**STRUAN HAMILTON**

**A SHOAL OF RED HERRINGS**

**CHAPTER ONE**

**A COLD ENCOUNTER**

‘I am such grateful eternelle. I will never forget what you has done for me. Now I can walk on the street, my reputation is cleared. Please to give to Albert and Olivier and Joi my hugs. Please accept these roses as the token of appreciation. Martine Levy, Dijon.’

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‘It was such a great opportunity and my experience as an Adventure Scout leader was what swung it, I think!’ Thus enthused Oliver, my best friend Joy’s adopted son. He’s Thai and tall and handsome and our godson. We were camping in our practically vintage camper van on the west coast of the Scottish island of Arran. We’d been told it was a much quieter side and just as lovely. ‘We’ is me, Daisy Dolbear and my husband of 40 years, Albert. Retired civil engineer and we hail from Plymouth. Joy was with us too, of course.

 Albert was mustering up some breakfast as the sea shimmered and the large expanse of grass which bordered us, looking so green, waved in the morning breeze. We’d always planned to return to Arran one day. despite our previous rainy trips and when Oliver, first year university student of sociology, landed a job for the summer at Lochranza Outdoor Centre we were at once persuaded to come and be near him on the island. He was delighted we’d be joining him as his six week stint would mean he’d have to hang out at the evenings and weekends with the staff or the children and teens he was leading. So, halfway through the course, he was glad to get away from all that and relax with his mother, Joy and Albert and me. We’d decided to park the camper van at various places so we’d all see different parts of the island.

 He was really enjoying everything about it and he’d already slept in his tent beside Albert’s one, next to the camper van. This was Saturday morning and he was as chatty as can be. ‘We had to dunk 12 kids into the deep, icy pools in North Glen Sannox and they loved it. Character building, it’s called. More like chilblain building. Two of them were ‘special needs’ and they were just so ecstatic when we pulled them out. Next week it’s up on a long hike to Goat Fell…’ He tailed off and Joy and I, who were trying hard to find rocks to hold down the camping table for breakfast, hardly noticed when he said in a kindly voice, ‘Hello. Are you alright? Are you lost?’ His voiced tailed away. We wondered who he could be speaking to on this desolate coast at that time in the morning.

 I went to have a look on the side of the van facing the road and there was a girl, early twenties, who looked bedraggled and frozen. Dressed quite lightly with a green kagoul and peach coloured jeans and yet quite sturdy-looking, green hill walking boots. Quite an emotionless face.

 She was just standing by the road, silently. Oliver came closer to her and said something out of earshot. He turned to us and called out. ‘Do you know the next bus to Brodick?’ None of us had a clue as we were not dependent on public transport. Judy, our west highland terrier sniffed around her legs but the girl hardly reacted. As the bacon smell permeated the air Judy came bounding back. Oliver stepped back a little towards us. The girl seemed to be in a sort of ‘first thing in the morning’ mode. Dozy and indecisive. He said to her that as it was Saturday there was no school bus so the first one would be round nine o’clock. ‘If you keep your eyes peeled it should come into view in the distance.’ I came nearer and wanted to put a thick jumper over her shoulder as she was shivering a little.

 From the other side of the van Albert called, ‘Breakfast up! There’s enough to sink a battleship!’ Judy got in the way as usual.

 I asked the girl if she was alright. Joy also approached, gingerly. The girl seemed a little out of sorts. ‘I think you need to put this sweater on,’ I said, trying not to sound too bossy. The wind was up and a slight drizzle seemed to be around us.

 She didn’t demur and took it and said, ‘Merci becoupe.’ Oliver whispered something in Joy’s ear and she said she agreed. Joy came over and took the girl gently by the arm and said we were having petit dejiner and she must join us.

 Oliver looked concerned and, as it his wont, he led the way to the table, telling Albert, ‘An angelic personage from La France has descended on us and I will give up my seat for her.’

 Albert pulled a face but when the girl and Joy and I came round the corner of the camper he said, ‘Bonjour and all that…’ He was fine about her joining us, just a little surprised.

