

Not wanted on voyage

Sandra Davies

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One

Edinburgh, Sunday 1st August 2010

'Rose,' she said, refraining on this occasion from the diminutive since she had a favour to ask, 'I don't suppose you fancy being my husband for a week, do you?'

He had greeted her with his customary 'Mad again? Or just a little loony?' an apparently irresistible comment on *her* surname. She was one of only a very small handful of work colleagues he would choose to speak to halfway through his Sunday lunch and he now lowered the bottle of Raven Ale he had been about to take a mouthful from and sat back, phone to his ear, grinning with goblin delight.

Following the departure earlier that morning of a now ex girlfriend, Baz Rose had spent a couple of hours re-claiming his flat and it had been with a sense of well-scrubbed satisfaction that he had sat down in front of the television, with three rounds of extra mature Cheddar sandwiches, half a dozen pickled onions and a couple of bottles of Orkney beer, to watch the Hungarian Grand Prix. An uneventful start had been followed, on lap fifteen, by a minor collision resulting in debris on the track, and it had been as the safety car was deployed, for what looked likely to be several processional laps, that his phone had tapped out eight seconds of drum beat followed by the lead singer of Editors, urging him to 'Pull the blindfold down, so your eyes can't see', a comment, generally unrecognised, on the nature of his job as a senior crime reporter for one of Scotland's biggest daily newspapers.

'Madigan, my love, what a *fascinating* proposition! I *am* between women at the moment, as it happens, but I have to admit that while I like you well enough, I've never exactly fancied you ...'

'Same here,' with conviction. 'It'll be in name only I assure you. It's just that if we're going on a honeymoon cruise, the assumption will be that we're married.'

'Yeah, I see that ... but why a honeymoon cruise?'

'Because there's been a higher than average number of grooms returning as widowers. And I want to find out why.'

'Define higher than average.' He drained the last of the beer and set the bottle down on the floor beside the settee.

'At least one per cruise for the past three cruises, and the last one had two, two deaths. That high enough for you? And there's only ever twelve couples at a time.'

He suppressed a belch. 'OK, I'll give you that. When, where and how long for? A week did you say?'

'Seven nights, Sunday to Saturday. The 'Dunvegan', departing Leith two weeks today, gets back Sunday lunchtime, the twenty-second. Heads north, stopping Aberdeen and Invergordon, then Stromness and Lerwick.'

'What are you looking for? Who's behind it?'

'Well, it could be some sort of life insurance scam. Also, three of the deaths, alleged accidental, occurred in Orkney. The obvious link there is the tour guide, who is employed by the cruise company. He was a witness to all of them, but I don't know how it works, whether it's to order, or just a hobby of his.'

'To order'? You mean husbands actually wanting their brides bumped off?'

'That's one theory. Obviously there could be more to it than that, deaths that aren't so obvious. It's one of the things I want to find out.'

'And it could be nothing but coincidence ... but I agree, it does sound in need of investigation. Not so much whodunnit, perhaps, but who is it going to be done unto, i.e. which wife. So we'd need to suss out which are the less than perfect-appearing marriages and try and catch the murder as it happens ...'

'Or prevent it ...'

'So long as you're not expecting me to do anything brave ... OK, my love, you've convinced me, I'm on, so long as you promise that we don't have to go through all that posh suit, white dress stuff.'

It had been that 'white dress stuff' that Isobel had been hoping for.

This morning she had been trying to keep open the option of returning. Cool, but no longer freezing him out, as she had been last night, in her irritation at his intransigence, but this was the second time she had decided it wasn't working, or rather, he had known but had

allowed it to be her idea, and he was set on preventing a third occurrence.

Last night's meal had ended midway through the dessert, with her going straight home to her own flat. Today she had appeared at his door just before nine, immaculate as ever, despite it being Sunday. Baz's appearance, when he eventually answered the door (never having given her a key), barefoot and wearing old jeans and a much-faded university rugby shirt, had further pointed up the differences between them.

His black-stubbed unkemptness exacerbated his undeniable ugliness, which for long periods she had been able to overlook, save when observing the reaction of her friends on first meeting him. He *was* ugly, his features large and over-mobile, surrounded by folds and crevices of flesh which ought, but did not, give the impression of fat and which added to the expressiveness of his words. His near-black curls were abundant and unruly, always over-long, although presumably he did go to the barbers reasonably regularly, and his sideburns hinted at some gypsy past. (The lack of a red-spotted neckerchief created a small desire, in some female observers, to place, initially, their fingertips, in the hollow of his throat.) His nose had been broken in his youth 'more than once' and his mouth, also over-large, was asymmetric.

His eyes were his best feature, dark, and shiny as well-oiled olives, habitual amusement indicated by the sunburst of pale lines at each outer corner, and his every remark, in a creamy-frothed, Guinness-dark voice, was emphasised by surprisingly well-shaped black eyebrows.

At first sight he could be taken for a taller-than-average gondolier, one with pugilistic proclivities. At second sight, but again solely to certain female observers, he might still suggest gondolier, but the overwhelming impression was of a devastating sexiness, in a bad, guilt-inducing sort of way.

For Isobel this morning, however, his eyes had been less shiny, deliberately so. As a couple they were too different: last night's storm had blown up with her request that he try just once going to the ballet and him refusing (without bothering to tell her that he had been and had found it not to his taste) and had ended with her insistence that their forthcoming holiday – a precious two weeks – be spent lying on a boring bloody 'luxurious' beach.

He had long recognised that Isobel was, to put it crudely, posh girl thinking she wanted a bit of rough. Over-optimistic posh girl with romanticised idea of rough. And having believed she had got it – despite the fact that Baz invariably behaved well within the bounds of civilisation, had never bothered to act up to her fantasy – she felt obliged to try to sand down the scratchy, uneven, uncivilised edges.

He neither wanted nor needed her enough to let himself be so polished, but there was no point in hurting nor antagonising the girl – they had to work together sufficiently often for it to be sensible to avoid a major falling out.

Trying to steer between truth and tact, as he closed the boot of her car on the last of her neatly-boxed possessions he had told her, 'I hear that the 'Herald' has a new arts reporter – get yourself along to the premier of 'Tosca' next week, you'll find he's much more your type.'

Two

Venice, March 2008

'Pronto?'

Eyes shut tight since her hand had known the necessary distance to reach, she had grasped her phone and put it against her ear, thumbing the 'Connect' button and making sure to sound anything but welcoming. But the phone remained stubbornly silent, which was when she realised that the buzzing had been the doorbell. One eye squinted open to check the time on the tiny screen. Ten past nine, on a Saturday for Christ sake, whoever it was couldn't possibly be anyone she knew, or who knew her! Lurching slightly, grumbling, she got out of bed and walked on tiptoe, lest it be cold, across the floorboards to press the button on the entry phone.

Repeated, along with her irritation, 'Pronto?'

'Penny?' A man's voice, Italian of course, although whoever it was knew that *she* was English, knew at least her name.

'... Yes,' cautiously.

'Come down here, now. And let me in.'

'Wha-a? Who is this?'

'*Avanti cara!*' Suddenly impatient, 'Open the door.'

Responding entirely to the command in the voice, she did as she was told, running barefoot down the wooden stairs, dusty but too worn to be splintery, herself aware of the frowsty overnight smell of her body – she really should have changed the sheets – but decently-clad, thanks to her preference for white cotton Victorian-style nightdresses. She drew the top and bottom bolts, flinching, as ever in anticipation of slicing a painful portion of finger, turned the iron key and pulled open the heavy door, the early morning air rushing in, billowing cool around her ankles.

There was no-one there except, across the square, beyond the capped-off circular well head, the two old men she had christened, without differentiating, Marco and Polo, after one of Cannaregio's more famous residents.

They were deep in their usual early morning conversation, having positioned themselves in the as-yet-narrow area of sunshine, needing its warmth despite their overcoats. This was the first of their daily exchanges, a second took place post-siesta and a third in the evening. What they found to talk about she did not know, they only ever wished her the time of day should she walk past them, courteous but disinterested. This morning they did not spare her so much as a glance, thereby implying, she thought, crossly, that she made a habit of appearing on her doorstep in her nightdress.

Part of her now wondering whether she had dreamt the entry-phone conversation, she would not have been surprised to find that there was no-one there at all. Taking a couple of steps out, however, toes curling on night-chilled stone, she saw him, leaning on the wall to her left, pale face turned towards her, and immediately knew why she had acted so promptly at the sound of his voice – Pavlovian response quicker than barely-fired-up brain.

‘Penny.’ His voice throaty, not quite as it had been, ‘I’d have known you anywhere, nightdress or no.’ He laughed briefly. ‘It’s taken, what, five years, but I’ve found you at last.’

‘Guido. Christ, Guido. You’d better come in ...’

Memory, *memories*, fractured and guilty as an accidently shattered heirloom Christmas bauble, returned with a vengeance, constricting her throat and reducing her to momentary dumbness. And though she had subconsciously noted that his leaning had not been casual, his paleness a little more yellow than was reasonable for the end of winter, she failed to wonder why, because as she headed back up the stairs her mind was in a tumult. Was it really wise to let this man into her home, into her life again? He always had been able to influence her, for better or for worse, right up until that last time. Had he now tracked her down with the intention of forcing her to admit the truth – a truth she’d been running from for perhaps too long? One she had thought she’d escaped from?

Once upstairs in her flat again she paused, listening to his still-approaching footsteps, coming more slowly than expected for only the second floor. She heard him panting, struggling to catch his breath and turned to look at him as he came through the door, his hand gripping the doorframe. Her face was in silhouette, the window behind her, but the reflected light from the sun on the upper windows

of the buildings across the campo, although too dim to fully penetrate the dingy little room, was enough to illuminate the sheen on his face.

He looked around, allowing himself time to regain breath enough to speak, then, '*Cara mia!* I imagined you somewhere much more ... more beautiful than this!' and he surveyed the bare utility of the room with an air of distaste.

'Yes, well ... didn't work out like that, did it?' and she turned sharply away from him, not so much irritated by his words as to hide the fact that she'd been shocked to tears by the contrast between the well-remembered arrogance of his remark and the ... the *wreck* of his once beautiful face.

And because she had seen that, whatever her preference, he needed to finish the business between them, because his time was running out and he would soon be dead, certainly before the two old men in the Campo below.

She heard him walk across the room and come to stand beside her at the window, his forearm against the wall, fingers white-knuckled against the corner of the recess, supporting him. Together they looked down into the Campo where Marco and Polo appeared to be bringing their discussion to an end, their gentle voices, still liquid in their now slow-declining volubility, echoing around the high buildings.

'Ah – the pleasure of reminiscence ...' he began and she quickly turned her head to look at him, to gauge whether he was referring to his own situation or if it was just a casual throwaway remark, her face unable to hide what she had already divined. He smiled wryly 'You've learnt a little more perception, my little English *centesimo*. As you see, time is short. Let me tell you what I want from you; this time you have not so much need to fear.'

But that had been his view of the situation, and although in the end it was not fear that was uppermost, she certainly endured discomfort because, employing a combination of charm and fairly brutal truth, he had proceeded to wring from her the confessions she had, five years previously, fled from rather than face him with.

Thereafter, as a condition of his forgiving her, he had insisted she make him a promise.

Two promises.

He had charged her to murder.

And he had charged her to seek revenge.

Three

North Yorkshire, November 2009

'Christ, it's a bit bloody parky in here isn't it?'

His smile, even while rubbing his hands together in clichéd old geezer style, acknowledged that he was far better off than she, as it also acknowledged his gratitude that she was not screeching and moaning in full-on prima donna fashion as he had fully expected her to do, given the way the majority of women behaved in her profession.

Especially because, for once, he would have allowed she had every right to do so, having just been shown the several boxes of miniscule swimwear she was going to have to model, one by chilly flesh-exposed one. Her face showed more puzzlement than dismay, and most of that had to be due to the vicious tone taken by the arrogant bastard in charge, before he'd left the room to take a phone call. Not something she was used to, seemingly, but it wasn't his place to wonder.

Davey Cartwright hated catalogue work with a vengeance, hated the falseness of the whole fashion industry, the belief that clothes were so earth-shatteringly important. It seemed that the trashier the clothes the more pretentious the whole shebang – as if fashion was more about words than material goods. No great skill involved for him either, at this level, nothing creative, just speed.

Plenty of that – speed, or any other mind-bending substance – if he was so-minded (he wasn't) and ditto the 'flash bang' if ever he acquired a taste for copulating with self-promoting stick insects, but that too soon lost its attraction.

However, bills to pay and a need to eat and buy equipment meant he had no choice but to take on such jobs when offered and, as his agent had said, this one at least had the merit of being in a minor stately home – Elizabethan allegedly – in the glorious countryside of the West Yorkshire Pennines. Give him landscape every time, but the market for that was over-full and cut-throat these days, didn't pay

anyway near so well, until you hit the big-time (and even then it was never *that* big!) so as a source of regular income it was a non-starter.

