



IAN COUPER
Books and Music

Free As the Wind

Part 1

The great golden eagle looked down on the scene below while it soared majestically through the grey cloudy sky high above the purple-heathered highland glen. If he could smile in appreciation of the situation below he would. A massive, fully grown and proud red deer was galloping powerfully up into an abundantly heathered and rocky corrie just off the main glen having scented and seen two amateur stalkers following him.

The deer, nostrils splayed and panting with the great effort, was, in fact, heading into a corrie that had no visible means of escape other than its steep rocky sides. The two amateurs, equipped with shotguns, smiled broadly at each other in the fine highland drizzle as they realised the predicament of the deer. They had him now!

The deer slowed as he moved momentarily out of sight behind some large grey rocks, remnants dropped from an ancient glacier in the centre of the corrie. The stalkers took their chance and cautiously moved closer to the deer.

Shortly, and exhausted from their climb up through the glen but now more especially within the steeper-sided corrie, the two now-bedraggled amateurs settled for a short break on the heather that crackled beneath them in this grey misty morning in the Highlands of Scotland.

It was then when breathing heavily and turning to gaze back down the glen one of them, shocked, indicated to the other the sight he had just seen about five hundred yards below them. The great red deer was now inexplicably behind them and swiftly making his way out of the corrie to disappear into the glen below... but not before stopping and turning to look back briefly and directly at the stalkers.

“WHAT THE...!!! HOW DID??”

The eagle, still soaring and watching, continued to smile... if it was possible to do so!”

*Run deer, while you are free
And like the eagle together you'll be
Free as the wind, fresh as the stream
While you are free you have no need to dream*

It starts

It wasn't the sudden physical and jarring shock of the crash landing on the storm-swept surface of the dark water that was the most chilling and frightening part... nor even the slow gradual sinking under the surface with the subsequent rush of freezing water into the dark confined cabin. No, it was the cold-sweat, disorientation as the cabin now quickly rotated into an upside-down position.

"What the f...?" he swore to himself in a cold panic.

The orange chopper was slowly sinking. Fellow passengers moved as if in slow motion, others in desperation, trying to get to the windows, the doors, anything, and they didn't mind who was hurt or who they struggled over, punching and kicking in the process.

Then, in the dark watery gloom, it was the awareness of the dark shapes outside, the beckoning slow-moving hand, and finally, the deep sigh of relief. He had a feeling everything would be all right now.

He started to emerge through the window space with a great effort into the dark blue coloured water which appeared brighter towards the surface. Again, the ghostly figures were beckoning, beckoning. The sounds of many bubbles and escaping air was all around him.

He forced himself to pull away from the open window and swam desperately for the surface past the divers to be confronted by dazzling flashing lights, blaring sirens, and a water surface greatly disturbed by the wave machine.

He was then greeted by a derisory voice,

"Come on, come on, ye'll need to be quicker than that. Ye'd have frozen yir bollocks aff by now!!"

It is April 2012 on an Offshore Survival Course in Aberdeen. Everyone going to work offshore had to complete this course before setting foot on an offshore installation. It might conceivably be for work on a fixed production platform operated by one of the oil companies, or a floating drilling rig, an offshore accommodation barge, or even an FPSO (Floating Production Storage Operation.)

"Well, how was it?" Kenny Blane smirked, pointing the question at his younger companion.

Kenny, an old hand, was re-doing his offshore survival course after unfortunately letting it lapse a few years ago. He had spent many years, more than he cared to remember, working offshore, and it was always the lure or the "buzz" that brought him back. For the last few years he had missed it hugely while working on the "beach" in Aberdeen, the oil capital of Europe.

Calum McLeod, still panting heavily with the effort of extricating himself from the simulated helicopter in the training pool, took a deep breath before answering while the water ran off in rivulets from him. His response with another question.

"Have you ever been through the real thing?" he asked, chest heaving as he breathed hard.

“Na! These things don’t seem to happen much anymore. Still, best to be prepared, eh?”

They then listened while the instructor finished summarising with his thoughts and concerns before they were instructed to leave the pool area to head for the changing rooms.

“So what do you think of UK Oil then? ...as an employer I mean?” the younger man asked as he opened his locker to take out his clothes.

Calum was twenty one and originally a Glaswegian but for the last twelve years had lived on the island of Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides before moving more recently to Stornoway, the capital and main commercial centre of Lewis and the Outer Hebrides.

Kenny sighed. “I guess they’re just the same as the rest of them. Making loads of money.”

“I have to say though,” he sighed after considering for a few moments as they dried themselves off while sitting down on a bench in the changing room, “conditions are a lot better now in the North Sea, but then the money’s no’ as good as it once was.”

“It’s a lot better than you can get in Stornoway!”

“Ah, an islander eh?” Kenny raised his brow in surprise. “Ye’ve got a Glasgow accent?”

Calum sighed and nodded in agreement then shrugged the shoulders of his deceptive six-foot frame.

“*The usual response,*” he thought resignedly to himself, smiling.

He closed his locker and started to get dressed. His accent had in fact been changing very gradually but he would never lose his distinctive Glasgow “twang”.

“Ma dad got an M.O.D. job in Benbecula and we moved there from Glasgow some years ago. Now ah’m living with my girlfriend in Stornoway.”

The Head Office of UK Oil in Altens, Aberdeen.

The building was much bigger now than it needed to be as many former employees had lost their executive positions in the industry downturn of a few years back. The industry periodically went through times of boom and downturn with each downturn gradually reducing the size of the industry, but things were now starting to boom again as a world-wide shortage of oil meant that mature fields were having their shelf life extended, and fields previously considered to be too expensive to develop were now being re-considered. New potential sources of oil and gas around the globe were also being sought.