 The girl, covered in my Fair Isle sweater, and not looking much like an angelic personage, walked a little unsteadily but came with us and Oliver motioned to her to sit down. She was pale and miserable looking. ‘You are very kind,’ was all she said as she sat down on Oliver’s wooden seat.

 ‘Do I hear a French accent?’ Joy said as she handed her a tray and a plate.

 ‘Oiu, I mean yes. I am French.’ She looked around and we didn’t know what more to ask.

 ‘I know the French don’t like a big breakfast, generally,’ said Albert, all hale and hearty, and at once regretting it. ‘You’ll have some bacon and egg I hope. I’ve made plenty…’ He decided to leave it at that.

 As she just stared into space Oliver asked softly, ‘Is bacon and egg alright for you?’

 ‘Oiu. I’m not Jewish.’

 This was so unexpected. Were we supposed to laugh at this? We all looked at each other to gauge reactions but I drew a blank. We ate mostly in silence. She ate well enough and even asked for another oatcake with cheddar, an island speciality.

 ‘I am sorry and very grateful for you kindness. Please can you tell me, which direction will bus come from?’

 ‘Oh,’ said Oliver, ‘from the south.’

 ‘What way is south?’

 ‘The opposite way you arrived. When did you arrive?’

 She looked guarded. She was already looking better after her meal and sit down. A little pinker too. ‘Last night. From Broderick.’

 Certainly no chatterbox. But she seemed to take to Joy and she looked to her and they had a stiff conversation as Albert and I cleared up. He looked at his watch, saying there was half an hour before the bus would come. Oliver hung around, a few feet away, curious as to who this girl was, who’d suddenly appeared. We were three miles from a hamlet, Catacol and two miles from Pirnmill, to the south. Where on earth had she spent the night? There didn’t seem to be any bed and breakfasts for miles around.

 The drizzle was beginning to get heavier. Albert and Oliver decided to put up a canopy, attached to the side of the camper, which would more than cover their two tents. If the rain proved torrential it would give them double protection from the elements.

 I sidled over to where Joy was talking to the girl. ‘Sorry, I never asked your name,’ said Joy, warmly.

 She stared at her and then came out with, ‘Eh, Bernice.’ She paused and then said, ‘Sorry which way is the bus come?’

 This was really odd. Couldn’t she remember? She arrived last night and now was going away so soon? Very odd. Joy glanced at me, then looked away. Oliver, combing back his wild hair, had heard us and looked puzzled and concerned. She was certainly confused. She was wearing thin woolen gloves and kept stroking them nervously. A sign of something amiss but I couldn’t think what.

 Albert came over and pointed to the south where the bus would come from. ‘You’ve time yet. More coffee?’ She smiled for the first time.

 ‘Personally, I don’t understand why anyone from the South of France would want to come to this cold and wet island,’ Albert said, as he started to pour her a coffee from our flask.

 ‘I’m not from there.’ Yes, laconic and intriguing. Anyway, slightly irritated at her and annoyed that Oliver was showing such concern, I went off and got another oatcake or two for her. We’d never see her again but it would be better for her to leave us with a full stomach, if nothing else. Joy, who is supposed to be ‘good’ with people, said to me she’d take her to the roadside and look for the arriving bus and maybe find out more about her. I can’t deny I was curious to know what had happened to her but I never want to show such obvious interest. Albert pottered away round the camper van, sighing now and then, as if it would keep away the drizzle. Seagulls cawed away in the distance but never came for any morsels.

 Just then three cyclists rode past and paused. There were Swedish flags on their mountain bike wheels. A couple and a child of 12 or so. Albert went over and talked to them and they had a chat in the distance by the road side. They were very yellowy. Yellow jackets, hats and a huge yellow tent strapped to the back of the man’s bike. I didn’t catch much as I was trying to listen in on Joy’s conversation with Bernice. Not that it was very lively. She chomped away on the oatcakes and Joy was straining to get much out of her. The Swedish man guffawed and I turned back to look at them and then they cycled off confidently with Albert waving at them.

