
Opening Extract from...

Time & Tide

A Hew Cullan Mystery

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Prologue

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Before he learned his letters, Jacob read the wind. He could not recall a time when its patterns made no sense to him, clearer than his catechism, whispered as a child.

– *What is thy only comfort, in life and in death*?

– *That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own.*

Jacob read the wind, and cursed it when it dropped to lank and irksome stillness. When it turned against him, he was unprepared. It was not as if he had not understood. He knew precisely what this wind required of him, yet he could not rise to it. The waters came at last to blast upon the quietness, and Jacob knew, for certain, he was not his own.

– *I am not my own, but belong to my saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

He had no hope of Christ in the bowels of the black ocean. It caught the little bark and tossed it like a winnower, blowing dust and thundering, threshing out the storm.

Joachim had been the last to die. He had died before the storm broke. And Jacob had stitched Joachim into a folded sheet of sailcloth, weighed down with lead shot, before tipping the dead boy into the sea. Jacob's hands were thick and woolly, like a pair of gloves. He had struggled to sew up the seam. It was a blessing that the boy had died before the storm. Jacob saw his mother still, weeping by the river Leie in Ghent. He knew the family well, and had given her his handkerchief. But Joachim's mind had turned, like all the rest.

Jacob had restrained him in the hold, and all through the night had listened to his howls. The pity was it was not Joachim's fault. Jacob had allowed the boy to gorge himself on sweetmeats, leavening his last hours with the captain's bread. He heard him howling still, though Joachim had been dead for several days.

Jacob had acquired the captain's cabin, where he wrote to Beatrix after Joachim died. It took a little time, but he had time enough. *Tell Joachim's mother that,* he wrote, and crossed it out. He knew that Beatrix would make sure that Lotte learned to read, and so he wrote the child a letter of her own, and sealed them both with wax from the captain's candle stub. He found a wooden pepper pot, and placed the scripts inside, together with his book. The letter of its creed he had by heart. He let the candle drip to make it tight around the bung, carving the direction on the surface with his pocketknife, Beatrix van der Straeten, begijnhof sint Elisabeth te Gent. He considered for a moment whether he should set the casket on the open sea, or keep it in the stronghold of the ship, closed in the ocean's grasp. In the end, he kept it there, knowing it was all the same. He placed it in the captain's kist among the listless instruments, and lying on the captain's blanket, Jacob closed his eyes. Better to die quiet, and the ship might let him shelter for a while. He thought of Joachim sleeping on the seabed, where the little fish swam silver through the slack seams of his shroud, making streams of water from his eyes. He thought of Beatrix, fearless, with no breath of hope. He cursed the airless ocean, weeping for the sands. Yet when the wind picked up, he was not prepared for it. He climbed up on the half deck and cried out, choked and raging, not ready yet to yield so easily to death.

Jacob found the wheel, with little hope of turning it. Tobias was dead, and Jacob on his own could not hope to guide the vessel through the storm. Though he read the wind as clearly as a book, he had never been a mariner. He could not take in the spret sail, lower the foresail, bear up the helm or haul the tack aboard, or any of the things he had heard the first mate cry. He no longer felt his

fingers in the wrenching wind. Vast waters bellowed, engulfing the deck, and Jacob was knocked from his feet. He clung to the mizzen mast, sodden and blind. He could neither veer nor steer her, rocking through the storm. She was cradled in a trough, where she drank in sheets of water, lapping up from either side. Jacob, drenched and sobbing, sought to scoop them out. He could not clear the decks as fast as she could fill them; and so at last he climbed, exhausted, to the stern, preferring not to drown inside the body of the ship. Yet he found he could not drop into the blackness of the sea. He turned the wheel again, and prayed his old adversary the wind to be a little kind to him. And for a moment, God – or was it yet the wind? – appeared to hear his prayer; the hull began to roll and the fickle gusts rebounded, taking up the sail. The ship was blasted on the waves and blown about its course, with a sudden list and lurching that washed the water out. Jacob gave thanks; to God, after all. And it was Christ his saviour, as Jacob understood, who lit the castle ramparts shadowed on the rock. Far off in the distance, he was coming in to land.

