding written records, a meteorite of excrement was heading for the wind turbine – they've been put up on the Pentlands in recent months in a belated attempt to go green.

'How about a clue?'

'No.'

'Take me to the crime scene?'

'There isn't one. Well, there is, but it isn't clear what the crime is.'

I stared at him. 'Are you pulling my—'

'Certainly not.' Davie got up. 'Am I taking the whisky or leaving it?'

I caught his eye. 'Can I trust you on this? Is it really going to be worth my time?'

'How do I know? It looks like the beginning of a massive case, but these things sometimes fizzle out.' He picked up the bottle. 'I have a feeling this one won't.'

I grabbed the Talisker.

'All right, I'm in. But I'll be out the minute it gets boring.'

Davie laughed grimly. 'Ever the boy adventurer. What age are you next birthday?'

I kicked the back of his leg. The prospect of the big 5-0 was scaring the shit out of me.

'Where are we going?'

Davie was at the wheel of a new and shiny white Korean 4x4. The Guard's fleet of ancient Land Rovers had finally been put out to grass – or rather, handed over to the wards to run, spare parts not included.

'Wait and see.'

'I told you I was on board.'

'Don't you always say that an unprejudiced mind is essential when encountering evidence and scenes?'

The windscreen wipers were on full blast but I could still hardly see anything of the road ahead. Fortunately Davie was a skilled

driver, something he was inordinately proud of. He swerved smoothly past a couple of drenched citizens on their bikes, then a bus full of workers going home. We passed the revitalized Market District, buildings whose foundations had been laid in the early years of the century finally completed. That was all part of the city economists' master plan to turn Edinburgh into a tax haven and financial services hub. States in Europe and around the world were getting back on their feet after decades of in-fighting and extreme disorder. We'd been starved of international news, the Information Directorate providing only stories that put independent Edinburgh in a good light. I remembered that offshore banking, low-tax regimes and unregulated markets had been part of the problem that tore the world's economy apart when the man and woman on the street finally had enough of being urinated on.

'Edinburgh as the Cayman Islands? Jersey? Liechtenstein?' I said.

'If you say so.' Davie turned on to Dalry Road.

'Yet another component of the Council's topsy-turvy world. The Enlightenment banned money, remember?' I laughed. 'Though that didn't stop them taking it from tourists.'

'We had to survive somehow,' Davie growled. 'Anyway, the year-round festival wasn't much of a change from before.'

'I don't remember there being marijuana clubs, legalized brothels, a racetrack in Princes Street Gardens and gambling venues all over the city.'

'Neither do I.' Davie shrugged. 'I know the system isn't perfect, but it's getting better.'

'You might be right,' I conceded. 'Then again, what's this big case?'

'Not long now.'

He clammed up and I looked at the shabby surroundings. We were out of the centre now and, despite the Council's efforts to improve citizens' lives, the built environment isn't pretty. Davie bore right and then took a sharp turn. The rain was lighter now and I made out a large maroon sign:

Welcome to Tynecastle, Home of Heart of Midlothian  
Football Club  
Hearts, Glorious Hearts!

'Uh-huh,' I said. 'Is there a game on?'

'It's five-thirty on a Tuesday,' Davie said. 'Match days are Sundays.'

‘Oddly, I knew that.’

‘Didn’t think you were a fan.’

‘I’m not. I was a Hibeer when I was a kid, before match-fixing and doping ruined the sport.’ The Enlightenment banned football soon after it came to power, preferring rugby. That was one of many unpopular decisions.

‘You supported Hibernian?’ Davie said in disgust.

‘Don’t tell me you’re a Jambo. You’re a rugby player.’

‘Was. Knee’s knackered, remember? Aye, I was a Jambo, still am. We lived up the road when I was a kid. Screw Hibs. Bunch of left-footers.’

‘May I remind you that sectarianism was proscribed by the first Council, guardsman? And religion heavily discouraged. There can’t be more than a few hundred Catholics in the city now.’

Davie pulled up by the south stand. ‘You’d be surprised. Since freedom of religion was enacted a couple of years ago, organized religions are making quite a comeback.’

‘I’d noticed. None of which explains why we’re here.’ I looked around. There were no other Guard or official vehicles present – only club vans. ‘On our own.’

‘Some of my men are inside dressed as groundsman. You’ll do as you are – citizen-issue donkey jacket as usual. I’ve got a full-length rain jacket.’ He pulled it on after he got out.

‘Is there an umbrella?’ I asked forlornly.

Davie laughed and led me into the complex. A door was open but the only person around was a guy in a tracksuit who was obviously a guardsman. I can spot their air of authority no matter how much they try to disguise it.