And glorious as the Dales were, even they made minimal impact in November, a month also particularly unsuited to beachwear, but he hadn't known that was what he was going to be photographing before he arrived.

'You weren't told either?'

She shook her head, as she slowly began unbuttoning her leather coat. Fay she'd said her name was, and it suited her. Goodness knows, she looked fragile enough even before she started stripping off gloves, scarf, boots, woolly socks, jeans, high neck fleece and the two jumpers she wore.

'No, Simon didn't say. Just to come early for some extra work.'

Once she was stripped off though – and because no screen had been provided he'd helped her pile the boxes one on top of the other so as to give her a bit of privacy to change behind – it was only her face which gave that impression maybe the length, the fragility of her neck; where it mattered most she was beautifully well-endowed. All hers too as far as he could tell (and he'd seen enough silicone supplements to tell the difference), good bum on her as well – perfect for bikinis.

The pale transparency of her skin was unusual, the merest sprinkling of freckles just enough to set her apart from the run-of-the-mill catalogue models. Not the only thing that set her apart: her lack of experience, modelling experience, showed too. But she was a quick learner, and she didn't whinge, just got on with what she had to do which, in itself, was enough to tell him that she wasn't cut out to be a top model – not temperamental, not self-centred enough, though well comfortable in what he had to admit was one of the best bodies he'd seen for half a year at least.

But the whole set-up stank.

He couldn't put his finger on why, or how but it felt bogus in some way. That sadist of an agent, publicity bloke or whatever, Simon – Sleazy Simon he'd nick-named him – for a start.

'He's the sort that gives the Scottish their reputation for being tight-fisted, wouldn't have hurt to give us a bit of heat ...'

'Careful,' she'd said, laughing at him, 'I'm Scottish too ...'

'You don't sound like he does.'

'No, he's from Glasgow ... and he's not usually like this, I don't know why, something must've really pissed him off.'

'Is this place his?'

'God, no, not Simon's style at all, he's all flash modern. Belongs to a friend of a friend, he said, bought by some musician who's not yet got round to moving in, which is why it's only part furnished I suppose. He'll probably get some heat on in a bit ... he doesn't normally do this sort of work.'

'Out for as big a profit as possible, by the look of it, probably pocketing more than his fair share of it too – is he paying you a decent amount?'

'He usually does, we didn't discuss this job, but I'm sure he'll be fine.' She was nice enough to be anxious that he didn't get too upset on her behalf.

'Best thing then is to work non-stop. Keep us warm and get it all done in the one day.'

Which they'd proceeded to do, with minimum interference from Simon. With his permission they'd quickly found half a dozen chairs and rugs, vases and table lamps, to use as props, and, at Davey's instigation, a couple of blankets for Fay to wrap herself in in between shots and then he'd left them to it, once he'd seen that Davey could work from the instructions that had been faxed through.

It had got dark a couple of hours before Davey packed up.

He'd asked her if she needed a lift to anywhere, assuming she'd be as keen as he to get somewhere warm. Had thoughts of offering a meal, but she said she was staying overnight. She'd tried to laugh, to reassure him, but she sounded to him like a necrophobe contemplating a night in Undercliffe cemetery. She said she'd be sleeping in all her clothes just to stay warm and would catch a train home the next morning. Simon would probably give her a lift to the station, if no further.

He didn't like it, and told her so, gave her one of his business cards, and took her mobile number, but she said she was sure it'd be OK, Simon'd likely calm down now the catalogue stuff was done, it was likely that which had made him so evil, because it was new to him. Unhappy, Davey had no option but to leave her there.

Ten narrow-focused miles down the dark road, the only light an occasional twin flash reflection from some staring sheep, and bulging drystone walls threatening to punish every minor deviation on the tight corners, the heater in the car finally blasted out enough warmth

for Davey to feel human again. His conscience similarly revived and refused to allow him to continue to believe her reassurances. Still vivid in his own memory, from one nightmare hostel in Liverpool, the horror of sliding between icy, and probably damp sheets was sufficiently compelling for him to turn the car around in the next farm gateway and head back.

He found the big front door unlocked.

Quietly, he let himself in and went through the dark hallway to where he could see a light coming from under the door of a room they had not used. He could hear voices, men's voices, more than he expected, since there had only been her and Simon there when he left. The excuse he'd been rehearsing – a mislaid lens – seemed less convincing now and he had to force himself to remember the goose-pimples on her arms, before he could bring himself to stealthily open the door.

He blinked at the scene before him.

Vivid white spotlights made black and two-dimensional the four men within, beyond whom, burning in the black iron-surrounded fireplace, was the glow of a log fire, a *real* log fire, a little smoky but smelling good, and already such warmth!

Sleazy Simon still appeared to be in charge. Two others, one skinny, shaven head and a Mexican bandito moustache – more nacho than macho – the other, already double-chinned and a gut on him, despite his youth, held cameras, one still, one video. The third, better-looking by far, thanks to wax and sun-beds, and probably working out, was in the process of removing his shirt. As each of the silhouettes interspersed themselves between the fire and where Davey stood they were edged with orange firelight, limbs set to quiver.

The spotlights were set round a shiny black satin sheet-wrapped mattress, which lay on the floor in front of the fire. A large – five feet or more – wooden cross, black and elaborately hand-carved, and inset with red glass, stood at the head of the bed, and hung from the arms, like Mike Oldfield had become a butcher, was a graded set of knives, red-handled and recently sharpened, judging by the glint of firelight reflected along their edges. A porn film-set, without a shadow of a doubt. Possibly – probably – something worse, from the heightened menace in the room, far exceeding what was reasonable .

He took all this in before he even found her.

She was beyond the glare of the spots, and he saw immediately that she was either very drunk or drugged in some way. Pretty much out of it anyway, sagging on a pile of cushions on the floor, leaning against the wall, head back, mouth slightly open and eyes shut. Completely naked. And in such a way, he was, later, pleased to remember, to excite nothing but pity, strengthening his impulse to rescue her.

Four of them and only one of him, and no help to be expected from her; hindrance if anything. Numbers-wise he didn't stand a chance, not in a straight fight, but he did at least have a fully-functioning brain. None of them were sober and, apart from Simon, far from bright. The two with cameras didn't look like they'd relish a fight and the other might be more than usually reluctant to lose his looks if that was what he earned his living by.

It had taken alcohol – more of it, for them; time – more than he expected; a resurrection of his own acting skills, and a bit of cunning, before he eventually got himself and her safely away. But not before he'd had to do a bit of naked wrestling himself – and he hadn't needed any oiling to look good.

Happily, he'd also trashed their cameras on the way out so that particular sequence would never see the light of day.

Four

Edinburgh, Friday 5th March 2010

SOCOs he supposed they were, remembering a recently-read book by another Ian who lived in this city, and also that, before he showed them out, he should've asked whether it was pronounced 'soak-os' or 'sock-os'.

Returning from politely seeing them out, taking the stairs two steps at a time, no less steep for being on the grand side, as befitted access to the top floor flat in one of Edinburgh's more glorious city centre Georgian terraces, he was as irritated at the amount of time it had wasted as much as anything else. He paused on the threshold, momentarily deflated and thinking, uncharacteristically, *Christ* – what a fucking mess!

He had always assumed the worst part of a burglary, after the loss of personal things, would be the sense of violation. That was what the papers always went on about, usually ending with a reference to 'victim support'. He didn't think of himself as a victim and surely it would be a hell of a lot more practical if they had a hot-line to Molly Maids or whatever the Edinburgh equivalent of the home cleaning service was, especially because not only was there the mess of overturned jars and packets in the kitchen – pretty obvious they'd been looking for something specific rather than hoping to get lucky with silver or jewellery or something – but the bloody finger-print powder was everywhere, like icing sugar, especially noticeable on the black marble work surface. At least they – *he* more like – hadn't vandalised the place, hadn't shat in his bed.

When the police heard that he'd only just moved in they were quick to say there was a strong possibility of mistaken identity, that the thieves had very likely acted under the assumption that the previous owner was still living there. But they'd refused to tell him why they thought that. And for well-established reasons, he did not voice his own concerns; they might be right but there was always the possibility that they were not.

An hour later, as if to prove that things *could* get worse, there was a buzzing from the doorbell, a voice echoing from the entry phone, identifying someone he had no choice but to let in.

'Hi, it's me.'

Opening the door, he knew his scruffy jeans and paint-spattered sweatshirt, changed into while he cleared up, would give the impression that he was intending to spend the night at home, something he need disabuse her of as soon as possible, but he couldn't ignore her, couldn't let her go without at least offering food and drink, even though, in the past year he'd learnt to see through most of her manipulations.

'Do you want a sandwich or something?' In trying to remember what she'd wanted last time, how much money he'd handed over, he'd temporarily forgotten the state of the kitchen. The sitting room and hall were now mostly tidy but he'd decided that the kitchen was too big a job to tackle this evening.

She followed him, slouched black dwarf, acolyte to quicksilver conjuror of cash, coming to a halt in the doorway, almost jolted into a sympathy quite alien to her usual self-absorption, 'Fuckin' hell Ian, you been burgled or something?'

Realising that he knew exactly how to get rid of her he forgot to give his usual disapproving glance at her language. 'Yes,' stepping over the pasta- and cereal-scattered floor, 'They didn't take much, but I've got to go out, need to go and get changed in five minutes. Tell you what, though, if you stay and get this cleaned up while I'm away, I'll bring back a takeaway for you.'

Hiding amusement, he watched greed square up to idleness, and congratulated himself – he could have put money on it – when she said, with no real attempt to sound sincere, 'Promised I'd be home ... could you not just give me the fare this time?'

Saturday morning, and again he'd forgotten to cancel the alarm, but for once was not tempted to turn over and go back to sleep. He still had the bloody kitchen to clean, and knew he'd feel better if he got up straight away and got the job done before even thinking about breakfast. Squinting at the curtained window, still not sufficiently familiar with how the light varied, he could not gauge whether or not it was sunny; from where he lay the blue-grey heavy cotton tended to

colour everything more dour than it really was, though they looked good enough otherwise.

Three hours later, sun definitely shining and himself showered and hungry enough to be considering brunch – or even a decent lunch – rather than breakfast, checking his wallet to see whether or not he needed to get cash out, he found a page of lined paper, torn from a small notebook, on which was written:

'Lydia Kennedy – 332-4464'

Mind elsewhere, he studied the spiky black writing before a jolt of memory brought back that intriguing – *potentially* intriguing, let's not get *too* excited here, Ian – woman from Thursday night. Suddenly swept with an unaccustomed wave of ... light-heartedness he supposed it could be, and before his habitual caution clicked in, like some emotional bloody traffic warden, he pulled out his phone and entered the number, thumbing 'call' as soon as he had done so.

'Hallo?'

He was surprised by the quick response – he'd not heard it ring – and also at the pleasure of hearing her voice, recollecting that he'd likened it, somewhat fancifully (he'd had a few whiskies by then) as 'smoky velvet'. Aware that the pause was going on a bit longer than it should, fearful that he'd be taken for some sort of phone pest, he said 'Lydia?' although he was sure it was her, and then 'It's Ian, Ian Portal – we met at ...'

'At Sarah's – yes of course I remember! And how nice to hear from you.' She was smiling, he could hear it in her voice, less velvet more, don't know, something less luxurious, probably because it was daytime, and encouraged he said, 'Look, I know it's short notice but I've been busy all morning, haven't had breakfast and now I'm in need of a good lunch. I wondered if you could recommend somewhere ... wondered whether we could meet. I'd like to see you again.'

'That's really excellent timing – I'm just on my way out now, bit of shopping and then lunch, my Saturday treat to myself. I've a sort of permanent reservation at Giovanni's which means no more than he'll always squeeze me in, and I can certainly recommend that. That is, if you like Italian? It's in Stockbridge.'

He did, and she gave him directions.

He was just about to ring off, when she added, 'I'll be wearing an orangey-coloured coat, with a black scarf, and jeans; don't be looking for the dressed-up version on a Saturday morning!'

She was smiling so much her cheeks ached. Went to the mirror to check her usual Saturday attire was good enough, knew her hair, loose and curly and untidy, no matter that she'd brushed it, was very different to the sophisticated severity of Thursday night, and took time to say to those glowing eyes, 'This is going to be different, right? You're going to concentrate only on the man, what he's like, whether or not you like him. *Nothing* else at all – so far your tally of happy relationships is nil – a total duck – let's see if this new approach can break it.

New approach or not, it came as a shock to realise, three hours later, that they were the only people left in the restaurant, so absorbed had they been in the easy exchange of seemingly unending things they had to say to each other. Giovanni and his family could be heard in the kitchen, eating their late, late lunch; he would not have minded, had left them alone. Concurrently, both she and Ian were struck with a fear of having too much of a good thing and, having already established that each was committed elsewhere that evening, agreed they'd 'be in touch.'

Until Ian asked could they meet again tomorrow. 'I'm busy all next week, wouldn't like to have to wait until next weekend.' Surprisingly he asked to do some of the tourist things, climb Arthur's Seat for example, 'I'm still a newcomer to this city,' and they arranged to meet at the entrance to Holyrood House.