It took a while before he realised what the shadows meant. He came to shallow waters, in the darkness of the storm. The landing craft had long ago been lowered to the sea. Before the early fishermen set out to cast their lines, Jacob would be washed up on the strand, wrung out in the wreckage of the ship. He belonged to his saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, for he had no spirit left in him to fight. He looked back at the mizzen mast, and felt it sag and spring. The bark began to fracture as she bore down on the rocks. And then he saw his cargo, braced above the hold, and understood at last what he should do. He found her fixed and fast, unflustered by the wind, though high above her flank the topsails flapped and furled. Jacob crept inside to listen for the crack.

And she was still and dark inside, quite dry, and so familiar in her warmth that when he closed his eyes he almost could forget the lurching of the ship, the howling of the wind he had often sought for her. And though she yawned and creaked a little, still

she did not stir. She smelled of grease and timmermen when Jacob closed his eyes, so that when at last it came he almost did not mind.

Chapter 1

An Ill Wind

The twa extraordinar professouris affirmis . . . they ar not subject to live collegialiter to eat and ly within the college.
Commission of Enquiry, St Andrews University, 1588

Hew Cullan kicked aside the broken slates as he turned briskly through the entrance to St Salvator's, his hat and gown dishevelled in the wind. He crossed the college courtyard and hurried to the hall, setting straight his cap. He was, he was aware, a little late; and yet he knew the hall would wait for him. The scholars rose expectantly to see him take his place. They would have gaped like louns to catch him at the chase, darting through the tennis courts in primrose-stirruped slops. Masters, they well knew, could have no other lives.

And for the regents in their midst, who had the daily care and teaching of these boys, this was true enough, reflected Hew. His own place was a sinecure: *magister extraordinar* in law, in a college that could boast no legal faculty. He played little part in its domestic life or discipline. The appointment of professors in the laws and mathematics had left no impression on the core curriculum, grounded in philosophy and arts. Hew gave lectures to the college once or twice a year. As second master, he was sometimes called on to officiate, in the absence of the principal, anatomist Giles Locke. When, as often happened, they were both engaged, on some more pressing business of the Crown, the third professor, grumbling gently, set aside his sums to step in to the breach.

This third professor, standing at Hew's side, reached across to nudge

him, breaking through his dreams. He plucked a withered fragment from Hew's sleeve. 'Acer maius, or, to many, platanus,' he commented. 'The greater maple, commonly, and falsely, called the plane tree or the sycamore.' The mathematician opened out his palm, showing Hew the seed, the winged fruit of the sycamore. 'You are sprouting wings. What as a bairn I chased round dizzy in the wind. We called them *locks and keys*, or *whirlijacks*.'

Hew suppressed a smile, which old Professor Groat, with his rheumy, washed-out eyes, was quick enough to see. 'I understand you well. You do not think that I could ever be a child; or else this fledging plane tree harks back to the ark.'

'Ah, no, not at all,' protested Hew, who had indeed been thinking something of the sort. How old, after all, was Bartholomew Groat? Sixty years? Eighty? Or, as Giles asserted, nearer fifty-three, of phlegmatic disposition, prone to windy gout.

The professor blew his nose. 'Tis true enough, that when I was a boy this maple was a novelty, which now is thought a scourge, and counted as a weed.'

He did not give up the seed, but wrapped it in his handkerchief to put it in his pocket; whether to preserve the ghost of little Bartie Groat, giddy as the wind, or to prevent its spread, Hew could not be sure. 'The winds were wild last night,' he remarked more diplomatically.

This observation had a sobering effect. 'Foul spirits stir up tempests,' Groat imparted gloomily. 'The milk kine startled in the fields, the storm has soured the milk. The priory trees are torn up by their roots; the shore mill lade is flooded. Tis providential, Hew.'

'Stuff and superstition,' Hew retorted. 'I do not believe in it.'

Bartie cast his eyes to heaven, sending up a prayer. 'The young are always quick to scorn. And yet the wind has one effect that cannot fail to move you. I heard there was a ship wrecked in the bay. All the crew were lost.'

'Dear God, rest them!' whispered Hew. 'Were the poor men Scots?'

'Zeelanders or Flemish, judging from the load. I wonder that you did not see it, on your way to town,' murmured Bartie Groat.