‘Come on,’ Davie said, tossing me a maroon-and-white-striped umbrella. ‘What, don’t you want it?’

‘Bit late. Haven’t you got one in green and white?’

‘What do you think?’

He opened a door, led me down some concrete steps and suddenly we were on the pitch. I remembered a dire Edinburgh derby I’d attended with my old man when I was about ten. Hibs got stuffed.

The seating in the stands was new and the stadium in surprisingly good nick. It had taken the Council long enough to realize that football was an effective opiate of the people, but they’re making up for it now. There was even a sign for free pies above a stall.

Two men were standing under umbrellas like mine in the centre circle, garden forks resting against their hips. There was a large plastic box at their feet. I felt a tingle in my spine.

‘What’s in the box, Davie?’

‘Wait and see.’

We squelched over the sodden grass, though it wasn’t as bad as I’d been expecting. Surely the Recreation Directorate hadn’t run to an efficient drainage system?

‘Step back, guardsmen,’ Davie ordered. He turned to me and watched as I pulled on a pair of the latex gloves I always carry in my back pocket. ‘Never unprepared, Quint, eh?’

I raised the stump of my right forefinger at him, the rubber hanging down pathetically, then squatted and took hold of the opaque plastic box. A deep breath and I lifted it.

‘What the . . . ?’

‘You know what it is,’ Davie said grimly.

‘I do. A human heart, the arteries roughly severed but the parts of the exterior that are visible otherwise intact.’

‘Aye. Pleased you signed up now?’

I looked up at him. ‘I don’t remember signing anything, but I will if you want me to. Right now.’

## TWO

**W**e were out in the open, as the person or persons who’d left the organ on the centre spot would have been. The rain had probably obscured the view from the buildings around, but someone could have seen what happened.

‘We can’t ask questions,’ Davie said after a pair of crime-scene technicians, also disguised as groundsman, had removed the heart and the turf below. ‘Council orders. They’re worried about publicity.’

‘What if someone talks to the media?’ There were quasi-free newspapers and radio stations in the city now.

‘They’re being monitored.’

‘Of course.’ There would be undercover auxiliaries in every news outlet.

‘Who found it?’

‘A groundsman, surprise, surprise. He was in before anyone else – the place didn’t open till midday today – and he did the right thing.’

‘Called the Guard. How do you know he didn’t tell his boss first?’

‘Because he’s terrified. I’ve got him up in the castle. The recreation guardian’s honorary chairman of the club – of all the clubs in the Edinburgh Premier League, of course – which helps.’

‘It didn’t occur to anyone to take the heart for examination?’

Davie grinned. ‘We’re not that useless without you. The medical guardian’s had a look. Taking into account the ambient temperature, she couldn’t be specific about how long it’s been there or when it was removed from its host body. She recommended that it be left in situ for you.’

‘Did she?’ Sophia, the medical guardian, and I were on-off lovers, more on than off in the year since my long-term partner Katharine Kirkwood had illicitly left the city. ‘Well, she knows how I work. It’s still full of holes, and I don’t mean the heart, jackass. Who had access to the stadium? Who witnessed the heart being left? Where’s the body it came from? We need to talk to people.’

‘The guardian’s worried about drawing attention. As for witnesses, the feeling is that anyone who saw it being put on the centre circle will call it in.’ Davie headed quickly back to the stand before I could point out how unlikely that was. Citizens still didn’t trust the authorities. I looked around as I walked. There were several buildings whose top storeys overlooked the pitch. Were we being observed now?

‘So why I am involved?’ I asked, brushing water from my scalp.

‘Come on, Quint. The city’s opening up, tourism’s back to the numbers we had before the Chinese crash, Edinburgh may become the capital of Scotland again. This is the last thing the Council needs.’

‘And I’m the first thing?’

‘Unlikely though that might seem. So where to?’

‘Your place of work, I suppose, since I can’t knock on doors here.’

‘Your supposition is my command.’

Back in the 4x4, I turned to Davie. ‘Is there anything you aren’t telling me?’

‘Yes. The medical directorate’s recently started doing heart transplants.’

‘Ha-ha.’ The likelihood of the resource-starved infirmary being

able to provide such complex surgery to the citizen body was minimal. Besides, Sophia would have told me. Or would she? ‘You are joking?’

Davie glanced at me. ‘Er, yes.’

‘On second thoughts, let’s go and see the medical guardian. It wouldn’t be the first time people in the infirmary were up to no good.’

‘No, it wouldn’t,’ Davie said ruefully, hitting the accelerator hard.