Early on Sunday morning, what would have been very much too early had he not already been up, Ian had a less welcome call. At least he'd known from the ringtone this wasn't Lydia phoning to cancel, even so, at this hour it wasn't likely to be good news.

'It's me ...'

Because he was feeling especially light-hearted he tried, despite knowing already from the grey flatness of her tone that it was a waste of time, making a joke of it. 'That's funny, I'm me too.'

A sigh came down the line. 'You've done that one before ... and it wasna funny then either.'

'I know, love, sorry ... put it down to my age ...'

'Aye, I'll do that.'

Silence, a silence which he had at least learnt not to try to fill, another sign of his age, and her immaturity. But she strung it out and he was trying to decide which of his well-worn openings would be the

least likely to make her clam up again, when she said, 'I ... I need some money ...'

Well that wasn't a surprise, when did she not? He sighed, trying for less exasperated than he felt, not wanting her problems to impinge on his optimistic start of the day, 'What for this time?'

'Can't tell you ...'

'Won't, you mean.'

'... Won't, aye.'

Another pause while he mentally went through all the reasons why he shouldn't just hand over cash, then all that might happen if he didn't. All recently discovered and shocking things that she knew about and he, despite his maturity, did not. In the end, as always, 'How much?'

'Fifty. Soon as you can.'

He heard the sharp relief, an unaccustomed amount of relief in her voice – it was an unaccustomed amount of money! – which suddenly, inexplicably, frightened him. Urgently, sensing something which had been absent from all previous requests he said, 'Bella, where are you?'

'I ... I don't know ... I think ... nowhere.'

And she had ended the call, and thereafter been unavailable.

Lydia was first to arrive, knowing how long it sometimes took to get through the Sunday morning pavement jams, created by coaches decanting tourists. Within five minutes she saw him striding towards her, his face expressing mild concern, presumably at having kept her waiting, even though he was on time.

No more than twenty yards away, his expression changed to something more worried, but also relieved, and he pulled his mobile out of his pocket. Took two more steps then came to a standstill, whether to concentrate or prevent her overhearing she did not know, but as she watched anxiety was replaced by anger and he began walking towards her again, gesturing. Reaching her, glancing at her, he took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself and she heard him say, 'No, it isn't convenient, not at all, but I haven't any choice have I? I'll be there as soon as I can. Do not, this time, run away, whatever you do, otherwise that's the last time ...'

He stopped speaking, took the phone from his ear and looked at the screen, whoever it was had obviously ended the call. Immediately

to her, urgent and seriously worried, 'Lydia, I can't explain now, not properly, but ... what's the quickest way to get to Portobello?'

She didn't hesitate.

'My brother. That is, if you don't mind a bike, a motorbike?' He shook his head, and she was already holding her mobile to her ear as she added, 'Provided he's in of course, and not, er, otherwise occupied.'

He was in; she explained where they were, and rang off. 'Ten minutes he said, but it'll not take anywhere near so long to get to Portobello as a taxi.'

'Thank you, I can't tell you how grateful I am ... and I can't tell you, at the moment what all this is about ... I'm not entirely sure myself, and I don't know how long it'll take to sort. Can I leave it that I'll let you know as soon as possible? And I'm really sorry for messing up today – I was looking forward to it, to spending the day with you but I have no ... this cannot be ignored ...' He stuttered to a stop.

She reassured him, 'Don't worry, Ian. I can see that it's out of your hands, whatever it is. Get back to me when you can, to let me know you're OK. Here's Mike now.' She nodded over his shoulder and Ian turned to see a black-leather-clad man on a shiny black, obviously fast and powerful bike draw up beside them, full-face tinted visor completely obscuring his features, giving him the air of some sort of alien. Ian wasted no time in donning gloves and helmet, allowing Lydia to check its tightness, before climbing onto the back, giving little more than a preoccupied nod before Mike roared off.

After he'd dropped this bloke of Lydia's off in Portobello, tactfully made sure he was OK and didn't need waiting for or anything, Mike slalomed through the church-going traffic, pissing off the righteously-queuing motorists, to Lydia's house in Stockbridge. As he anticipated she was glad to see him and, more welcome, said she'd do lunch for him, which was payment enough.

He watched as she moved around the kitchen, saw that things were different with her. He must have been frowning about it though because she suddenly said, 'Stop staring at me like that, you're making me feel I'm about to be interrogated or something!' and he grinned, successfully hiding his disquiet.

'I'm trying to work out why you're not full of twitchy angst and chewing your fingers as per usual about what this bloke is up to ...

You don't know why, don't know who and don't know when he'll be back. And you haven't asked me anything about where I dropped him off either.'

Lydia blushed. 'Oh shut up, Mike, it's just that a week or so before I met him I decided no more choosing men for the wrong reasons, like because they're rich. I was only going to go for men I like ...'

'Go for men because they're rich? Is that what you were doing?'

'Yeah ... sounds awful of me doesn't it? Took me long enough to work it out, too. But as soon as I spoke to him I knew he was something different from anyone else I'd met, which sort of justified my change of attitude I guess, made me even more ... sort of *que sera, sera*.'

'You're mad. You're well enough off now aren't you? *And* done it all by yourself.'

'I know, it's a hangover from being so skint as kids, I think. Bit of a shock to look back and realise what a mercenary cow I've been. Don't you go getting any ideas about Ian, though, because it's early days yet, and I want to take this slowly.'

'Well, take care then ...'

Despite his efforts, something of his concern must have impinged because she stopped what she was doing and stared at him. 'You're hiding something. You'd better tell me ...'

'You sure?'

'Yes. You're not one to worry unnecessarily, and you'll leave *me* worried if you don't tell me now.'

'He wanted the police station ...'

'Ah. Do you know why?'

'No, I didn't drop him off right outside – didn't want to be seen myself – but I can find out if you want me to.'

She thought for a bit. 'No. Not at this stage, it would feel like a breach of trust. I'll wait until he tells me.'

'And if he doesn't tell you?'

'Then I'll have to decide whether I needed to know. Or not. It might be, probably is, none of my business. Honestly Mike, it *is* early – *very* early – and I don't want to ... well, anything.'

But Ian, phoning a couple of hours later before coming round, briefly outlined what had been the problem.

'Bella's my half-sister. My parents split up when I was ten, the problem being Mum's inability to cope, with marriage and, family as far as I understood. I stayed with my Dad, down south, and she came back up here. They kept in touch, more than I realised at the time – in fact, they never actually divorced – but I wasn't told about Bella for quite a while, Dad presumably wanting to keep me from the knowledge of Mum's promiscuity. I was at uni by then, after which I went to the States. So it wasn't until Bella was four that I even heard of her existence.'

'Did you not see your mother in all that time ...?'

'No. Looking back that seems quite appalling. I don't think Dad would have stopped me if I'd wanted to ... I just never had the need, my memories of her were not good. Not *bad* either, I mean she wasn't mad, or violent or anything. Dad's sister lived in the same village, so I had my cousins ... it just never came up. Not until ...'

He looked at her, grimaced, 'Look do you really want to hear all this? I want to tell you, which is unusual enough in itself, because I've never told anyone else this, just glossed over things, but it's all become more part of my life these days ... my *different* life.'

'Why different?'

'Well, my Dad died, three years ago. There were legacies for Mum and Bella which I came up to sort out, then we kept in touch. Eventually, I couldn't avoid seeing Bella needed more, I don't know, discipline, structure, certainly more family than Mum, so I moved back up here, to keep a bit of an eye on them.

'It hasn't been easy. Mum and I are different people, very different, and we've managed without each other long enough, but it wouldn't have been right for me not to offer to help a bit. Though I don't know that I'm doing any good at all sometimes, not when she goes off the rails like this.'

'You managed to find a job?'

'Oh yes ... computers, easily transferable skills.'

Five

Pipistrelle, North Yorkshire, Tuesday 29th June 2010

It had never been his intention to turn what had originally been a cupboard-size, occasional overnight bedsit into his permanent home, but Eleanor having married and moved out, and this latest project requiring him to make frequent trips to Scotland, it made more sense to let his house, turn an adjoining office (one with a decent view eastward towards the Cleveland hills) into a sitting room cum more congenial office, and take up permanent residence here. At least it cut travel costs for this part of his job .

And on quieter nights, such as this, he could continue working on other business interests while monitoring what was going on downstairs, in what had, equally unintentionally, become a hybrid half upmarket nightclub, half hotel: Pipistrelle. Which wasn't to say he didn't make his presence frequently felt; it never did to become too trusting, too complacent.

He had used this phrase when meeting with Tom Underwood last week.

An ultimately useful meeting, although the need to not reveal his own hand until he'd ascertained Underwood's honesty – and ditto, of course, for Underwood regarding him – had slowed, partly skewed things at the outset. He'd had to work hard to gain the man's trust. Couldn't blame him, he'd been well fucked about, and it would be necessary to keep that in mind, to keep reinforcing, reassuring him. Other than that, tonight's call was little more than a progress report, maintaining contact, blessedly short on bullshit.

'Tom, looks like you were right about Walpole. He's certainly got a strong link to Greg's brother, *lots* of links, to the extent that I suspect it's him who's paying his wages. Automatically puts him under suspicion. But of the others you mentioned, I've found nothing in the way of hard evidence so far. Tony's credentials live up to his cooking

and, as I said, we'd have to be very sure before accusing him of anything, his reputation being one of the main selling points.'

'The *legitimate* selling point or the other one? It's hard to tell which is the main one nowadays!'

Tom, suspecting he was about to be fobbed off again, had gone, aggressively, straight to the heart of the problem.

'That's what we're doing our best to change. May be over-optimistic of me but Tony, from what you said about his thinking he might hand his notice in, might be open to persuasion back onto the straight and narrow. The far bigger problem is Egglestone. I gather that the Orkney police haven't been able to pin anything on him, much as they'd like to, so we can only hope to catch him in the act ...'

'Better *before* he acts ...' Unwilling to acknowledge, yet, that Ed's contacts there were at least as good at his.

'Aye, obviously, or hope he makes a mistake. We certainly need to keep an eye on him. As far as those passengers already booked ...'

Gruffly, Tom again interrupted.

Face to face with Ed Hetherington, he'd eventually been able to convince himself that the man wasn't trying to bullshit him, was, as he had said, on the same side. Now, a week gone by and only hearing his voice on the other end of a phone, he was less sure, more strongly remembering the smooth, confident public exterior (of which the all black clothes and shaven head were only a part), less the underlying no-nonsense toughness. A knuckle-dustered, silk-clad mandarin. Or dressed-up, double-crossing thug.

Christ knows, he'd had more than enough to be suspicious of, it was no wonder he was slow to trust anyone, even, *especially*, a new boss. And he had at the back of his mind the fear that he might be driven to trust too rashly because of the strain of trying to fight it single-handed.

Nevertheless, allowing his doubt to be more strongly heard, he said to Ed, 'On past evidence, there ought to be at least one dodgy booking among the six so far, if not two. And that doesn't include McGarry. Not that I can claim he's actually murdered anyone, I just can't stand the man.'

'Aye, and as you said, any man who puts himself up for three honeymoons is definitely one to cause concern!'

Ed sympathised with Underwood's nervousness, did his best to reassure him. 'I'm still trying to find out more about him. I'm also

looking at getting on board someone known to me, someone who might be able to act as an extra pair of eyes and ears, but obviously only if there's vacancies nearer the deadline. We need all the full-paying, bona fide customers we can get.'

As the CCTV screen changed again Ed recognised a face at the bar, belonging to a man who, judging by the mimed conversation, was asking whether or not he was in. The discreet glance at the camera by the barman confirmed it.

'Tom, I'm going to have to go, business calls ...'

'At this time of night?'

'Aye, my working hours are flexible, but I can't even think about bed much before three most mornings. I'll keep in touch, let you know, but we do need to be discreet, for all the reasons I've already said. Thanks for all your help.'

Putting the phone down, Ed reviewed the call, then thought of all the reasons for discretion he hadn't told Tom about, before slipping on his jacket, checking his appearance in the mirror, locking his office and going downstairs, trying to decide if the appearance of this particular man was serendipity or a distraction.

Ten minutes conversation indicated that it could well be the former, with reservations.

Aidan Thurlow was, to the best of Ed's knowledge, trustworthy and on his side. The offer of a discount honeymoon ought to clinch it, although whether Aidan himself possessed the resourcefulness, especially given the distraction of a brand new wife, remained to be seen. He certainly lacked the inches for any physical intimidation, and it was hardly reassuring to say Have a honeymoon on me but watch you don't get murdered; best to say nothing, give him a discount and consider him as emergency use only.

Half an hour later, his smile intact, his mind three-quarters elsewhere – much as he liked Aidan there was only so much rhapsodising about a new woman that he could listen to – Ed heard an end-of-conversation change of pitch, 'But I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread it about too much, kept quiet about the baby ...' and he realised, even if the man speaking didn't, that Aidan, having had more drinks than he meant to have, hadn't actually meant to go into all that.