Hew shook his head. 'I lay at the West Port last night,' he explained. 'My horse does not care for the wind.' Dun Scottis cared for little that upset his regimen. He baulked at wind and water, with perfect equilibrium.

'You ought to take up lodgings, as I've said before. I confess myself perplexed that you will not consider it,' Bartie answered peevishly.

It was a well-worn argument, and one to which Hew struggled to respond. He had declined the rooms that came with his election, preferring to remain at home at Kenly Green. The house stood four miles south, an hour on foot upon a winter's day, and a little less in summer, on his sluggish horse. Returning to the college for a second year, he already felt the cloisters closing in, the hallowed kirk and walkways a conspiracy of spires. It was not a feeling he could share with Bartie Groat, who took his dinners daily at the college mess, and brightened when the cook doled out a second slop of neaps. Hew did not care to end his days *collegialiter*. He changed the subject quickly. 'I see the doors have closed. So we are all assembled, and ready to begin.'

One by one, the names were called, and the students swore allegiance to the university. The youngest scholar stumbled at the stand. In awe at the proceedings, he clean forgot his oath. Hew Cullan winked at him, and saw the boy's astonishment collapse into a grin. A regent hurried forward and retreated with his charge, who, to Hew's amusement, was named as *George Buchanan*. He saw nothing in the boy that stuck him as remarkable. It seemed unlikely that their paths would cross again.

Bartie had withdrawn, like a tortoise to his shell, where for the last half hour he had appeared to be asleep. When Hew was least expecting it, he blinked, thrusting out: 'It is not like our principal to miss matriculation.'

Hew answered stiffly, 'Indeed, not.' He cursed both God and

Bartie Groat. In a few more minutes' time, enrolment would be done, and he could take his worries out into the street. For now, he must stay resolute, civil and in place. He did his best to look discouraging.

'Perhaps he has been called out to a patient,' Bartie droned, relentlessly. Giles was a physician, as well as an anatomist, with a thriving practice in the town.

'Aye, perhaps.'

'Or on business of the Crown.'

'Tis very likely,' Hew agreed.

'Though on business of the Crown, you also are most frequently invoked. Therefore it may be inferred, since you are here, and he is not, it is not business of the Crown.'

Groat was penetrating, gazing once again with his colourless, damp eyes, no less clear and piercing through the film of age. Hew saw no escape. The ceremony drawing to a close, the boys were ushered out, to lecture rooms and lodging houses. Hew was left behind with Professor Groat. He did not dislike the man. Groat was a fine astronomer, and lyrical upon the motions of the spheres. But he remained inclined to gloom, his prognostics seldom ending happily. On this subject, at this time, Hew had no wish to talk to him.

'His young wife is with child, of course,' Bartie reached his pinnacle.

'She is,' admitted Hew.

'Pray pardon – I had quite forgotten – he is married to your sister, is he not? Who has the falling sickness?'

'I commend you on your powers of recollection,' Hew returned abruptly.

Groat persisted, undeterred. 'Doubtless, there are dangers there. Please tell Giles, they are in my prayers.'

'Doubtless, he will thank you. I will tell him straight away.'

Professor Groat was right. It was unthinkable that Giles would miss matriculation, without a word of explanation or apology to

Hew. If he was not in college, then he must be at home, and if he was at home, that could only mean one thing. Hew abandoned Bartie at the door and hurried down the North Street towards the Fisher Gait.

The streets beyond the college were deserted, as though the wind had swept them clear, and left behind its footprints in a scattering of leaves. The fisherwives had dropped their cries of codlings and late crabs, their empty crates and buckets littering the steps. A bare-legged child stood watchman, rushing at the gulls. Hew called out in passing, 'Are the markets done? The clock has just struck twelve.'

The child stopped to consider this, sucking on a thumb. It offered up at last, 'All gaun, tae the wreck.'

'And left you on your own? Good bairn,' Hew answered vaguely. He could not discern, from the whisper thick with thumb, whether he was talking to a girl or boy. He found himself unsettled by the queerness of the child, and by the empty thoroughfares that led to the cathedral, the town and markets suddenly bereft, upended by the storm. He hurried past the fishing quarter to the castle on its rock, towards the little house that overlooked the cliff. The wind had dropped back, the sea a sheet of glass, where a hazy sunshine skittered, bouncing back and lighting up the stones.