 He came back over and said they were really nice and planned to go to Glen Catacol and camp. A lovely glen with light coloured bed rock so the burn and waterfalls are especially crystal clear. Oliver was round the opposite side of the camper van from where Joy and the French girl were sitting. ‘Giving them space,’ he whispered to Albert and me. ‘Mum’ll get more out of her that way.’ Was he being tongue in cheek or was he himself intrigued by her? Albert thought the former and told him off for implying his mother was overly curious.

 ‘Oh, ‘Just showing human interest in my fellow man,’ as mum calls it. But I am inclined to find her a bit mysterious.’ Oliver, honest and reasonable as usual. ‘Probably a perfectly simple explanation.’ He then zipped up the canopy half way and asked Albert about the cyclists. ‘Norwegian flags everywhere.’

 ‘Swedish actually…’ he said and they then compared notes about flags. I sidled over to the other side and just caught the tail end of the conversation with Bernice.

 ‘Actually, I think I am full to the neck,’ and she smiled. Joy gave her a small bag and said the sandwich would do for the boat going back to the mainland. Bernice took it and put it in her tiny backpack.

 There was an awkward silence and I filled it by saying, ‘The weather’s not too bad today compared to what I’ve seen here in the past.’ It fell heavily as a breeze made Joy’s mohair scarf flap about. She’s not exactly very dressed for the outdoor life like Albert and me. We’re tweedy and practical but with some style. I hope.

I said to Albert, sotto voce, as we had to grin and bear the drizzle, ‘Why did you ask her about being from the South of France? Was it a ploy?’

 ‘Am I so transparent?’ he said as he squeezed my shoulder. I smiled to him and Oliver nodded that he’d noticed this perhaps unsubtle approach. ‘Yes. I thought she might just indicate where she was actually from but she’s pretty button-lipped.’

 ‘Too right. Psychologists say that the free exchange of information between interlocutors usually results in people telling you things in a normal, relaxed way. You don’t even filter out what you’re saying. Unless you are an especially private person.’

 ‘Or traumatised,’ I blurted out. Where that had come from, I wasn’t sure. Albert looked at me and Oliver screwed up his eyes.

 ‘Hm,’ he said. ‘I was trying not to analyse things too much but that did occur to me. I told her bits and pieces about what I was doing at uni. That we were from Plymouth, which has a ferry to Brittany. She just said nothing except, ‘Nice’, a few times.’ There was a pause and then he said, ‘Traumatised is too strong a word perhaps but upset could be true. She did not arrive last night on this barren coast alone. I’m sure of that.’ Albert and I nodded. I could see Joy and the girl standing by the road and looking to the south for the bus which seemed to be a little late. Nothing much going on there. ‘My instincts tell me that she arrived with someone last night. Something happened and they parted for whatever reason.’

 ‘From her physical state I think she stayed out on the hillside all night. It must have been awful.’ I said the words and knew Albert agreed with me. A mystery indeed.

 Albert stood up and said he could see the bus in the distance. We then followed him, with Oliver whispering to me that she was alright now. ‘Back to Brodick, then away to the Mainland, probably. She’ll be alright.’ I agreed. A little flash in the pan. That was all it was. Nothing to write home about. But all the same, I wondered as Joy saw the girl onto the bus what more she’d managed to find out about her story. There was no hug from Bernice. Just a shrug and a ‘merci’ and then she hopped on. She sat on the opposite side of the bus so there was no final wave to us.

 The bus pulled off, the driver smiling broadly to us. The feeling of letdown, of anticlimax, was raw. We sauntered back to the camper van as a shaft of sunlight shone down. We sat by the canopy and Joy was the first to speak. ‘You remember the old Cointreau advert?’ I said I did, vaguely. ‘The man says ‘The Cointreau is the warmth of we French which melts the ice of you English.’ Well…’

 ‘It was the warmth of we English who failed to melt the ice of one petite francais,’ said Oliver tartly. ‘Not even a token hug.’

 Yes, we were all a little irked by her. After tidying up the dishes and the breakfast things I asked Joy if she’d found out anything more about her. Joy was rarely silent for long but now even she could think of nothing to say.