Ed, finishing the last of his (totally alcohol-free) drink and deliberately, jokingly misunderstanding, in backward reassurance,

said, 'Can't keep babies quiet for too long, they have a habit of getting themselves noticed ... or did you mean who'd fathered it?'

'Yeah, we've not entirely decided how to play that yet. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy enough to be thought to be the father, but ... there's pros and cons and we want to make sure we get it right.'

'She sounds like a strong lass, though, your Natasha, I look forward to meeting her. I'll get back to you to confirm the 15th August departure; next month's, the 25th, is definitely full.'

Bringing the conversation to a close, Ed stood up, 'I'll get them to phone for a taxi for you. Your car will be safe enough overnight, here.'

Six

Edinburgh, July, 2010

It must have been the unusual heat that reminded her, that and the fact that the high angle of the July sun allowed light to reach, for once, into the moss-edged courtyard within the surrounding tenements, although the colours weren't a patch on Venice, since even on a good day Edinburgh's Old Town looked dour under the height of the buildings, the darkness of its history embedded in the once-black and sooty stone. The tourists, sunglasses and bright summer clothes, myriad languages, sitting at tables outside the bars in the Grassmarket and the blue sky, background to the definitely non-Venetian Castle certainly added to the effect. And, having been reminded, she also felt the loss of other things from that time, not least her irresponsibility, her lack of plans. Which wasn't to say she didn't love the place, loth though she'd originally been to return.

But after Guido had gone; the speed of his deterioration as shocking as his reappearance, she had had little choice, except in the timing. He'd been more alone than she had realised – she'd always assumed he had a family, one of those big, friendly happy-go-lucky Italian families, but apparently not. Not that she had begrudged spending the time with him, had not regretted it at all, except for the ending of course, but she had known that was inevitable as soon as she laid eyes on him.

Neither could she regret that from that moment on he had once again charmed her, manipulated her, used an amount of verbal trickery and had within hours extracted those two promises from her. And although she would have thought that the first would be the hardest, in the end she had done that for him, had followed his careful instructions, and been glad to. Before he died they had between them planned how she should fulfil the second promise and thus expiate her guilt.

*

Her guilty past had begun the second year of her Art history degree when, sent to Venice, she had had access to the archives of the Accademia. Just nineteen, and something of an innocent abroad, so when she found herself ambushed by gargantuan lust for a fellow student, a man most certainly out of her league, she had been determined not to let him know and had sought diversion. Another English student, Gary Erickson, had read her easy as an infant primer, had befriended her, used her and eventually duped her, she, initially at least, totally unsuspecting of any ulterior motive.

Added to her innocence had been her self-wilful blindness to the fact that she was making a sideways approach to Guido, knowing him to be an associate of Gary. As a consequence more was hidden even than she meant it to be. When she eventually recognised what she had stumbled into she also knew that the man she loved had feet at least clay-dipped, since he could not help but be involved in the machinations of his – their – so-called friend.

But when it threatened to implode, was about to implicate herself, it had been Guido who stepped in and, at some risk, who shielded, lied, denied and eventually evaded retribution for them all.

Now back in Edinburgh and, nearly two years after making it, her second promise was still not yet fulfilled. She had always known that it would be hard and would take longer. Known that it would require that she return here, that she track down the other one involved back then. So, while it might well have been the light and the heat that reminded her of Venice, it was also that she'd finally laid her plans, and was now ready.

Well, sort of ready.

In some ways she'd done less than hoped. It had taken far too long to get started and although she'd got the next stage sorted, in theory (and was reasonably sure she could put it into practice) she couldn't see what best to do after that.

'Penny, you must clear your name,' Guido had urged, meaning his as well as hers, but he had also said 'make reparation' which she'd interpreted as bringing Gary Erickson to justice and returning all the pictures, both of which would need considerably more authority than she possessed.

But in other ways she'd done more, much more than she'd believed herself capable of, to reach this stage. Making a friend, and

then almost a confidant of the girl who manned the desk in his gallery had been a stroke of not exactly genius but something more than luck. She'd put it down to 'people skills'; something she hadn't know she possessed, but had now found she was good at. Or was it better described as manipulation? In which case it was something she'd learnt from Guido, without doubt.

Seven

North Yorkshire, Friday 16th July

‘When’s your birthday, pet? Twenty-first did you say? That’s next ... Wednesday? With luck this’ll be finished by then and we can go next door to celebrate – you’ll be old enough to officially drink then.’

Bernard smiled at her as he checked the colours he had squeezed out onto the wooden board he used as a palette, and selected brushes from the big earthenware jars and palette knives from a stained wooden box – probably a once-upon-a-time drawer – his mass of dark red hair as unruly as ever, and the blue of his eyes exactly matching, as she noticed every time, the paint-splashed denim shirt he wore.

The studio was upstairs in the back bedroom of an end-of-terrace house, its open-endedness allowing the insertion of a second window in the side wall. Both were uncurtained to allow maximum light into the room and neither overlooked, which made it ideal for his purpose. White-painted walls further reflected light, as would the pair of tall, narrow mirrors leaning up against the wall, were they not so dusty.

She paused and looked across the room at him, arms in front of her crossed at the elbows, hands grasping the hem of her loose cotton dress, before continuing unselfconsciously to pull it up over her head – no knickers, she didn’t need a bra, and he’d said no jeans right at the beginning because of the way they marked her skin. Turning to lay her dress across the back of a chair, and with her back to him, she asked, hesitantly, ‘When you’ve finished ... will I be allowed to see it then?’

‘Once I know it’s done, yes of course, pet, you’ll be the first to see it, but until then I’m the only one who’ll ever lay eyes on it. It’s a superstition ...’

‘Will there be any more?’

He heard the anxiety in her voice, and understood it to be regret, regret at ending what had been a thoroughly enjoyable collaboration between them, rather than the loss of money he paid her. She was a

sweet lass, intelligent, and they'd had some good conversations while he worked; more importantly, she also knew when to keep quiet. He suspected, although he had neither asked nor commented on the fact, that she viewed the hours spent posing for him as something of a respite, an escape from a less-than-happy home situation.

'Not until I sell this – I told you it was one I was doing just for me – but I can't afford to do another until I earn a bit more.'

'I'd sit for nothing ... if you wanted.' She blushed, aware that she sounded too eager, and he reassured her.

'No, pet, it's the cost of everything else as well – and I've got other commissions to do, first – that's what brings the money in, although as you know, I hate painting bloody dogs!'

Unsmiling, she laid herself down on the ancient chaise longue, thinking that at least the silk shawl could be washed before any next time, and checking her alignment points – middle finger of right hand resting against the third down indented button, left toe aligned with the edge of the battered bookcase across the room. A bookcase filled not with books but a selection of plastic boxes which had once contained ice-cream but now held a variety of odds and ends such as clips and tacks, sponges and pencils, the felt-tipped handwriting – not his – which had once detailed the contents now mostly rubbed off, so that only the faintest shadow of the letters were visible. And, she suspected, the contents likely bore little relation to the labels anyway.

Wriggling into position she focused on the central cross-piece of the support at the back of the large canvas and relaxed into the now-familiar pose, anticipating the usual half hour of silence, except for the noise of him working, until he started to relax and began, sometimes, sometimes not, to start talking to her again.

Four days later, on the following Tuesday, Annabel called round to tell him that, if it was finished, Chloë Carrington definitely wanted this painting in her forthcoming mixed exhibition. So long as she had it by Friday morning, without fail. That Chloë had said so, without having seen any of his other work, indicated huge faith in his abilities – faith bolstered by both his sister's reputation and her recommendation.

'I really appreciate that, as you know, a great deal – thanks, pet.' They stood together in his studio, contemplating the large canvas, each holding a mug of tea, brought upstairs from the kitchen.

One arm around his sister's shoulders he said, 'I declared it finished yesterday, let Zoë see it, now I'm just waiting to be absolutely sure it's reached that final, final 'nothing whatsoever more to do to it' point.'

Bernard turned his head and looked at Annabel; her matching but better-conditioned glory of Titian hair, wind-blown to a larger than ever halo and further enhanced by her standing with her back to the light, undeniable evidence that they were blood-related. Undeniably, too, she was one of the few people whose approval he sought, opinion he valued, she also being a painter, hence his close examination of her expression.

Annabel stood in silence, concentrating, and after a moment he removed his arm from her, fearing, stupidly he recognised, to influence her, or to pressure her.

Eventually she nodded, smiled at him. 'It is finished, truly, looks perfect to me. One of the best you've done, if not *the* best. You've conveyed that innocence, that 'on-the-cusp-of' exactly as you intended, it's subtle yet very powerful. Yes, Bernie, this is a good one indeed.' She smiled again, more warmly, knowing how important it was to reassure, how even more important that she be honest; he would spot any insincerity instantly. Another pause for contemplation, shorter this time, and then she asked, 'What did Zoë think of it?'

Slight shake of his head, embarrassed. 'She cried. Stood in front of it for about five minutes, absolutely unmoving, not a word, then simply burst into tears. I think it was as much because she didn't want the sittings to end as anything else.'

'Hmm, I'd say it was more than that. I suspect she was learning something about herself that she hadn't known before. It certainly wouldn't have been that she disliked it ...'

'Oh lord, no, she was horrified when it occurred to her that I might've thought she was crying because she didn't like it. That stopped her quicker than anything.' He remembered how glad he'd been that she had stopped, how helpless he'd felt, seeing her distress, himself busy scraping the palette board, putting brushes into turps, so as to make sure he wasn't tempted to add anything else.

Checking her watch, Annabel switched into efficient mode. 'Right, I'm going to have to go. You need to get this to the framers today, need to insist they have it done by Thursday and then deliver it

immediately to Chloë. I'm certain she'll be absolutely delighted to have it in her show. There is one thing that occurs to me, though ...'

'What?' He had been smiling at her younger-sister bossiness but, fearing a belated criticism, his smile instantly disappeared. He turned again to scrutinise the painting, searching for reasons why it might fail to completely delight the elegant, demanding and therefore highly successful gallery owner.

'Zoë.' Annabel said, her tone reassuring him that it was not any quality lacking in the painting. 'I don't know what her parents are going to say about it – she still hasn't told them has she? And they're bound to jump to the wrong conclusions, seeing as she's stark-naked, at least twenty years younger than you, and still at school.'

Eight

North Yorkshire, Thursday 22nd July, 2010

'Annabel?'

'Ed! You're back. How was Scotland? Edinburgh again, was it?'

'Orkney, this time. As ever. A few problems, which is why it took a couple of days longer than expected. Did you miss me, sweetheart?'

She did, dammit, yes. Not while he was actually away, she could cope with his absence, no problem, but as soon as she heard his voice she fell under his spell again. Caramel, laced with vodka, (or vice versa) her latest attempt to describe it, or its effect on her. She couldn't decide whether her reaction was simply because, as he kept telling her, he wanted her (which was flattering in the extreme, given the quality of his past women) or whether she was genuinely attracted to him. (And how much of a part did his evident wealth play?)

She made herself comfortable on the settee, phone in one hand, the other tucked inside her shirt to rest on the skin of her shoulder, as Ed's had momentarily been fifteen days ago, thumb against her neck. A fleeting, flaring touch in a public place.

Despite her technical innocence, her conscience did its usual spiralling, bottle-brush imitation. She had a feeling she'd not be able to hold out against Ed Hetherington much longer; he kept telling her that three, four, months was some sort of a record for him to wait, and recently she'd wondered whether there was a hint that he was not prepared to wait much longer, would not hesitate to go elsewhere (and the pity was she knew Liz Cockburn's bed was likely where he'd finish up, which would just rub salt into the self-inflicted wounds of her refusing him ...)

But, not waiting for a response, he continued, 'I've just come past the gallery – is that one of your paintings in the window? Only it wasn't one I recognised ...'

'I'd be surprised, Chloë usually puts up something big and dramatic ... I've only got small pieces in this time.'

'It is big, about four by six, female nude – stunning, what I could see of it. I thought you'd been hiding something from me ...'

'Not mine,' he could hear the growing pleasure in her voice, 'but I bet I know whose it is ... and if I'm right that's absolutely brilliant, he'll be really pleased.'

'He? Not Dan, surely?' The matter-of-fact ease with which Ed spoke of her husband never failed to surprise her and she was silent as he added, 'No, he doesn't do nudes does he?'

'No, I'm pretty sure it's Bernie's, my brother Bernard's ...'

'Did I know you had a brother? Oh yes, I remember, you pointed him out at your last show. You must introduce me. And I must make sure to get there early tomorrow, I don't want to lose out again like I did last time. Who is it of, the painting, do you know?'

'She's called Zoë ...'

'Zoë? Greek for 'life' if I remember rightly. Right, I'd better go, duty calls. I'll see you tomorrow evening then, sweetheart, at the gallery. Take care.'