The infirmary is a Victorian building in what had been the university area in the southern centre of the city. Its towers and vanes give it a Gothic air, especially with the stone walls darkened by the rain. There are some more modern parts, not least a steel chimney pointing skywards like that of a first-generation steamship long run aground. There were crowds of citizens in the waiting areas even though it was early evening. Appointments were made until 9 p.m., meaning that riots by those needing treatment were avoided – and that the doctors and nurses were permanently exhausted. That went for the medical guardian too.

‘Hello, Sophia McIlvanney,’ I said as we were ushered into her office. I never miss an opportunity to use auxiliaries’ surnames because I know how much it irritates them; they prefer the titles that make clear their superiority.

‘Hello, Quint,’ she replied, brushing back a strand of white-blond hair. There was a time she’d been known as the Ice Queen, but she’d lost that quality for me. Among other things, sex is a great leveller. ‘You’re here on an affair of the heart.’

‘I should be so lucky. But yes, if you want to put it that way.’ I tried to avoid looking at the scar beneath her right eye. She caught me out, of course, and I felt my cheeks redden.

‘Come on. I’ve got the pathologists waiting.’

Soon we were all gowned and masked up, even for the single organ. I was happy enough as the air in the morgue is always pungent.

‘Go ahead,’ Sophia said to her subordinates.

They leaned over the organ, which had been washed of blood either by the person who had cut it out or by the rain, and started speaking. I let the words flow over me – aorta, anterior interventricular branch, pulmonary veins, coronary sinus – waiting to pounce when something struck me. For a time nothing did. Then I heard ‘serrated edge’ and raised a hand.

‘So a serrated blade was used to cut the arteries and so on?’

‘That’s right,’ said the taller of the masked figures. ‘Strange. Any professional would use a straight edge.’

‘Though the cuts display a reasonable degree of medical knowledge,’ said his short colleague.

‘Reasonable meaning what?’ I asked. ‘City Guard medical orderly level?’ Like all auxiliaries, they’re issued with knives that have serrated blades.

Davie was looking at the ceiling, while Sophia’s eyes narrowed.

‘As far as I know, medical orderlies are not trained to remove hearts,’ she said. ‘Kindly suppress your customary suspicion of auxiliaries, citizen.’

‘The person or persons who removed this heart were careful not to cut or otherwise damage the exterior,’ the taller of the pathologists said. ‘That suggests medical knowledge.’

‘Did it come from a male or a female?’ I asked, after they’d measured the organ.

‘Male,’ they said in unison.

‘Fully developed,’ put in Sophia. ‘It’s about twenty-five per cent larger than a female’s.’

‘Also, there’s no evidence, at least externally, of aortic or venous disease,’ said the shorter pathologist. ‘So we’re probably dealing with a young, healthy male, though that’s subject to what we find when we open the organ up.’

After more talking to the microphone that hung above the table, the men looked at Sophia and she nodded.

‘Cutting across aorta and aortic valve cusps,’ the tall pathologist said.

I let the words roll over me again. This time nothing made me intervene.

‘Subject to tissue and other tests, this heart belonged to a young man in good physical condition,’ said the shorter doctor.

‘Are there any tests that will show how long since it was removed?’ I asked.

‘To within a period of hours, yes,’ Sophia said.

The tall pathologist raised a hand. ‘My working hypothesis would be that it was removed within the last twenty-four hours, taking into account the freshness.’

‘It couldn’t have been frozen?’

He looked at me as if surprised by the question and then shook his head. ‘The texture of the tissue suggests not.’



‘Anything else we should know?’ I said.

There wasn’t. The donor had been young and healthy, which somehow made what had happened to him even more of a disgrace.

‘Can you give me a lift to the Council meeting, commander?’

‘Of course, guardian,’ Davie said.

‘Citizen Dalrymple’s presence is required there as well,’ Sophia continued.

‘Brilliant,’ I mumbled.

We went out into the infirmary yard, the rain having miraculously let up.

‘What are you complaining about?’ Davie said, under his breath. ‘You’ll find out more about what’s going on.’

I laughed. ‘That isn’t the way it works, my friend. I’m usually the one whose lemon gets squeezed.’

Sophia gave me a curious look. Her knowledge of the blues was minimal and sexual innuendo wasn’t her strong point.

We drove down to what had been the Scottish Parliament for four years spanning the millennium – before public anger at the greed and fecklessness of politicians brought the system down. Edinburgh was lucky. Most parliaments in Europe, including Westminster, were blown up or burned down. Organized crime had been taken over by its disorganized but extremely violent sibling and drugs wars erupted across Europe and the USA. Edinburgh got the Enlightenment and then the Council of City Guardians. There was little crime but even less joy.

