

Duncan watched the boat ferry the last of the burial party back across the river as the sound of the pipes threaded through the rain. *Flowers of the Forest*. Walter Ker would play until darkness lowered its shroud on the castle, his sorrowful laments proud escort through the infinite dusk.

"Ten minutes," the cop said, coming off his PR. "Then we go."

Simmons. In constant touch with the shore party, his colleagues in the chopper overhead.

*What d'you think I'm going to do, swim for it?*

The boat at the slipway now, Drew first to disembark, helping Wattie Cromb and his wife ashore, then the minister. The sky so low the chopper seemed to skim the treetops as it curdled the darkening cloud.

"Wind's rising."

"And so's the river."

The western end of the island was already submerged and unless the rain relented, it was only a matter of hours before Tweed finally burst her banks. As if to make a point, a sudden burst of heavier rain lashed in, driving them to shelter among the trees. Simmons looking increasingly worried now, gazing into the eastern sky as though a clouded crystal ball.

"Easterly backing northeasterly," Duncan observed. "Just like the last time."

"That's fourteen hours solid," Simmons said, glancing at his watch. Everyday scenario, a cop and his prisoner talking about the weather as the floodwaters rise around them. Simmons with one ear bent to his handheld radio, a lot of static, it seemed, and unrelated traffic, but passing Duncan a nugget here and there.

"Amber flood warning soon to go Red."

Simmons had removed the handcuffs for the burial service, seemed in no immediate hurry

to clamp them back on. Duncan watching the party of mourners set off up the track to the castle, huddled like hostages beneath a shortage of umbrellas. Lonie back on the scene again, now alongside Armstrong on the slipway.

An outboard motor stuttered to life and the cop-turned-ferryman began nosing the boat upstream towards the island. Struggling to make headway. Duncan at the helm would have crossed to the far bank, edged his way up the northern channel to the relative slack of Dead Man's Pool, then used the current there to carry him onto the western tip of the island, now partially flooded below them. But no one thought to ask him.

Simmons was still intent on his radio, flood reports coming in thick and fast. "Warning levels on Ettrick and Yarrow," he reported, "Flood Control Group standing-by."

Duncan watching the boat's battle with the current 30 yards downstream, its bow rising and dipping like a sniffer-dog's snout to the scent of the river, a few yards nearer now, the cop-turned-ferryman drenched and bedraggled in the stern. Simmons also engrossed now, concern shadowing his eyes.

"Can you swim?" Duncan asked.

"I can drown slowly." With a nervous laugh. "Anyway, it won't come to that. There's always the chopper." But at that moment, as if on cue, the helicopter rolled and banked away, was soon lost to the northern horizon.

"Or the coastguard," Duncan said.

"The boat'll make it."

"Of course it will."

"Even if it doesn't, so what? We're safe enough here."

"Of course we are." Duncan with a growing sense of... what? *Possibility?* As though here on this tiny island Ranal's daredevil spirit now seeped from the soil, dripped from the glossy leaves, rode every drop of moisture through the misted air. Devilment creeping up through his roots as though by osmosis. "We could build a shelter, make a fire, hunt wild pigs to roast upon the spit. Think of the stories we could tell our grandchildren."

Simmons fixed him with a long hard stare straight from the manual. "Don't get any funny ideas," he growled, "or I'll slap your cuffs back on." Returning his attention to his radio as

another burst of incomprehensible dialogue crackled through.

The boat midstream now, closer, but not by much, hanging like a hooked fish in the current, its outboard barely audible, the cop-turned-ferryman straining to keep it head-on in this the swiftest part of the channel, only a matter of minutes, Duncan reckoned, before it began to lose way, would have to fight its way back to shore, a tricky manoeuvre at the best of times if you knew what you were doing and happened to understand the unpredictable habits of a river in spate.

Simmons grabbed his arm. "Where d'you think you're going?"

"Your colleague ever makes it, we'd better be ready to board."

The detective had to think about that, weigh the pros and cons on the scales of his suspicions before leading the way cautiously down the steep muddied path through the leaking lattice of trees to the Giant's Chair where he and Drew had sunk a couple of cans a week ago, the sun blazing that day as they'd laughed over Fin's psychological profile.

Armstrong and Lonie were still hunched beneath brollies on the bank, watching the boat struggle against the onrushing current like some insect fighting for its life, or perhaps they were watching Duncan as he clambered onto the boulder, stood there staring down into the pool of slack beneath the dripping fronds of willow.

"That pool down there? On a clear day you can see right down to the riverbed, watch the salmon resting-up before they tackle the upstream cauld. Or in the shade of the willow there, where it's shallower? That was Euan's favourite lie. He'd fish it from the bank where you are now, keep his shadow clear of the water, cast as far upstream as those trees would allow, then let the line drift on the inside current there"—Duncan pointing out the rip, now swollen beyond recognition—"and with luck catch an eddy that would bring his favourite Jocky Scott drifting lazily into the slack and, on a lucky day, get a tickle or maybe even a strike. Best he ever landed was a 27 pounder, ten or twelve ounces I think, and he almost soiled his pants that day..."

Simmons saying, "Yessir," into his radio, then telling Duncan that Lonie wanted him down off that rock.

Duncan intent on the broiling rip—where the currents that circumvented the island merged—

a mere ten or twelve metres from where he stood. He said, "You know what Lonie reminds me of? The kind of creature that eats its own young."

The radio crackled again, but this time Lonie's orders were drowned by a sudden downpour, the pitch of the rain rising as it crashed through the canopy, smacked off the water, drummed fierce tattoos on the sodden earth. Both men already soaked through but neither of them envying the poor sod in the boat, hunched beneath the onslaught as he fought desperately to steer the craft away from the seething rip. But by now it was apparent both to the man himself and everyone watching that he was losing ground, the rippling current gradually forcing him abeam. A second later as the boat corkscrewed in the air and tossed the hapless cop into the water, Duncan dove from the boulder into the torrent below.