Hmm, Annabel thought, removing the phone from her ear, unable to be sure whether he'd phoned to find out about the painting, or Zoë. If it was the latter he was in for a disappointment, Zoë was light years away from being the sort of woman he went for. But Bernie would be really pleased to know that Chloë liked his painting enough to make such a feature of it - she was even more choosy about what she put in the window. Annabel dialled his home number, but there was no reply, and she knew he'd not have his mobile on. She'd try again later.

Bernard had been in the pub next door, the face on him what you'd expect from Ophelia's grief-stricken father, on discovering his daughter had drowned. Always assuming it was he she'd inherited her hair from. Neither the pub nor the beer had been what he wanted, which didn't surprise him because he knew he was in that state of bereaved lassitude where he didn't know what he *did* want. A state he recognised, inevitable following the finishing, the handing over for public display of an important painting, one which meant something, a state anticipated, but invariably uncomfortable.

At least Chloë had seemed to genuinely like the painting.

He had arrived at the gallery mid afternoon, the blinds down so she and her two assistants could do the hanging unobserved, and had seen from the part-filled walls that he was in good company. She

hadn't said much, except to reassure him that she'd made sure there was space for it, and knowing she was working to a deadline he had left her to get on with it.

He drained his glass, decided against another – it hadn't helped, and the crowd in the pub had irritated rather than distracted – and knowing it was almost certainly his fault, he'd returned home put a Blues compilation into his CD player and made himself a coffee which he'd then forgotten to drink. He'd not been at all pleased to be interrupted by the knock at the back door.

His irritation faded at seeing Zoë stood on his doorstep, her face in darkness because, deliberately discouraging, he'd not put a light on in the kitchen.

'Hello, pet, what are you doing here?', recognising, with a twitch of surprise, that she was probably the least unwelcome person he could wish to see at the moment. Then, jokingly, remembering the last thing she'd said to him as he left her at the end of her road, after her birthday drink on Wednesday, 'Have you come to check that I washed that blue shawl?'

She shook her head, but didn't speak, and then he heard, from a snuffling gasp, that she couldn't. She stepped into the kitchen and slightly alarmed, partly on autopilot, he shut the door behind her.

'What's the problem? Come in and sit down by the fire, you're shivering.' He led the way into the tiny sitting room, lit only by the flickering flames of the fire he'd treated himself to, pointed her to the chair he'd been sitting in and perched opposite, clearing a space for himself on the two-seater settee, all that could fit into the tiny, overcrowded room.

Then he saw that one side of her face was scarlet, her eyelids swollen, lashes clumped, and his heart ... well, that was it, it didn't sink, not in a foreboding 'Uh oh, here comes trouble' sort of way, but was jolted, struck with a sharp chopping of pain, like the blade of a guillotine coming down and slicing into it. Pain for *her*, for whatever she was suffering.

So astonished was he that he could not speak.

She looked up at the silence, assumed he was cross at her for coming round when he hadn't expected her, and rushed to explain, saying, in between hiccups as she tried to stop crying, 'Your painting, it's in the gallery window, and someone phoned my Mum and told her.'

Ever afterwards Zoë viewed the fragility of the chain of coincidence which had brought her to this point as potentially terrifying.

Not just in the things that had happened, one thing leading to another, but the way she'd been forced into deceit, by her mother's intolerance. She hadn't liked her own sullen silence, it still felt far too childish, but she had been incapable, at that stage, of any sort of articulate explanation, of asking her mother to recognise that she was a person in her own right. Despite all the mental rehearsals she carried on in her head.

She thought of one of the later harangues, probably the last one before the final big row. On that occasion, her mother had returned from work and straight away come barging into her bedroom without so much as a knock, not even taking her coat off.

'I want a word with you my girl! I sat next to Mrs McIntyre on the bus and asked how you were getting on working in the shop and she said she'd not laid eyes on you for months – how do you think I felt about that? I ask a favour to get you a job and then you go and throw it in their faces!'

Zoë had assumed her habitual blank mask, disguising her silent rejoinder: *Well she's obviously as blind to her husband's repulsive appearance and dirty-minded activities as you are – but she's pregnant, and he's obviously sex-starved ...*

'So how am I going to hold my head up again in this village, just answer me that, eh? Why is it that you can't hold down a simple job for five minutes? I suppose you think you're too good to work?'

Too good to put up with that for sure! And it would've been a waste of time telling you that the reason I quit the shop was because Mr M cornered me – only when I threatened to stab him with a skewer did he stop – but I wasn't going to put up with that every night!

'I don't understand you – you're just bone idle! It seems to me all you want to do is sit around and hope that money drops in your lap – jobs like that just don't exist, you know!'

Well, that's just where you're wrong! As it happens I've got a job doing exactly that – two hours a night, three nights a week just sitting – posing for that painter who lives next to the pub – he pays a darn sight better than the local shop and he's never laid a hand on me yet – but I'll bet when you find out you'll try and put a stop to it!

That had been near the beginning of May.

After the confrontation with Mr McIntyre, the obvious thing might have been to go straight home and explain, but Zoë knew that her mother would be more inclined to believe it was her fault, would say she must have been asking for it or something – as if! But after she'd run out of the shop she found she'd lost the rush of courage that had led her to retaliate – or was that just instinct? – and was surprised to find herself fighting back tears. Instead of going straight home she had walked down to the footpath along the river – well-lit and safe enough – and just as she got to the last house before turning back up again to the High Street, she'd seen Mrs Cockburn, who came into school to teach the Sixth Form cooking, unloading stuff from her car.

Mrs Cockburn had obviously seen her too.

'Zoë,' she'd said, sounding both pleased and a bit rushed, 'Zoë, I don't suppose you've got a few minutes have you? I need a hand to unload these – I'm doing a dinner party here and there's been a bit of a hiccup.'

'I can spare a couple of hours if you like.' Zoë was glad to have someone to take her mind off things – Mrs Cockburn was cool, always treated them like grown-ups.

But when she followed her into the house she was shocked at the state of the kitchen, there was dirt everywhere, it was really filthy, yet from outside you'd have thought it would be all immaculate. Mrs Cockburn – she said to call her Liz – saw her looking and sort of laughed and said she had a theory about the quicker some people got rich the quicker they were to stop doing anything for themselves.

'Their common sense, their pride in themselves, just seems to desert them: this pair's domestic help left last week, and I'm not sure that I blame her; they've obviously not set foot in the kitchen since. Nothing whatsoever's been done in preparation for tonight's dinner, except to call me in a panic and offer double rates – I wish now I'd asked for treble.'

And then, at the end of the evening, as she had handed over a twenty pound note, Mrs Cockburn, Liz, had asked if she would be willing, or able, to help with the food – just the food, because she was too young to legally handle alcohol – on Friday, at some Private View at Carrington's Gallery.

And *that* had been the start of everything!

Even at the time it had felt sort of significant, had given her the realisation that there was a different and more interesting world beyond that of her parents. The paintings for a start, Annabel's nudes, were a real eye-opener. She was used to that sort of thing now but hadn't forgotten – thought she might never forget – how it had felt as though they'd hit her, not so much in her eyes but in her stomach, in her gut. They'd been exciting and full of energy and really sexy (though she hadn't said that at the time, in case she sounded silly, and would show herself up as knowing nothing about sex. Which she didn't). And then there'd been all the people – exotic was the word she'd used to herself, something really out of this world. It was like she'd lived a black and white life up till now and someone had shown her that it was possible to have colours.

If she'd thought about it she'd've expected to be overwhelmed, stupid and tongue-tied, but Annabel's brother – obvious, because, they had the same hair – had seen her looking before it opened, had talked to her and had somehow made it easy to ask about them, not made her feel ignorant – he even said *he* found people scary – and later, after the food had been cleared away, he'd talked to her a bit more, told her who some of the people were (although he didn't know that many), and he'd introduced her to Annabel.

She'd felt like crying when it started to come to an end, felt she'd had a glimpse into a world she'd never be able to find her way back into ever again. She hung about as long as she could, even after Liz had said they could go, wiping down the kitchen, but eventually she'd thought she'd better stop, was a bit afraid they'd all go off without her, accidentally locking her in the kitchen. Also she didn't want to look like a completely pathetic anal little housewife or something. So she'd come out into the gallery again.

Annabel and Liz and Mrs Carrington – Chloë, scary in a spiky, super-polished sort of way, but nice, not the bitch she looked like she might be – were in the corner where she had her desk, Chloë pouring champagne into three tall narrow glasses and saying something about how successful it had been but Zoë didn't want to look as if she was being nosy, or after some champagne, so turned as if to go and have another look at the paintings. But she'd only taken a couple of steps when she realised that all the men, the husbands – Chloë's, Annabel's and Liz's (and Liz's husband was a *real* surprise!) – were standing

around the really big one which was all on its own on the end wall. (Liz's husband had actually *bought* it, even though it cost *thousands*.)

She stopped, would have changed direction, but before she could decide which way to go now, Annabel's brother, who she didn't think was anyone's husband, came over and said 'Zoë, I thought I'd probably missed you, are you just off? Could I have a quick word before you go?' He'd seen that the women were still talking in the other corner, so pointed to the doorway through to the kitchen and said to go in there again.

He'd looked a bit worried to start with, uncertain, then seemed to make his mind up, and said 'Look, pet, this might not be the best timing, a bit of a rush, but I wanted to ask you now, give you time to think about it.' He stopped, and looked at her again, as if he was thinking she might be wanting to run away or something, but she'd been just wondering what on earth he was going to say. He saw that, obviously, because he then said 'I wondered if you'd sit for me, if I could paint you? You have the face ... and the body, I think, that would suit an idea I have for some work. The only thing is, like Annabel, I paint nudes. I thought if I asked now you could check with Annabel or Liz Cockburn – they'll tell you I can be trusted – and I ought to check with your parents too.'

'No!' She'd almost shouted, then saw that she had frightened him, he wasn't sure what she was saying 'no' to, so she'd had to explain, quickly, 'I mean, yes, I'll sit for you, but you don't need to ask my parents. And I sort of know you can be trusted.'

Zoë's mother had been apoplectic, almost, but unfortunately not quite, to the point of incoherence. And Zoë had recognised that much of her fury was because of her having learnt of it from the nosy old bag next door. She knew, however, that even if the Queen herself had popped round to personally inform her mother of the fact that there was a four foot high by six foot wide painting of her only daughter, stark naked, face all too easily recognisable, displayed in splendid isolation in the window of the gallery in the middle of the High Street, right opposite the Post Office, her blinkered, conventional mother would still have found it totally, humiliatingly unacceptable. Even if the Queen had said that she, personally, approved.

The deceit hadn't helped, of course, and even after she explained about the harassment her mother believed that by virtue of their

having 'proper' jobs these men were possessed of some sort of merit which set them over and above Bernard. No matter that Bernard had not so much as touched her in the whole time she'd been sitting for him, the fact that his job didn't involve holding money or a spade or some equally 'honest' tool, that he only – *only!* – held a paintbrush, was enough to condemn him forever in her mother's eyes.

Plus the length of his hair, of course.

So Zoë had told her mother what she thought of her narrow-minded, old-fashioned ideas. And had been slapped for her pains, open-handed and hard. And had then been told to get out and never come back again, having brought disgrace upon the whole family.

That Thursday night Zoë stayed with Bernard, slept in his bed, as did he, his arms around her, comforting. But he knew he could not spend another night like that – compassion was far too much in danger of being overwhelmed by passion.

The following morning Bernard with Zoë to her parents' house where her father had answered the door and immediately ushered them, finger on lips, into the back garden where he did his best, without being out and out disloyal to his wife, to say that he was on Zoë's side but that her mother would not be moved. He too appeared to have had a sleepless night, which probably explained the relative passivity with which he listened to Bernard telling him that he had proposed marriage to Zoë and been accepted. All three of them agreed that Zoë was better off staying well away from her home.

News leaked out.

By six o'clock Friday evening, when the Carrington Gallery opened its doors for the private view, the full story, the intended marriage, was known.

Chloë, ever-mindful of the benefits of publicity (and of alcohol, in moderation) and having checked they did not mind (in such a way that refusal would seem churlish) had announced their forthcoming wedding and given everyone present a glass of champagne to toast the happy couple.

She had also trebled the price of Bernard's painting.

Partly to make sure that Bernard did not change his mind about selling it, from some sort of sentimental impulse, and partly because she knew it was worth that much. She knew her customers and

regretted only that there was no possibility of an auction because she would have liked to have seen Liz Cockburn's eminently attractive and somewhat mysterious husband challenge Ed into paying much more for it.

That she and Ed had just last year ended a short but intense and mutually enjoyable affair, as amicably as could be expected, did not mean she did not relish the thought of him paying well over the original price, especially knowing that he was currently trying to lure Annabel into his bed. Trying very hard indeed: when he heard about Annabel's brother's wedding, he insisted on being allowed to host a small wedding reception for them a couple of weeks hence.