The house was battened fast against the wind and sunlight, doors and shutters closed. Hew's knock was answered by the servant, Paul. 'I kent it was yersel',' he yawned, 'by dint of a' the din. The master is asleep. I'll tell him that you called.'

'How so, asleep? Has your mistress had her child?' demanded Hew.

'She hasna' started with her labours yet. No doubt you will be telt, when her time is due.' The servant had retreated, pulling back the door. Hew stopped it with his foot. 'I think you know me better, Paul,' he warned. 'Since I am not the blacksmith, nor the barker with his bill, you do not close the door to me. It seems you have forgotten it.'

The reprimand struck home. Paul began to stutter and to blush.

'Tis only that . . . your pardon, sir, but do not tell the doctor. He is fair forfochten.'

'Do not tell him what?' a sleepy voice inquired, and Giles himself came rumbling through the hall, squinting at the light. 'If that is Master Hew, then bid him wait until I'm dressed.'

'By your leave,' muttered Hew to the servant, who allowed him to pass with a hiss. 'Do not say, sir, that I did not prepare you.'

'Prepare me for what?' Hew hissed back.

'Why is it so dark in here?' Giles had opened up the shutters, letting in the air, and blinking as the sunlight filtered through the room. 'How comes the sun so bright?' he pondered paradoxically.

'How comes it that your household is asleep?' retorted Hew.

'I know not . . . What? What time is it?' Giles rubbed his eyes.

Paul answered, disingenuously, 'Mebbe eight, or nine? I cannot rightly say, for I havna' heard the clock.'

'It is a little after twelve,' corrected Hew. 'And yet it is no matter, Giles.'

Giles looked baffled, like a man disturbed from walking in his sleep, to find out he has trodden on his spectacles. 'Of course it matters!' He made sense of it at last. 'I have missed matriculation.'

'No matter, that,' said Hew. 'Professor Groat and I have managed it between us. And save for my solicitude, and Bartie's speculation, we managed it quite well.'

'I've no doubt that you *managed* it,' protested Giles. 'That is not the point. The point is in the principle; that is, I am the principal. Did I not tell you to wake me?' he rounded on Paul. 'Did I not tell you, *expressly*?'

The servant stood his ground. 'I do not recall it, sir. Now, I was looking for your hat, when Master Hew came chappin' at the door; I'll go and find it now, and by your leave. I doubt you must have left it at the college.' He slunk off down the passage, with a backward glance at Hew, which plainly spoke, '*You* stirred it; now you settle it.'

Giles looked hopelessly at Hew. 'Much good my hat will do

me now! I must be severe with him, for he has gone too far. He always goes too far. Does he? Has he? Has he gone too far?' he flustered.

'He does, and has, and always goes too far,' acknowledged Hew. 'And yet, on this occasion, he must be commended, for clearly he holds your best interests at heart.'

The doctor groaned. 'Then he is above himself, and ought to be dismissed!'

'I cannot think that that will help. What is the matter, Giles? This is not like you,' said Hew.

'I am not quite myself,' admitted Giles. 'My world stands on its end. It is the helter-skelter of a dizzy heart.'

'Indeed, that does sound serious,' Hew answered with a smile.

'It is serious. The matter is your sister Meg. She spent last night in thrall to the falling sickness.'

'I feared it,' Hew exclaimed, 'though am loath to hear it. How does she now?'

'Sleeping like a child. The worst of it has passed; the nurse has come to sit with her. I closed my eyes a moment . . .'

'Then Paul is right and I am to be blamed for waking you,' Hew declared emphatically. 'The crisis point is over, rest assured.'

'*Rest assured*?' Giles cried. 'If I could rest assured . . .! I am helpless to help her, Hew. *Helpless*.'

It was the closest he had come to frank despair, and Hew felt at a loss. 'You are too much in the dark,' he tried at last, 'and want a little sun, to show this prospect in a fairer light. Come, then, walk with me. The air will do you good.'

The doctor shook his head. 'I cannot leave the house.'