‘What do you think, Sophia?’ I said as we approached the weather-stained relic of democracy near the ruins of Holyrood Palace. The monarchy had been a major target of the mob. Prince Charles should never have married that Colombian drugs heiress. ‘Is Edinburgh going to be part of Scotland again?’

‘That’s up to the citizens,’ she said, keeping her eyes off mine.

‘Right. No tampering with the ballot boxes by the Council next year.’

‘That’s an outrageous thing to say, Quint.’ Now I got the full benefit of her Medusa-stare. ‘I could have the commander here lock you up.’

I laughed. ‘Then what would your colleagues do about the heart at Heart of Midlothian?’

‘Don’t imagine you’re indispensable, citizen.’ She opened her

door and got out. She might have been winding me up, but I couldn't be sure.

'What age are you?' Davie demanded.

'Too old to rock and roll, that's for sure.'

'Arsehole. Show guardians some fucking respect.'

'That, big man, is a two-way street.'

I left him behind and went into the building. It could do with some serious maintenance, but the Council claims it's directing all the resources it can to citizen facilities. But what about the Market District? No expense was being spared there. Still, Davie was right. My life would be much easier if I kowtowed to our lords and mistresses. Then again, someone had to stand guard over the guardians.

A guardswomen in full dress uniform opened the door to the main chamber for me. The fifteen guardians were in their seats in the semicircle, looking down at me.

'Citizen Dalrymple,' said the senior guardian, a gung-ho sociologist in his early forties, who was in charge of the Supply Directorate as well as being this year's numero uno. 'Welcome back.'

'Thanks, Fergus,' I said, taking in the disapproving faces above. 'Call me Quint.'

That was unlikely to happen, at least in Council. In theory everyone in the city can now be addressed by their first name, but you took your life in your hands if you called guardians what their parents had. The city's leaders still call each other by their titles, at least when there are citizens around.

Fergus Calder's smile took a hit, but he persevered. 'You have some thoughts to share?'

I shook my head. 'I was the last to know about this case, so I'll speak last. Tell me everything you know.'

There was a wave of tutting and harrumphing, then the public order guardian stood up. She was wearing the standard tweed jacket, but had gone native with a kilt in her clan tartan. Unfortunately the Barclays wear a yellow weave that blinds and nauseates in equal measure.

'Citizen Quint's involvement in this case has been ordered because it is potentially highly problematic.'

'How do you make that out, Guardian Doris?'

She did me the honour of ignoring that.

'Not only is the city expanding its international profile, but there must be no threat to the Scotland referendum next spring.'

Her colleagues nodded, their expressions serious.

The guardian gave me a glance that did not bode well. 'Although the senior guardian was made aware of the case from the start, this meeting is the first opportunity I have to brief you in full.'

Here we go, I thought. When things get tough, guardians keep information to themselves for as long as it takes to build bulwarks around their backsides.

'At eleven forty-five this morning I received a call on my personal mobile from a number that cannot be traced. The voice was muffled and I could not make out any accent, or even if it was male or female.'

I sat down on the chair that had belatedly been brought for me. I was going to let the guardian talk herself into a hole until I made any comment. That way she'd be desperate for help, and desperate guardians can be useful. Then again, they can also bite your head off.

'The caller said, "Tynecastle, the centre circle, there's a gift for you. Be discreet. I'm watching."'

'Is there a recording of the call?' the recreation guardian asked. Peter Stewart had been a fine athlete in his youth and was popular among citizens because he'd brought football back. His face was unusually pale and his hands were trembling.

Guardian Doris looked sheepish. 'I'm afraid not. It was over before I could react. But I sent Guard personnel disguised as ground staff immediately and the heart was found. The medical guardian visited and advised that the organ should be covered until the citizen here saw it. As subsequently happened.'

'One moment,' said the education guardian, a desiccated man in his fifties who was notorious for nitpicking. 'As I understand, the citizen didn't arrive at the football ground until after five p.m. What happened in the intervening period?'

Now the public order guardian looked bilious. 'I was in meetings with the senior guardian and the finance guardian,' she said. 'We had to make various decisions.'

'What decisions?' asked the education guardian, barely disguising his anger. 'An emergency Council meeting should have been called.'

'Calm down, Brian,' said the finance guardian, giving up on titles. He was wearing a grey suit that had definitely not been made in Edinburgh and a silk version of the black-and-white tie that only Council members are entitled to.

‘Don’t take that tone with me, Jack MacLean,’ the education guardian barked.