(It took Chloë a little longer to learn that, during discussions prior to that reception, having learnt from Bernard that he shortly had to return to the Bonhoga Gallery in Shetland for another private view, Ed had additionally persuaded him to accept as a wedding present a cruise which, with serendipitous timing, arrived in Lerwick the day before).

Before then, however, on the morning after the Carrington Gallery private view, Bernard had another visit from his sister. On hearing that Zoë had gone to visit *her* brother, Annabel had come straight round.

'You are an idiot, a complete idiot, Bernie – what the *hell* were you thinking of?'

Bernard turned his head to look at her across the room from the sink where he was filling a kettle, prior to making a pot of tea, for once failing to be amused at her insensitivity. That this failure was only partly due to exhaustion, from the unaccustomed weight of confrontation he had been forced to support over the past thirty-six hours, and contained more than a little annoyance at the tone – and content – of her remarks, Annabel did not immediately perceive.

'I wasn't ...' he began, but Annabel interrupted again.

'No, obviously you weren't thinking, I can see that, and it's not as if I didn't warn you!'

'Look, all that was before. Now, it's OK, really, I'm perfectly fine with it ... absolutely delighted in fact.'

'As I said, you're an idiot ...'

This time his voice warned her that she was presuming far too much. 'Annabel, I am not an idiot. I know it's a bit sudden – God

knows, it was a shock to me – but as soon as I realised, it was absolutely right. And Zoë, thank God, felt the same way.'

'So you *were* fucking her!'

His stare, very much that of an elder, and better brother, challenged.

Less certainly, '*Surely* you were, weren't you?'

'I could ask the same about you and Edward Hetherington, only I prefer to mind my own business.'

The sudden, and rare, hardness in his voice told Annabel not only that her assumption was incorrect, but that there were aspects of her own behaviour that her brother strongly disapproved of. Both hands up, palms outwards, she apologised, retracting her question.

But Bernard couldn't entirely blame her, and the weariness in his voice suggested it was a question he'd had to answer more times than he cared to. 'No, I wasn't. I didn't, and I haven't. Until Friday night I'd never even so much as touched her. Literally. And now we'll wait until we're married.'

A small silence, while Bernard poured the tea and put the mugs on the table, gesturing for Annabel to sit down. She put her hands round her mug and, staring into the steaming tea, still swirling from Bernard's vigorous stirring, said quietly 'I'm not sleeping with Ed.'

'Good. He needs to remember that you have a husband. Perhaps you do too.' Annabel glanced up at him, the reddening of her cheeks sufficient to tell him that he had got his own back for her prying.

He stared hard at her for one moment more then, satisfied that he'd made his point, grinned to signal an end of hostilities. 'I wouldn't like to think that that was his reason for buying my painting.'

She snorted, 'I doubt Ed Hetherington has ever had to shell out six grand for a fuck, and I certainly wouldn't price myself that high! No, it was partly a 'thank you and goodbye' to Chloë, and partly to piss off Leo Cockburn, because Leo bought that big one of mine. But mostly he bought it because he really liked the painting.'

Bernard was not entirely appeased. 'He must be rolling in it if he can afford that sort of gesture.'

'Money begets money. That's what he told me. He certainly knows how to spend it, but he works bloody hard at earning it too, and even you can't grumble at pocketing, what, something a bit more than three grand? It'll certainly give you and Zoë a good start, won't it?'

Nine

Edinburgh, Sunday 1st August 2010

Rose Madigan had suggested they meet early that evening in a pub which neither had hitherto been to – too touristy by far – but one where their togetherness would not become the subject of speculation since no-one they knew would be likely to ever set foot in the place.

She had known him long enough to be sure that his jokey, blokey, apparently thick-skinned, occasionally blackguard persona hid a sharp intelligence which he used to good effect, in tandem with a well-honed awareness of what made people tick. Plus, she had cause to know, he had a capacity for practical sympathy which was less usual in their profession, at least in her experience. She liked and, more importantly, trusted him, despite his inveterate fondness for winding her up at all times.

He had heard a great deal about her before ever they met, automatically taking an interest for several reasons, not all of which were professional in anyone moving onto his patch and calling themselves a 'freelance investigative journalist'. As soon as she arrived in the city, some three years or so ago now, there had been would-be scurrilous and often bitchy gossip – from blokes – most of whom had tried it on with her and failed to impress, or had actively earned her allegedly considerable wrath, usually for incompetence or for patronising her, much of it stemming from jealousy of her reputation, which they were reluctant to admit could be due to talent and hard work. Having gradually got to know her, he thought 'feisty,' as used by the less prejudiced, one of the better words to describe her, but one which was insufficient to fully encompass what he admired in her, which was her hard-working professionalism and her tenacity, plus her dislike of playing the feminist card, particularly the two-faced, only-when-it-suited version.

What he had not heard was any hint of any other man – or men – in her life; he doubted she was celibate and guessed she'd managed to raise discretion to a hitherto unheard-of level in the newspaper world.

Waiting at the bar, for the pint of Dark Island she had asked for – he had not known in advance what to order and, having arrived earlier, was already halfway down his pint of the same, amused that her choice coincided – he watched her reflection in the mirror behind the bar, unseen by her because she was studying a notebook she had pulled from her scruffy leather shoulder bag. Tonight, as with every entrance she made, although he did not think it was intentional, she had burst through the double entrance doors of the tartan-carpeted bar with all the energy of a mini-tornado, her thick tobacco-tawny hair wind-clumped as usual, apparently salt-rinsed even, as though she had crossed a particularly choppy stretch of ocean to reach here: incongruous in the centre of the city.

Her eyes this evening were grey and peaceable, almost matching the jacket she wore, over a plain white cotton top, but he knew that they were capable of flashing a vivid green when angry or especially heated about something. And when in the throes of sexual passion no doubt. (He smiled at himself here.) And smiled again, knowing this to be a comparison he would never (probably) tell her of, but at such times – the anger, not the passion – she reminded him of a Tasmanian devil he had once seen in Ballarat zoo, solid-packed with muscle and bad-temper. She certainly wasn't skinny, was well fit, in the old-fashioned sense, fit well into her jeans quite nicely in *any* sense, and he knew that as well as sailing she climbed and ran regularly. Rumour had it she boxed too but he hadn't ever asked about that.

What she would be like as a wife he could not imagine. He certainly couldn't see her as ever being meek and subservient and, thinking about it, realised that he didn't even know the extent of her domestic skills, if any. Or where she lived, come to that.

When he sat down opposite her, the table having been chosen for its being slightly set apart from the others, he grinned at her, suddenly optimistic to an extent he found surprising which, as a result, made him mischievous. He raised his pint and said, 'Here's to our ... future happiness?'

Her returning smile quartered his face, nervous, as if she'd been having second thoughts, which he had not anticipated, but before he had time to admit to disappointment she lifted her glass to his.

'Yes. I'm not entirely sure how it's all going to pan out, but I suppose the obvious thing to wish is that everything comes up roses.' Then she smiled at him, above the rim, eyes a little less wary.

'Christ yes,' he nearly spluttered, 'especially if you're going to be calling yourself Rose Rose!'

'I've thought about that,' more confidently, 'I'll simply swap my names over, after all, you only ever call me Madigan, don't you?' Grinning, she gently tapped her glass against his once more and took another mouthful of beer.

'You're never going to be a Rose.' He set his glass down, folded his arms on the table and gazed into her eyes, signalling fully- focused interest. She had seen him use this often enough on others but had never felt the effect of it herself. 'First off, tell me how you heard about this dodgy cruise.'

'Oh it was one of those coincidental things, you know, starts with someone saying something about a death and then there's another mention elsewhere. The first was my hairdresser ...'

'What? That died?' His eyes moved to her hair.

'No, her sister-in-law's sister, or cousin or something. And then a couple of days later there was a report of an inquest, same ship, the 'Dunvegan', but someone different, so I started looking, and found the previous deaths. All accidental, no suggestion of anything suspicious, until you start to add them up.'

'So it has to be something they – ScotCruise did you say? – know about?

'Can't not have done ...'

'Could they even be organising it?'

'Not impossible, certainly. I've spoken to a couple of blokes there, just mentioning those on the latest cruise, both of whom dismiss it as an unfortunate coincidence, one more convincingly than the other. I didn't want to press them too hard because I was already thinking I needed to see for myself, so I changed persona, left it half a day then rang and asked about bookings. Greg gives me the old 'you'd better book now else you'll miss your chance' spiel but Edward says there's still three or four places, but a couple of people holding options.'

'Who are they, Greg and Edward?'

'Not sure. Both sounding like possible owners, but just as likely not, rough and smooth. Edward was the one going on about 'new management'. It's run from an office in Glasgow.'

'Holding options' is weird; sounds like you're expecting to call the whole thing off.'

'Mmm. What's perhaps also interesting is that it always seems to be the groom who books the honeymoon, they seemed surprised about me asking ...'

'That's traditional. My brother convinced his wife that they were going to St. Andrews for a for a golfing week. Lucky for him I told her he was joking otherwise she might just've called the whole thing off. So there still are vacancies?'

She nodded, expression fleetingly intimating that his family were probably dangerous lunatics, as he added, 'And did you find out anything about who's going on this one?'

'Well, Edward said there's two couples booked on the strength of being able to visit Orkney, so they, the wives, the brides, are either up for or totally oblivious of the fact they might be candidates for being bumped off, and when I said where I lived he told me there's another Edinburgh-based couple. Groom's name is Ian Portal. He didn't mean to name names but I asked if it was Jack McLeod because we might know them and he said no, and told me his name. Do you know an Ian Portal?'

'Nope, never heard of him, nor a Jack McLeod ...'

'That's because I made *him* up! Oh, and another bloke has booked for the third time!'

'*Third?* How many have there been? Did you get a name for him?'

'No name, no, though even Edward was hard put to hide that he thought that a bit weird. There's been four cruises as ScotCruise, they had a different name before, been going a bit more than three years altogether. You're definitely up for this, Baz, are you?'

His glass empty, he sat back. 'Well, I have to ask, what's in it for me? Why should I give up a week of my holiday ...'

'You get first option, an exclusive on whatever I find ...'

'*We* find, surely? And will I be able to use it, if it's *your* story? Or am I just an over-qualified research assistant?'

'Well, there's bound to be different angles, inside stories and all that other ... I hoped you'd understand that ...'

He grinned. 'I'm joking. In part at least. I have to give you ten out of ten for timing, seeing as you caught me when I had a couple of weeks holiday already booked and no-one to go with, but yes, my love, I am most certainly up for it.'

She didn't tell him how much more than good timing had been involved. Instead, briskly, and allowing only a fraction of the relief she

actually felt to show, she said, 'Good. I'll get onto ScotCruise first thing tomorrow, make sure I speak to Edward, not Greg, because I think I can charm him into giving me a discount.'

'Let me know what I owe you.'

'Oh no – you'll owe me nothing ...'

'*What?* Don't be stupid – you can't pay for me as well as you!'

'Oh yes I can, and *will* – how else can I keep you in check if I make you pay?'

'No question of 'make' me pay, I'd expect to pay for my own holiday, otherwise I feel like some sort of gigolo ...'

'Well, it'd have to be a temporarily pensioned-off gigolo, we've already established neither of us fancy the other ...'

'True, though where gigolos are concerned, fancying is optional I think ... what about your bloke? Couldn't you have taken him?'

His eyebrows failed to back up his barely disguised curiosity.

She shook her head smiling.

He persisted, 'You must have some bloke who'd object, surely?'

'Not your problem Baz. And although, professionally, I do trust you more than most, I'll say again, this is *my* story, *my* investigation and although I'll welcome your input, I don't want you taking over or anything unless we've discussed and agreed it first – understood?'

'Yeah, OK, love. You just want me to stand around looking decorative.'

He'd timed that to perfection; Madigan's splutter sent beer down her chin and onto her jeans. While she was searching in her bag for a tissue, he continued, 'But wouldn't it be a good idea if I give ScotCruise a call, see what I can find out about getting you murdered?'

'Yes,' reluctantly, it *was* a good idea, 'just so long as you don't use the name of Rose, which is what I'll book us under. And *don't* tell him you're a reporter either ...'

'I'm not a complete amateur, Madigan ...'

He sounded irritated and she sneaked a glance at him – surely he wasn't *that* sensitive about his looks? But just in case, she said, 'It might be an idea if I give you the name of one of the previous husbands, to drop into the conversation as a sort of reference ...'

'Just in passing, yes. And it'd be an even better idea for you to let me have all that you've managed to find out so far, so I can begin getting familiar with what's going on.'

He allowed just a glinting nanosecond of challenge, saw her eyes narrow in response – threat? or sudden doubt? he could not be sure – before she reached into her bag, produced and handed him a memory stick.

‘It’s all on there ...’

He suppressed his surprise: he’d not expected that level of trust, not this early on, would now have to live up to it (while knowing that wouldn’t be a serious problem).

‘Thank you, love, efficient as ever. I suggest we meet up again before the end of the week – Thursday any good?’

She checked, ‘So long as we’re done by eight, yes. Here again?’