'And yet, a moment past, you were all for setting out, to see the boys matriculate,' Hew reminded him. 'You are disordered, Giles, and have lost your balance. Come, I insist. We'll keep the house in sight.'

They settled on the path above the castle beach, and walked along the cliff top to the summit of Kirk Hill, that led down to the harbour and the shore.

'I am right sorry,' ventured Hew at last, 'to hear that Meg has taken fits again, at this close stage of her confinement. I cannot comprehend it, for I thought the sickness well controlled.'

'For that,' Giles returned, 'you had not reckoned with the wind.'

'What has the wind to do with it? You sound like Bartie Groat!' objected Hew.

Giles looked small and cowed in the shadow of the cliffs, his towering bulk diminished by the water and the sky. 'Do you not see it?' he urged.

Hew resisted stubbornly. 'I do not see at all.'

'Then I shall explain it,' Giles answered with a sigh. 'You are my dearest friend, and know me well enough to know I do not sink to superstition, like Professor Groat.'

'I thank God for that,' snorted Hew.

'And yet it is a fact that the wind effects disturbances,' the doctor went on earnestly. 'It sets the world on edge. The master at the lector-schule remarks it in his bairns, running wild and shrieking when the gusts blow high. It has no less effect upon your sister Meg, and one well fraught with danger, in agitating sickness, and precipitating fits. I can no more control it than the raging seas.

'The sailors with their quadrants cannot make the compass of the ocean's toss and turn, where chance clouds overlap the constant flux of tides. We draw the moon and oceans, the heavens and the stars, and shape their folds of darkness to our little worlds, yet for all our charts, we cannot map the surface of one fragment of the whole. We think ourselves ay at the centre, at its very heart, that somehow we have harnessed nature, bending wind and water to our will, yet all the while we are as nothing, specks and motes caught in the breeze, that nature taunts and tosses like the frigate in a storm.'

'I know you do not think that,' remonstrated Hew, 'who own the finest sets of instruments that I have ever seen.'

'They are but trinkets, toys. I thought to make a horoscope!' Giles contested bitterly, 'But think of that! I thought to mark his

coming on a *chart*. And would that smooth his passage, do you think? Would such calculations help the bairn?'

'Well, I do confess, I have never made much sense of your prognostications; I make a poor astronomer,' reflected Hew. 'Yet I will affirm your measure over nature, your medicine and your physic over its disease. As I have seen Meg, with her potions and simples, mop out corruptions and clear up the cough.'

'Meg is a special case,' conceded Giles. 'She turns nature in upon itself, and bends it to her will. Then nature is become an art, and sickness makes the cure.'

'Well then, trust in her. She proves it can be done. And when your courage fails you, put your trust in God.'

'Amen to that.' The doctor fumbled in his pockets, drawing out a string of beads. Awkwardly, Hew turned away, allowing Giles the quietness of prayer. He watched a young girl clamber over rocks, throwing pebbles on the beach below. The girl glanced up and caught his eye. Then, to his astonishment, she ran across the sand to turn a perfect cartwheel, white limbs whirling naked in the shadow of Kirk Hill.

'Look there!' Hew exclaimed. 'And you might find your thesis proved: the world turns upside down!'

Giles looked up and frowned. He slipped the rosary into his pocket. 'That is Lilias Begg, who should not be out alone. She is an innocent; a natural fool. The louns unkindly cry her, daft quene of the shore. Come up, Lilias Begg!' he called out to the child, while Hew gave thanks to God for the distraction.

The girl smoothed down her dress, and climbed the steps carved in the cliff, her bare legs flecked with sand.

'If she is seen as lewd and loose, the kirk will hold her mother to account,' Giles asserted anxiously.

Hew objected, 'Surely, she is just a child!'

'She is seventeen. Lilias Begg!' Giles called out again, 'Where is your mother? Does she know you're gone?'

'You do not need to shout,' said Lilias sweetly. 'For, I am here.'

She turned a somersault. 'I can coup the lundie,' she announced.

'So I see,' Giles tutted. 'Lilias Begg, this will not do.'