‘Colleagues,’ the senior guardian said. ‘There’s an ordinary citizen present.’

I wondered how heated the debate would have got if I hadn’t been there. MacLean was the thrusting type who brooked no opposition. He fancied himself as a captain of industry rather than a bureaucrat, which must have been frustrating for him considering how little industry there was in Edinburgh. Coal mines to keep the population warm, farms to feed the citizens and foreigners, tourism’s great rewards – they were all controlled by other directorates. He was just a number-cruncher. Then again, frustration can be a hell of a motivator.

‘Initial investigations in certain areas had to be instigated,’ Guardian Doris said, speaking the stilted language her rank has always favoured.

‘We checked the infirmary and all the city’s clinics for the donor corpse,’ Sophia put in.

The public order guardian gave her a grateful look. ‘And the Guard has been put on full alert.’

‘Discreetly,’ said Jack MacLean.

‘Indeed.’

‘And has any such body been located?’ said the education guardian, sticking to his guns.

‘No.’

‘I still don’t understand why the finance guardian was involved.’

‘Brian,’ said the senior guardian, ‘leave it, please. Anything that might affect the city’s income is within Jack’s purview. A human heart in the middle of a football pitch is unlikely to do the city’s image much good, not least since, as of the season that’s about to begin, tourists will be able to attend matches.’ He caught Sophia’s eye. ‘The medical guardian has the floor.’

She ran through what the pathologists had found, then sat down.

The senior guardian’s eyes were on me. ‘Well, citizen, you’ve heard the whole story now. What have you to say?’

I leaned back in the chair and crossed my legs. ‘It’s the biggest cock-up I’ve come across in years, Fergus. The call wasn’t recorded, I wasn’t told about it till now and I wasn’t involved with the case from the start. Plus it’s been decided that potential witnesses aren’t to be located.’

'Discretion, citizen,' Jack MacLean said.

'Sticking your heads in the sand, more like. So what if the bastard or bastards finds out there were witnesses? Are their hearts going to be cut out too?'

'Anything's possible,' said the senior guardian. 'We'll have to risk that.'

'Uh-huh. It's all about the city's image, eh?'

'Do you have anything positive to contribute?'

'How about this? Are you checking for missing persons? I've got several on my books we can start with.'

The public order guardian grabbed that like a drowning woman. 'We'll get on to that with you, citizen.'

'Any reports of unusual activities, particularly in the suburbs?' I asked.

'There are always plenty of those,' Guardian Doris said.

'Are you checking any premises where screams were heard or people seen being dragged in unconscious or struggling? I know the gangs do that all the time, but whoever's behind this could be using gang activity as cover. Or could even be in a gang.'

There was general shock and horror. Gangs were one of the city's enduring problems, but they'd never done anything as extreme as this.

The finance guardian gave me a disparaging look. 'Gang members are drunk or stoned most of the time. They couldn't cut a heart out without damaging it, never mind get it to Tynecastle unobserved.'

I smiled. 'Who said they were unobserved? And if you think gangs aren't capable of cutting out people's internal organs, ask your colleague Doris.'

'There was a wave of that about a year back,' she confirmed. 'We caught the citizens involved.'

'Eventually,' I said. 'Are they still locked up or have they been given a pat on the head and told to behave themselves?'

'Two are still in the castle dungeons.'

'Good. I'll be talking to them.'

'Anything you need, citizen?' the senior guardian asked.

'A mobile phone.' Only guardians and senior auxiliaries were provided with those. 'With all your and senior auxiliaries' numbers pre-loaded.'

'Of course.'

'A Council authorization giving me authority to question anyone, including guardians, and access to all premises in the city.'

He didn't look happy but he nodded.

'I also want City Guard Commander Bell 03, a.k.a. Davie Oliphant, to be seconded to me for the duration of the investigation.'

Guardian Doris gave that one the nod, though there was a second or two of reluctance.

'One last thing,' I said, looking at Jack MacLean. 'You're in charge of negotiating with representatives from other Scottish states and cities, aren't you?'

He looked anxious briefly, then rallied. 'That's correct, citizen.'

'I want access to them when they're in the city if I deem that necessary. Kindly provide me with a full list of scheduled visits.'

MacLean glanced at Fergus Calder. 'Very well.'

'Send it to the public order guardian.' I stood up.

'One moment, citizen,' the senior guardian said. 'The authorization we give you does not mean you can operate outside the City Regulations.'

'Of course not,' I replied dutifully.

If they believed that, they were fully paid up members of the Loch Ness Monster Is Alive and Well Society. Then again, maybe Nessie had made an appearance in the last three decades. How would we have known?