‘I’ll have it all read through by then.’

She had debated before coming out whether or not to give him so much information so soon, but recognised that trust had to be earned as well as given, and it probably did make sense. After all, she couldn’t manage without him, Plan B was sufficiently unappetising for the whole idea to be better postponed, Plan C non-existent.

Ten

Edinburgh, 2nd August 2010

‘Why me? This sounds like a cushy number, for a deskbound DI who prefers not to get off his arse. Nor his hands dirty. Sir.’

His boss, DCI for the HM Customs and Revenue Division of the SCDEA – Scotland’s Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency – having anticipated the near rebellion, merely eyed him across his desk and said firmly ‘I don’t have any of those in my department,’ which both knew to be stretching the truth more than a bit, before he confirmed ‘It is a relatively danger-free number – *not* cushy – I think you’ve had more than your fair share of observing man’s inhumanity to man at very close quarters just lately, something a bit less likely to result in bloodshed should come as welcome relief. But it also requires a degree of ... diplomacy.’

He’d already noted that the near-symmetrical features of the man opposite him – features his wife, with more enthusiasm than was tactful, had told him were as near to perfection as anything she’d seen, himself included – were less grey than they had been last week, his eyes less bloodshot when, the DCI suspected, he had been nearing the limits of his endurance following what had been several months investigating, among other things, a relentless round of drug-related murders, involving the deaths of whole families at times, and far too many innocent bystanders and too-young victims. The case – *cases* – had yet to come to court, of course, but the current incarceration of the main perpetrators should bring some relief to the capital city. As should this proposed job for detective inspector Luke Darbyshire.

‘And,’ he continued, ‘since the Italian DI, or whatever their equivalent is ...’

‘Commissario’ murmured Luke who had seen the occasional televised episode based on Donna Leon’s Venetian hero.

‘Yes, whatever, he’s quite high ranking and ...’

‘And probably highly corrupt ...’

'Not necessarily, Luke – the buggers aren't *all* corrupt, just by being Italian – but they're taking it seriously enough to ask for our help, which warrants us responding appropriately ... and you at least might recognise a drawing by Raphael or Leonardo da Vinci, know that there's more than one sort of cartoon, unlike some I could name.' They shared a grin, Luke well knowing who his Chief Super was referring to and, despite himself, curious about Raphael drawings.

'They're anticipating an escalation, from an already too high rate of art thefts. A bloke they've had their eye on for a long while, years, apparently. They know he's illegally obtaining and selling on works of art but have so far been unable to pin anything on him. Now a second suspect has recently appeared on the scene. She has no record as such, is lower profile but they were both in Venice at the same time, students apparently, so we can assume they are known to each other. She's several years' worth of gallery connections there too. That they've both turned up here is too much of a coincidence. So far they haven't actually been spotted together, but it's just a matter of time.

'As for corruption, it's all ours. Several small and one very big name, maybe two. Bringing them to justice would please several people. It's all in this file ... you might even get a trip out of it ...' The DCI's smile was broader than seemed reasonable.

Luke's grimace eased as he reached for the folder that was being handed to him. 'Ah, well, if a trip to Venice is in the offing ...'

He stood, preparing to return to his own office, anticipating an hour's concentrated reading and maybe a chance to wangle some reward for a dreary paper trail.

'I didn't say Venice ...'

'Well, anywhere in Italy would do.'

'Don't get your hopes up, you'll be much more likely heading north.'

Eleven

Glasgow, Tuesday 3rd August 2010

'Greg, all right? Listen, next cruise, still got spaces?'

'Simon, aye. Spaces? Think so, can't be totally sure, not without checking. I get Hetherington to deal with most of the bookings now.'

'Then *check*. Is he sticking his pointy wee fucking nose into every sodding thing?'

'Only what I put his way – booking's a pain in the arse, the regular stuff, so it makes sense. Your main man's signed on this trip anyway, isn't he? Walpole?'

'Aye, I decided it'd be a good idea to keep him there, with the other two, job or no, just in case. But I've got a job for him, now. A proper job.'

'One of yours? So long as it's you that pays him.'

'Don't I always?'

'Aye, but did I tell you Hetherington's done away with the casino? Wants dancing instead. Music and a DJ. Said you get thirstier folk and shorter hours for the staff ...'

Simon's grunt of grudging acknowledgement that the man was right, echoed Greg's own, eventual, response when Hetherington had told him of his intentions, his reply undisturbed. 'He'll cope – he's a versatile little sod.'

'Right, I've got it up on the screen ... aye there's two, three vacancies still ... one still to confirm ...'

'When's it go? Next Sunday?'

'No, fifteenth, Sunday week.'

'Better still, that gives me time. Christ, it's fucking brilliant when everything comes good. Taken me a fucking age to track this particular bastard down, but suddenly wham bam and I fucking have the bugga, he's got a lot to answer for! Listen, you say Hetherington's doing the bookings?'

'Aye, most of them'

'Right, I'll get this bloke to contact you, you pass him on and when you do, tell Hetherington he's a photographer and you want him to do the brochures and website. Want him offered a discount, usual stuff. Hetherington shouldn't object, all that redecoration, makes sense. Just don't mention my name.'

'To Hetherington?'

'No, you wanker, to this little bastard, but no need to tell Hetherington either, is there?'

'Not if you don't want it, no. And it's a job for your bloke?'

'Aye, but I'll not tell him yet, either, he might get arsey if he knows too much in advance.'

'What's the name? And are you going to tell me? About the job? Is it the usual?'

'It's a wee bit bigger than the usual. Don't think you need know.' And Simon spelt out the name for his brother.

Edinburgh, same day

The wind had too much northerly in it to allow the day to feel anything like summer and, both hands full, DS Fran Lloyd had to resort to using tongue and lips to try to spit out the coarse strands of hair; usually heavy enough to hang straight as a blackout curtain but currently determined to either tickle her nose beyond bearing or lodge itself in her mouth.

She was still grimacing when she reached the entrance of the Portobello police station, at the same time as fellow DS Mike Kennedy, coming from the opposite direction. He reached forwards and pulled open the door for her, waving her through with a courtly gesture which belied his amusement at the contortion of her features but matched the castellated grandeur of the building, and probably was not so far removed from his innate good manners as he would have liked to be believed.

'Busy?' she asked him, hair returned to obedience and noting his similarly lunch-sized carrier as they headed for the stairs up to the first floor offices; a daft question, since when were they not, as his eye-rolling headshake was intended to convey.

'Moderately, dead-ends, red herrings and a ton of paperwork.'

'Better than red ends and dead herrings,' she laughed, glancing up at his hair. An exasperated groan acknowledged he'd walked into that: he'd appeared on Monday morning with the final curly inch of his light brown hair dyed a vivid crimson. No explanation, only curses that it was taking longer than he had hoped to wash it out.

'Christ, don't remind me! I'm doing the father of the bride bit on Saturday, and this doesn't look at all respectable.'

'You could always have it cut. But, hell, Mike, I didn't know you were that old – you wear it very well is all I can say.'

'It's my sister I'm giving away, as I'm sure I told you.'

He had, a few weeks ago, and she nodded in acknowledgement as they turned into the first room along the corridor, less than half full this lunchtime. His desk was on the sunny, windowed side of the long room – one of the benefits of having been promoted to the rank of detective sergeant more than a year prior to her, Fran's was less than halfway down the murkier side of the room. He'd just opened his carrier when he remembered something; called down the room to her. 'Did you get that message I put on your desk this morning?'

'Yeah, saw it, thanks.'

He noticed the slight flush, saw an opportunity to get his own back for her teasing, 'And what does Detective Inspector Luke Darbyshire want with you this time? More undercover hotel hanky panky again is it?'

She laughed. 'Don't know – haven't been able to speak to him yet.'

Eventually he phoned her back, luckily when Mike was out of the room because she knew she'd been grinning like an idiot, cheeks scarlet. There'd been an odd echo of clandestine or something, and she felt exhilarated and flattered, both at being remembered, after what must be at least two years – more than – and that he'd asked her to meet him that evening if at all possible. Obviously it was work, so no need to go getting any other ideas; she wasn't so stupid as to even think it, even though he had asked her to suggest a place to meet where they were both unknown. And he'd remembered to call her Francesca, not that other stupid name she'd had to use last time.

So Friday night had her arriving, casually dressed as he had suggested, and only a bit early, at the Belhaven Inn, which turned out to be better inside than she had hoped, since she'd not had time to check it out. It was one of the bigger chains, the sort of overnight

place businessmen might use, or not-ever-so-budget-conscious travellers, marginally more atmospheric than some, having been converted from a small independent hotel. Certainly, if it was discretion he wanted she'd chosen well, albeit by a bit of a fluke, because there were several booths created by high-backed seats where they could be sure of being at least part-hidden, and the music, though bland, was loud enough to ensure conversation would be muffled.

Early as she was he had arrived before her, although it took a moment for her to realise that the floppy-haired unshaven man, dressed in black jeans and ancient Happy Mondays T shirt was who she was looking for: Detective Inspector Luke Darbyshire. And, if anything, more good-looking than ever.

Mike's 'hotel hanky panky' had been a reference to her first working with him, on secondment for a case where an unknown-to-the-area detective constable was required, as part of an operation to trap some high-profile businessmen on charges of corruption and fraud. She'd masqueraded as an undercover chambermaid. He had given her the initial briefing, stressing, with unflattering honesty, that her looks had played a part in her selection, by which he meant that her heavy features and straight dark hair allowed her to pass for 'east European,' (although he did have the courtesy to say, with a smile, that her features were quite a bit finer than peasant). He hadn't mentioned (probably too un-PC or sexist) but had certainly checked out her 'sturdy' body (her grandmother's approving description). Not that in this job there was any getting away with trying the sexist claim; some days, some blokes worse than others, and that was just her colleagues. Not a problem – she could give as good as she got, any day.

It was him she'd had to liaise with throughout the eight days the operation had taken. Afterwards, his official report had said that although she had impressed with her courage and ability to think on her feet, she had been inclined to be over-impulsive. Restraint would, of course come with experience, however, to progress she would need to become more of a team player.

Her initial awe of him – he was very much her superior – had been supplemented by admiration and gratitude since it had been his intuition and speedy reaction that had rescued her from the results of her own arrogant stupidity and, not to put too fine a point on it, had saved her life. He had had the ... charity? not to labour the fact in his official report, although God knows his unofficial dressing down had

been more than lacerating. She'd not've been surprised if he never spoke to her ever again.

This evening, despite the incongruity of his appearance, and the fact that she'd been promoted since they last met, she found, to her mild chagrin, that she was still only too conscious of his superiority.

Luke, although not entirely convinced of his personal disinterest in the outcome of the proposal he was about to make (unofficial as yet but there'd be no trouble about getting it OK'd if she was willing) was certain that she would never detect it. If he'd learnt nothing else, he knew he could school his features, control his emotions and let show only what he intended to show. Was able to hide doubt, disbelief and disgust as well as pain and downright naked terror. He'd learnt that at the age of thirteen, under circumstances so horrific that he would never forget them, although these days they rarely came to mind. Not that that was relevant, nor likely to be, in the relatively straightforward conversation he was about to have, a conversation which might contain some embarrassment, some awkwardness, on *her* part, which he would need to be sensitive to, but was certainly not life-threatening.

He'd been sufficiently impressed with her last time to have remembered her. Despite her inexperience, which could not be helped, she'd proved intelligent and resourceful. Brave. And she had since made good progress, a progress which he had made it his business to check on occasionally. But the important thing – the *vital* thing – was that he had not found her intolerable. (God, that sounded mealy-mouthed!) And unless she'd changed beyond all recognition, it wouldn't drive him mad to spend a week in close company with her. (And that wasn't much better.) But one of the things he needed to ascertain tonight was whether she felt able to say the same about him. And he needed her to be honest, not overcome with thoughts of rank, or damage to her career prospects should she decline.

He returned to the narrow table with the red wine she had asked for and sat down opposite her, his hands either side of his own glass, close enough to suggest that any minute he was going to catch hold of hers.

After a brief word of congratulation on her promotion, he began speaking quietly, watching her face throughout.

'As I mentioned on the phone, it's another assignment, a secondment I wanted to discuss. A preliminary discussion.'

Noting his uncharacteristic hesitation, she tried to help him out, 'Another Polish peasant?'

'No,' he laughed, briefly apologetic, remembering his less than tactful comment, 'You can be as British as you like this time. It's much more because of your ability to act a part that I thought of you. That, and particularly, because, based on our previous working together, because last time we managed, I thought, to work well together ...'

He paused, but not yet knowing what he was getting at, she said nothing and after a moment he continued, 'What is needed this time is that we give the appearance of being *happy* to be together. Happy enough to suggest, to convince, that we are on our honeymoon.'

That she laughed, genuinely amused at both the suggestion and, he was well aware, in recognition of his mild discomfiture, he found reassuring, and told her so.

'You don't find the idea totally appalling?'