 ‘She said nothing of substance. I asked where she had stayed the night and she waved her hand over to the direction of the hills. That was that.’ We got ready to go and Judy was wandering around getting under our feet. We were planning to try Corrie Lochan, a little loch above the coast with lovely views and waterfalls tumbling down from it. Oliver knew the way as he’d taken parties from the outdoor centre there several times. ‘I have a theory,’ said Joy, as she put on a waterproof jacket and reluctantly wore a hat over her styled hair. ‘I think there was a boy with her. They argued and he, or she, stormed off.’

 ‘He’d have to be pretty callous to leave her alone in the wild here. I mean she could have hitched a lift, this is quite a safe island, but maybe she’d no money for accommodation.’ But I thought Joy’s theory was sound.

 ‘I think you could be right, aunt Daisy,’ said Oliver as we made the camper and the canopy secure. ‘He maybe had a tent so he’d be alright. We’ll ask anyone we see on our walk if they saw anyone.’

 As we walked to the bottom of the hill which leads to Corrie Lochan, Joy and I did ‘Hat, stick and Umbrella’ for fun and Albert and Oliver walked on ahead. Albert used his field glasses, as he calls them, binoculars to you and me, and glanced around at the cliffs and the stony beach. Oliver was using his tablet app which identifies the birds according to their call. He got two new ones so was pleased. We got up the hard first section which Oliver said not to worry about as the walk leveled off later on. We came across an older man who took off his cap as he spoke to us. From Manchester I would say by his accent. He’d given up Corrie Lochan as he was bothered by his knees. Just before we left him, Oliver asked if he’d seen anyone about yesterday or even today. Some young man with a tent perhaps. Maybe French?

 He said he hadn’t but he’d seen the Swedish family and called them harmless nutters. ‘Love yellow, don’t they?’ he laughed.

 I was wondering if it was time to perhaps forget about Bernice and yet I was interested to know if anyone else had been around in the last day or so and may have seen her. But I would not be the one to snoop around. Joy would do that, thank goodness. Joy’s husband Bob, a great friend of ours, called her as we stepped over a stream. We were amazed there was a signal. He had had to work that week but said he’d fly up at the weekend and stay the following week. Their conversation didn’t last and the signal broke up. He and Albert used to work together at the Plymouth council architectural department. Albert retired some time ago but we’ve gone on holiday with Joy and Bob in our joint camper van for many years.

 We came to a steeper section and we had to be taken over some slippery stones by Oliver, who had excellent balance. It made us both feel a little pathetic as we are usually very sprightly. Joy made her own way over the stream, or burn, as they call it north of the border. Judy waded through happily and got us all wet when she shook the water off herself. She always walked near Oliver, who she adores, having known him all her 12 years. She loves the outdoor life.

 Then we cupped some of the cool, clear burn water. Oliver jumped back, giving me a fright. ‘Don’t do that. Carl, one of the instructors at the centre said that years ago they’d drank water on a hot day going up only to find a dead sheep stuck in the burn near the top. It was fetid.’ I felt sick.

 Albert guffawed but then turned to me when he saw my reaction. He patted my arm kindly, as is his wont and said, ‘Lightening doesn’t strike twice, Daisy dear. It’ll be fine.’ It was reassuring.

 Joy took a swig from her bottle of cold coffee. Oliver smiled and said that this was a tough section but it didn’t last long. The rain held off. Judy nuzzled up to me as she does when she senses something isn’t quite right. I was reddening and panting a little.

 Stretching from rock to rock and onto clumps of heather we heard some conversation behind us and a young couple approached. They were in shorts and thin tee shirts. They passed and then they stopped as Joy chatted to them. Breathless, Albert and I finally caught up.

 ‘Yes, a Jewish skull cap under his hood. One of them was Scottish. Thick Glaswegian accent. The Jewish one said nothing. The Glasgow one had bright ginger hair and said they’d be going on the Postie’s Path, whatever that is,’ said the lady. But they were raring to get going so they started to go further up.

 ‘Sorry for asking but what time was it last night?’ Joy asked as they started to clamber over a huge granite rock.