Brian McHarg was a young newly promoted Commercial Director and was staring at his MD in disbelief at what he had just pronounced.

The MD, David Carradine, was perceivably greying now which was unsurprising as he had reached the age of sixty six. It was only recently however that his colleagues and fellow directors who were now seated facing him in the

boardroom had become aware that he was starting to act, well, a bit older than before.

At this precise moment, and many miles to the west of the Aberdeen boardroom, the old, bearded and colourfully robed faerie king slowly scanned the murmuring and expectant faces in front of him in the growing darkness and then raised his hand for silence.

He shook his head, raised his staff high, and spoke strongly but resignedly to the crowd.

“It has started!”

“SKYE!”

David Carradine scanned the large expensively-decorated boardroom slightly amused at the reaction to his speech and his summary of where he intended to take UK Oil in its future UK operations.

His Commercial Director, stunned, was first to open his mouth albeit in a slow, disbelieving, and questioning manner.

“Why David? Why bother now? Surely it’s too late?”

He was slowly gaining in confidence. No-one would have questioned the Managing Director before.

“More drilling rigs, more subsea facilities... more expense in that direction is one thing,” he continued, “but a whole new terminal from scratch? It seems too much. It is a mature industry David. Why do this now?”

This time his voice tailed off as he started to lose his confidence again. He was after all the new boy there. But surely others would back him? He looked round anxiously at the other board members there for support. He could see from the down-turned faces it wasn’t coming.

David Carradine, determined to drive this forward, continued strongly.

“My God! Surely I’m not the only one that sees it?”

He glared round the silent faces of the apparently concerned board again then banged his fist angrily on the large oval beech wood boardroom table in front of him.

“If we want to develop the Minch and everything from Shetland to the southern tip of Ireland we need a support base and terminal on the west coast. The industry worldwide needs this. The UK needs this... And UK Oil certainly needs this. This is the future, our future!”

He paused drawing his breath and then decided to continue in a more measured tone.

“Our initial surveys have shown that Skye has the deep water facilities required and sits ideally in a central position in the Minch. Think of the continuing cost of transporting to Shetland, or Flotta in Orkney, and it would obviously be an expensive exercise to transport to the east coast facilities.”

Brian, still in disagreement, was frantically now trying quickly to consider other alternatives.

“What about a pipeline then?” he added, again greatly daring.

His MD studied him before answering. He had high hopes for this young, sharp, ruggedly athletic director after seeing how he had “screwed” the drilling

companies in the late nineties when business was hard and rigs were laid up in places like Invergordon in the Cromarty Firth. But had he made an error? This dark haired and fresh faced Director in front of him looked, well, young. The MD's look and tone now were half mocking.

"Through the mountains Brian? Now that *is* expense."

He decided to relent slightly now, almost apologetically.

"Brian," he said quietly, "you know we need this. Other terminals are approaching capacity. A new one is needed and it needs to go where the future demand will be."

He drew himself up to his full six-foot height, sighed and then continued, still looking directly and intently at his Commercial Director.

"Brian, take a small team, perhaps you and one other, over to Skye. Keep it quiet but suss out opinion and look for a few locations, perhaps somewhere in the north, maybe away from the Cuillin Mountains although that area might also be a possibility. After you report back we'll send the geological and planning experts in. I know Skye, and I like it... and I'm also sure that there will be little or no resistance from the local population. After all, we'll be bringing plenty of work and prosperity to the area over a good few years, and to Skye in particular. Now who in their right mind could seriously argue with that?"

A small stone-built and traditional Primary School just outside of Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides.

"Please Miss!" young Davie Grant asked as he sniggered with his classmates. "How long till you get married now?"

Catriona Simpson looked up from her desk at the front of the class over her reading glasses and smiled to herself. Since her class found out about the slim and attractive twenty year-old's forthcoming wedding, which was still over three months away, they played this game every few days.

"Get on with your work Davie Grant," she chided the cheeky faced youngster, but with a smile.

She loved this job. She loved this island. She had been born and brought up here in idyllic surroundings, level-headed and with a zest for living... the joyous life and soul of any party or ceilidh everyone said of her.

Lifting her head again from marking yesterday's class exercise she stretched, sighed, and lightly checked her pony-tailed long dark brown hair. She then turned to gaze out the window.

It was an unusually sunny day for April and she could clearly make out the edge of the town and harbour area.

"Town?" she thought to herself, smiling inwardly, "*Well, I suppose it is the largest in the Outer Hebrides.*"

Stornoway was indeed the largest community in the whole of the Western Isles with a population of six thousand or so out of a total population in the islands of around twenty six thousand. It was situated near the top of the roughly one

hundred and eighty miles long chain of islands, set on the east coast of Lewis facing the Scottish mainland and was the main ferry port for the island. Some of the other islands of the Outer Hebrides though were also served by ferries further south from Skye and Oban.

Stornoway also had its own small airport and an attractive fishing harbour set below the strong shape of Lews Castle. To the west of Lewis there was nothing but the Atlantic and North America, to the north was Iceland and the Faroe Islands and to the east was northern mainland Scotland, two and a half hours sailing time away.

Catriona's head turned towards the Minch, the stretch of water between the islands and the mainland. Her mind started to drift.

"He should just about be back now," she pondered as she gazed further out to sea in search of the ferry from Ullapool. "He had better be back on time. He has the gig tonight. I hope he's remembered it after his ...fun ...on that offshore course."

Sure enough on straining her eyes she could now start to make out the familiar but distant outline of the "Calmac" ferry the "Isle of Lewis" on its way across from Ullapool.

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