Lilias Begg had skin like milk, paler than a swaddling bairn's, that never saw the sun. She had brittle, flaxen hair, fairer than the smallest child's, and fey, elfin features, like a faun from faerie land. She stared at Hew with solemn eyes, and did not return his smile.

'Where on earth has she come from?' Hew whispered to Giles.

'She is the daughter of Maude Benet, that keeps the haven inn, and of Ranald Begg. A drunkard and a sot,' Giles declared contemptuously. 'He drank himself into an early grave, and left the world a better place once he had gone to Hell. He beat Maude Benet senseless, when she was with child. For which he put a shilling in the poor box, and escaped a fortnight in the jougs.'

It was rare for Giles to speak so unequivocally, and rarer still to hear him damn a man. The damage to an unborn child had cut the doctor deep. Nonetheless, he qualified, 'Or so I have been told.'

Lilias said suddenly, 'I am the whirlijack.'

'And what is that?' demanded Giles.

'The *whirlijack*.' Lilias began to spin like a whirlwind, perilously close to the edge of the cliff.

The doctor caught her hands. 'Be still; you will dance us all giddy! Whatever do you mean?'

'I am the whirligig, that spins the world.'

'The seed pods from the sycamore,' suggested Hew. 'The leaves and fruits are blown all over town.'

'Aye, but spins the world?' Giles fretted. Something had unsettled him, returning him to gloom. He was already looking back towards the house.

Lilias said helpfully, 'It came here on a ship.'

'Some trinket she has picked up at a fair,' Doctor Locke concluded. 'A trick to catch the wind. This is Master Hew,' he turned again to Lilias, 'who will take you home.'

Hew spluttered, 'I will *what*?'

'Tis plain enough,' insisted Giles. 'She will not go alone.'

'Ah, but surely, Paul . . .' said Hew.

'Paul would prove no match for her,' Giles argued. 'For all she is an innocent, she's cunning, in her way. She will lead a man a dance if he allows her to. Now she has come of age, it is her natural instinct. If Lilias is taken by a man, then it must be someone who can give a good account of himself.'

Lilias smiled knowingly. 'I saw a man, in my Mammie's bed. I saw a man, and his hands were all black,' she confided.

'Dear God!' muttered Hew. 'I take your point,' he said to Giles, 'though it is scarcely reassuring.'

The doctor hesitated. 'I would go myself . . .'

'Peace, I'm on my way. Lilias, take my hand!' Hew addressed the girl perhaps more brusquely than he had intended, for her lip began to quiver. 'I want Mistress Meg.'

'So that is it,' Giles sighed. 'Meg has ay been kind to her, and gives her sugar suckets for the cough. I will have some suckets sent to you,' he promised, 'but you cannot see her now. Mistress Meg is not well.'

Lilias asked brightly, 'Will she die?'

Hew said, 'Hush, for pity's sake!' as the girl began to sing, 'Mistress Meg is dead and gone, poor dead sailors all are gone.'

Giles cleared his throat. 'No one here is dead and gone. Yet I must leave you to it. In the temporal sense,' he excused himself to Hew, 'I have been gone too long.'

'Aye, for certain, go,' his friend assured him. 'I will see her home.'

He turned to Lilias Begg. '*You* are trouble, as I think.'

Lilias smiled. 'Come see!' She took his hand and ran, down Kirk Heugh and through the harbour, turning south along the shore, past the priory and the Sea Port, past the fishing boats and mill. The boatmen stared at Hew, in his scholar's drabs. 'This is not the way,' he panted, 'to your mother's house.'

Lilias giggled, stopping short. 'Look! Look there!' She pointed to the rocks at the far side of the bay at Kinkell Braes, across the damp dark sands, flattened by the ebb and flowing of the sea. The

tide was coming in, and a thinly straggled crowd came scrambling up the beach, retreating from the wreck. Four horses were backed up from the bulkhead of the ship, straining at the water's edge. Lilias stood pointing, laughing in delight, 'Look! There it is, the *whirlijack*!'

And there it was, the whirlijack, a perfect wooden windmill, braced against the foremast, high up on the deck. It was painted blue and white, and cross-sailed like the saltire on a summer's day. And flanking both its sides were ropes and stiff machinery. The town had summoned all its arts in salvaging this toy, bright above the wreckage in St Andrews Bay.