 ‘Oh, about nine o’clock last night. We were just watching the start of the sunset outside our cottage. One of the Twelve Apostles. Must go… sorry. We’re climbing above Corrie Lochan and down into Glen Catacol… then back home.’

 Joy thanked them as they quickly ascended and she turned to me. ‘Hm, that’s quite near where we’re camped and it could be connected. So, she was not alone. A Jewish boy, hm…’ But there was nothing that I could see that would make sense of Bernice’s strange appearance. Oliver and Joy looked pensive. Had the Jewish boy even been French and was it likely that two lads would abandon Bernice if they had been together with her? I thought not and said so.

 Reading my thoughts Joy said, ‘I don’t think that two boys would fall out with her and run off. More likely she went off and gave them no choice.’ She looked at me. I shrugged but nodded that it was worth thinking about. A cold shiver came over me. All alone on the hillside? It seemed so ghastly and yet unlikely.

 Puffing a little Albert said, frowning, ‘Remember the French girl said snappily that she wasn’t Jewish when I offered her bacon and egg? Could that be a connection? The skull cap? Am I clutching at straws?’

 ‘I don’t know about clutching at straws but can I clutch onto you dear? This bit is so steep,’ I said and that broke the slight tension. ‘Pull me up.’

 The Lochan was glorious and despite the drizzle we could sense the magic of the place. Oliver said that it was 50 feet deep, practically devoid of fish and there were shingle beaches at either end. In the distance, to the left of the Lochan and well above it, we could see the young couple we’d spoken to. They were going over a ridge and down into adjoining Glen Catacol.

 Although we’d had breakfast only two hours ago we all managed a sort of brunch with black bananas and oatcakes. As I wandered about and Albert and Oliver paddled in the clear water I spotted a tent peg and also an empty camping meal packet. So people do come up here and camp I thought. Impossible to say when these things had been left behind. I mentioned it to Joy and she gave it some thought.

 ‘Nobody is going to persuade me to paddle. Patricia at the beauty salon is the only one who ever gets to see my feet,’ she said as Albert awkwardly dried his feet on his tweed socks.

 Oliver was suddenly a little quiet and pensive. Joy whispered to me he had a slight problem. One of the heart. ‘I thought it was all over between him and Heather,’ I said softly, feeling sorry for him.

 ‘It is. This is a girl at the Outdoor Centre. One of the students. She’s half Thai and thinks that as he is also Thai that they have a ‘connection’. She’s been bothering him all week.’

 ‘It’s alright mum. No need to whisper. I got a text from Greig, the director. She was to have left this morning but she heard there was a vacancy for next week so she’s staying another seven days. Greig’s a great guy and understands the situation. It’s happened before. She’s 19 so it’s not an issue legally. She can’t stay in the centre over the weekend but her mother sent her money and she’s booked into a hotel in Lochranza for two nights.’

 ‘Is there the danger that she’ll be roaming the hills?’ asked Joy while Albert finally pulled on his damp socks.

 ‘No fear. She hates the outdoor life…’

 ‘Then why…?’

 ‘Exactly. I think the parents wanted her off their hands. Failed her exams. Moping about. She tried to guess my birthday so she could get us ‘connected’ by the Zodiak.’ He was smirking a little. ‘I’ll survive. Greig has changed all the excursions and programmes so I’ll not be taking many of her activities.’

 ‘He sounds great. Didn’t you say he wanted to meet us tonight for a drink at the Lochranza Hotel?’ Joy sounded quite keen. Knowing her, it would be a fine excuse to get dressed up, I suppose.

 ‘Yes, but that’s where she’s staying, while the Outdoor Centre is closed for the weekend.’

 ‘Oh,’ said Albert. ‘Seems a pity to forgo your evening over this… girl.’

 ‘Actually, there are two bars there in the hotel, called the Lochranza Country Inn. A sort of lounge place and an eating section so maybe we could hide in one of the corners?’ He looked to us hopefully.

 ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘it’ll be fine. We’ll take the van along. It’s only three miles or so from our camp.’

 ‘Thanks, aunt Daisy.’

 ‘I thought you said you’d drop the ‘aunt’ thing once you were 18,’ said Albert.

 ‘I have dropped the ‘auntie’ thing but… I like it. Maybe when I’m 21 next year it’ll be just plain Daisy.’

 ‘There’s nothing plain about Daisy, Oliver,’ chimed in Joy as the sky suddenly cleared and shafts of sun filled the corrie. We decided to have a lie down and Oliver agreed to leave us in peace while he’d climb just a little at the other side and get some height for his panoramic photos of the corrie. Off he went, tall, confident and deep purple-ish and emerald-coloured in his climbing gear. I could see why the girl at the centre, the half-Thai one, would fall for him.

 We snoozed for an hour or more and the shingle was very accommodating to our forms. A spider popped onto my nose and I gently moved it off. The silence was marvelous.

 Irritatingly, Oliver returned and wanted to show the panorama to Albert and he gruffly sat up and looked at Oliver’s camera. A runner, smoothly bald, in black top and tartan shorts came into view. He was almost baby faced and clean cut but with the most amazingly hairy legs, black and almost curly. From my position he looked amazingly out of place. He stopped and smiled, having already spoken to Oliver up on the ridge.

 ‘Great day for the corrie walk,’ he said amiably. ‘Look out for showers though. I saw some Scandinavians in Glen Catacol a few hours ago and they could hardly put up their tent as the squalls were so hard in the glen. I had to help them a bit.’ He chortled. I sat up fully and Albert pulled me up to stand, quite vigorously and unnecessarily.

 ‘They won’t get lost in a snow storm that’s for sure,’ said Albert. ‘That vibrant yellow tent. An eyesore.’

 The man nodded and said he’d to run for training and he went off. So the Swedes were getting settled into the glen. I was glad we had the camper van. When it rains we have the comforting sound of the rain hitting on the roof while we’re safely ensconced inside. Rain hitting your tent hard is not quite so easy to bear.

 Bernice was not mentioned on the way down to the coast and we almost forgot about her as we made our way to the camper van. We’d discovered a small beach with a slither of sand and soon got ready to have a paddle. Salt water is always much more envigorating than fresh. We decided to have a rest and then dinner at the Lochranza Hotel, or whatever it was now called. Oliver kept correcting us as it has been renamed the Lochranza Country Inn. Grumbling, but not seriously, Albert murmured that the food had better be good. Joy said she’d go in first, have a look around for the half-Thai girl and then find a suitable corner to hide ourselves in.

 ‘Now I’m guessing about Greig, the activities leader. I’ll find him in the bar and tell him who we are.’ That was Joy. We drove up the coast and Oliver was chatting to Greig.

 ‘Really… pretty unusual.’ There was a pause. ‘All in French, so nobody knew what was… I see. Nasty.’ Joy and I were all ears. ‘Glasgow Ned, yeah I know the type… but you didn’t call the police. They went off. The teens were a bit unsettled. Yeah… I can imagine. Yes, the fleshpots of Lochranza… I’ll have to watch my mum and Daisy. Keep them from harm’s way. Ha! Ha! See you soon.’

 Joy was, of course, the first to react. ‘What was all that about?’

 ‘Guess, mum. It seems there was a bit of a scene last night. Three people, maybe Bernice, not sure but one Jewish boy and one Glasgow toughie. French was the main language of communication if shouting and screaming can be called that.’

 As we drove into the car park Albert said, ‘I think we should leave well alone. Nothing to do with us.’

 If it was connected to Bernice I was just feeling sorry for her. Joy also said she was sad about the girl. ‘Oh, well, she’s gone now and presumably the boys as well. Let’s enjoy our meal.’

 Oliver was to stay in the van until we told him it was safe to go in. ‘He’ll be typical of that breed. Dressed in outdoor style no doubt. A bit of khaki, cords and green wooly jumper.’ She looked to Oliver smugly for confirmation. ‘A geography graduate? Maybe.’

 ‘Nope. Try five feet four, gothic punk, earlobes with big holes and pink bovver boots,’ Oliver said, enjoying surprising his mother. He had already briefed Greig on the situation so we’d nothing to fear.