His careful neutrality hid from her the fact that that from the first sight of her this evening he had found the whole idea even less problematic than originally anticipated. He'd not had to worry about finding her less sympathetic than he'd remembered: two and a half years had changed her but, without doubt, for the very considerably better. (Mealy-mouthed again, man, in spades. That had been a definite twitch of lust there and you know it!)

Yes, OK perhaps he was obliged to question his motives in choosing her. It did not bode well if he had learnt to fool himself as well as everybody else. Nor would it if she hoped for more because, professionally, anything like that was out of the question. Had to be. He also ought to check whether or not there was a current boyfriend, partner or whatever who may or may not object. For himself that was not a concern. Had not been for rather longer than he liked to think about

She was smiling at him as she shook her head, had been studying him as closely as he had her. 'No, I don't think so, not at all appalling. *Daunting*, perhaps, but not appalling. How long would it be for?'

'Just a week. Obviously I'll clear it with your Super, but I needed your agreement first – you're happy to do it are you?'

'Yes, of course I am.' She was, in a way surprised that he had asked and not simply told her, but presumably having to act a part like that, her willing participation would be a bit necessary.

Twelve

Edinburgh, Monday 9th August

Eric McGarry, routinely checking out the auction house crowd to ascertain which of his competitors, his fellow dealers, were present, and ignoring, without difficulty, the crispy-edged first-timers, had spotted the woman in the vivid linen jacket. He likened her to a bullfinch displaying amongst a flock of sparrows before recalling that only the males were that vivid, but he knew what he meant, the pink the same shade. She was striking in other ways too, olive-skinned and dark-haired, and could well be Italian, although it was not immediately obvious which category she fell into here; she certainly didn't possess the bored nonchalance of the regular but neither did she have the eyes-everywhere excitement of the amateur.

He had then been drawn into the inevitable round of hearty, insincere greetings; of declarations of disinterest, poor pickings and no profit before, at the entry of the auctioneer, having to take his place. Making his way to the back of the room, he had given the woman a second glance, and then a third – *was* there something familiar about her? Probably not, he surely would have remembered a looker like that.

As the auctioneer leant forward, list in his hand to adjust the microphone, Eric cleared his mind of all distraction on the job in hand so as to concentrate. As the morning went on he was twice caught out by the lot he wanted going, at the last minute, for a fraction more than he was prepared to bid, to someone else, the identity of whom he'd not spotted. These things happened, now and then, but he needed to find out who had been responsible.

In the interval, he went outside for a cigarette, keeping himself to himself. Finishing it, turning to go back in as he dropped his stub and trod it flat with the ball of his foot, he saw, out the corner of his eye, the glow of the pink jacket again. She was on the pavement as he was, but had walked up towards Frederick Street and was looking in the windows of the pawnbrokers on the corner. As he watched she turned

and looked up towards the sky, watching half a dozen incoming seagulls swirling in a cacophony of raw shrieks. Transported in an instant to St. Mark's Square – *Piazza San Marco* – he knew exactly who she was.

Bloody hell! After all these years.

Quickly he retrieved what he knew of her: shy, eager and biddable, she'd been a complete innocent to begin with, although things had got a bit tricky with her in the end. She had been in love with Guido of course, wasted her time, despite being told that Guido wasn't interested in her type, too mousy by half. Too poor, too English as well. But she'd obviously learnt something in the intervening years, got a bit more colourful, at least; more able to make the best of herself. He doubted she was any less biddable, not from what he could remember of her, that sort didn't change, and the more he thought about it the more he could see a most excellent reason why he should make use of her once again. In fact, this could end up looking like a stroke of luck which would more than make up for the morning's disappointments.

Checking his watch – five more minutes yet – he walked along the pavement towards her, mulling over possible opening remarks. She was now stood just beyond the corner, in the sun, and just before he got within speaking distance she turned her head and looked at him, the faintest of questioning frowns appearing on her face as if she thought she ought to know him.

Confronting her, in a tone of somewhat laboured bonhomie, a carefully-calibrated smile intended to cover both his slight doubt that he had judged her correctly and his concern that she would fail to remember him kindly, he said, 'Penny Plain become Penny Coloured eh? A definite improvement if I may say so!'

Across the road, from the opposite pathway where he'd been apparently engrossed in smoking a cigarette and studying a map, DC McCallan, used his mobile phone to photograph the two of them, saying quietly to himself, Gotcha, and if Fran fucking Lloyd doesn't think that's a sodding 'certainty' I don't know what is! She, at a call from Darbyshire, had skipped off elsewhere.

Penny, her concentration necessarily engaged on the man now stood before her, acknowledging her, had nothing to spare for

noticing, or wondering about, surveillance. She was concerned only at the need to suppress an alarmingly sudden desire to retch, not only in response to his creepily smarmy words but also at a sudden remembrance of the self-disgust and betrayal she had felt the last time they were together. Only when she had overcome that was she able to apply the mirror-rehearsed sequence of facial responses intended to indicate surprise, recognition and (hardest of all) flattered pleasure.

He *still* had that high-pitched nervous giggle, *still* made her think of naked Turkish Delight after someone had licked the icing sugar off, both of which confirmed that her task – Guido's second task – was going to be at least more satisfying to accomplish than she had at one time feared.

Yes, he had noticed her bright pink jacket. He'd been meant to, as much as he had been meant to be completely blind to her earlier anonymous appearances in these same auction rooms and elsewhere over the past few weeks. His failure to recognise her indoors this morning had necessitated presenting him with a 'flashback' pose which had succeeded in jogging his memory. Plan C would have been her making a tentative 'Are you who I think you are?' approach, but she was relieved not to have to do that, better that he believe he was acting completely of his own volition.

Initially she had hardly dared to believe that it was possible for him to be so unobservant, but over the course of the five weeks she had been looking into his activities she had realised that he had lost none of his blinkered self-importance. In Venice, in her youthful ignorance, she had viewed it as cleverness; but now was not so easily fooled.

Maintaining an appearance of pleasure, widening her eyes, 'Gosh, it's ... it is Gary isn't it? Good heavens, Gary Erickson. What a surprise. But I suppose I don't need to ask what you are doing here, do I?'

Watching his eyes, she noted the switch from patronage to panic and then – delivering a timely warning to herself – the speed with which panic was arrested.

He *had* been clever last time.

She had cringed when she heard just how clever, because it underlined her own stupidity, at underestimating him – almost as inexcusable as ignorance. She'd done her best to overcome her ignorance, hoped time and intent had reduced her stupidity and

reminded herself that underestimation this time would be unforgivable.

Checking that her mouth was still smiling, she said, 'You're still in the art business then? I didn't see your name in the catalogue.'

The flush on his already florid cheeks deepened and he smiled, an oh-so-sincere but conspiratorial smile, which his mouth alone made. 'Ah Penny, not Gary any more – too uncultured by far, and it was just a student name anyway. I now call myself McGarry, Eric McGarry – adds a bit of gravitas.'

She nodded, eyes shining, with what she hoped would be taken as admiration, and tried the new name out. 'Eric McGarry? Yes, Eric McGarry, it certainly suits you ... but are you intending bidding again for any of the next lot?'

'Goodness yes,' he checked his watch. 'I'd better get back; are you going in again?'

She nodded and turned to accompany him, but he laid a hand on her arm. 'If you don't mind ... I prefer not to be seen to be in association with anyone else, but if we could meet after?'

'Of course, I completely understand. How about the Queen's Arms? Just round the corner.'

'Perfect, my dear,' and he hurried inside, taking it for granted that she would wait for his convenience and totally unaware that with that 'my dear' he had racked up her desire for vengeance by a couple of points. Very few men, using those two little words, failed to do that.

He was, as she intended, the first to arrive and, as she also intended, not in a particularly good mood, having failed to gain a couple more lots during the afternoon, and then been unable to find out who it was who had over-bid him. Loss of certainty was a minor, if expensive, part of her plan and she had enjoyed overhearing his irritated questioning of the clerks.

'Sorry, Mr McGarry,' the youngest of them had told him, 'it was one of the Anonymous, name to be revealed only on pain of death – and I'm not about to die to satisfy your curiosity.' The remark was intended to be amusing rather than insolent, but Eric was far from pleased by his attitude, his sense of humour being anyway more absent than not.

Having deliberately and anonymously ruffled, Penny then set out to ostentatiously soothe, buying the first round of drinks and listening with apparent sympathy to his grumbling.

Before too long, however, he remembered that his intention had been to impress, to enlist her help. Provided, of course, he could establish her suitability. The arrangements for this next trip had been cut rather more finely than he liked, not through any fault of his own, since the girl who was to have accompanied him could not, presumably, help getting glandular fever. (That the glandular fever was entirely fictitious he never had the opportunity to discover.)

'So Penny no-longer-plain, what have you been up to in all these years?'

Tartly – there was no point in behaving completely spinelessly, she'd never keep it up – 'I didn't think I was *that* plain then!'

He held his hand up in apology, somewhat like, she thought, a Roman senator declining to be bothered and, apparently mollified, she continued, 'I've been 'up to' lots of things. I went back to Italy again, after I graduated and finished up in Venice for a bit ...'

'Accademia again?' That conspiratorial smile.

'Oh no, nothing so rarefied. Grubby commercial, you know? Pays better, though just the smaller galleries ...'

'The tourist ones? Selling?'

'Selling, yes. A bit more upmarket than tourist, though, more discerning clientele. Richer. I also did some buying, private sales, for particular clients.'

Got him!

Eagerness ratcheted up and, allowing her more respect than hitherto, he questioned her, closely and with intent. An intent she had anticipated, had planned for. She named some of the galleries, the clients, mostly truthfully and they discussed sales and trends and artists, she knowing all the while that he was moving closer to asking her to do precisely what she had come prepared to do.

Collecting evidence was not, she had come to realise, on its own enough. Not if all she was going to do was hand it over to some authority and have it – his capture and humiliation, her triumph for herself and Guido – all taken out of her hands to stand or, worse still, maybe fail, on a technicality. She wanted to be there, to see it for herself, to see him realise that it was she, who he had once despised, had rated as of no consequence, who was responsible for bringing him

to justice. (Yes, well, provided she came up with the rest of the plan, a 'rest' that was so far proving tricky.)

Now that he was on the point of issuing, in blissful ignorance, the invitation to what she hoped would be the best seat in the house from which to observe his downfall, she found herself struggling to control the uplifting corners of her mouth, and had to manufacture a cough, a polite hand raised to demolish her smile of delight.

But he did it for her.

In the pause in conversation which occurred as she leant back and finished the last of her white wine, he said, 'Did you ever run across Guido again?'

His expression let her know that he remembered her crush, juvenile and hopeless, remembered telling her that she was out of his league, that Guido only ever went for rich Venetians.

She put her empty glass down, clumsily, more heavily than was necessary, and shook her head. Her face, she knew, reddened and a sudden danger of tears forced her to look down, prevented her from speaking, but she was fairly sure Eric would interpret that as embarrassment at his remembrance of her youthful naivety. He clearly did not know that Guido was dead, and she was not going to be the one to tell him, would let him believe that she last saw him at the same time as he did, Guido's face cold, his voice contemptuous, expressing a hatred of all English and putting the two of them in the same unlovely, dishonest and dirty bracket.

'Bit of an arrogant bastard in the end, wasn't he?'

She said nothing, could not bring herself to comment despite remembering Guido's urgent words to her. *'To succeed it will be necessary for you to befriend this enemy, for you to appear to betray a friend, a dead friend who, you must know, cannot be hurt by this. Only then will you succeed in achieving justice for me, and a guilt-free future for yourself.'*

At the time she had not been able to decide which would be hardest, the befriending or the betrayal. Only now did she realise that both would be more difficult than she could have believed possible.

Her distress was more evident than she would have liked, more than he had anticipated and, remembering that he had a favour to ask, and didn't want her storming out, never to be seen again, Eric nodded at her glass, 'Another?' and went to the bar, giving her time to recover.

It worked. As he sat down again she smiled at him, unspoken apology for her loss of control and eager to change the subject.

'You've obviously not been idle. As well as changing your name, what else have you been doing in the last, what, seven years. You certainly *look* very successful.'

'Well, as you saw, I'm still in the art business, and yes, making a good living out of it, to be honest.'

'"To be honest"? Are you saying you're a reformed character then? You weren't exactly 'honest' in Venice, were you?'

The bar was now very crowded, the two spare chairs from their table having been appropriated and turned round to become part of bigger and far noisier groups on either side of them. No-one was listening to what she had to say, and her eyebrow-raised smile made it clear she was neither the gullible innocent she had been, nor was she now as disapproving as she had been then. There was admiration there; genuine interest in learning more. This was beginning to look like a bigger stroke of luck than he had at first appreciated.

He knew it was necessary to still be careful, but ... but there were reasons why it was not possible to take things as cautiously as he would normally do. Lack of time, for one thing, for the short term problem. Nevertheless, he attempted the moral high ground. 'There's no-one honest in this business Penny, as you must know from your own experience; Italy is rumoured to have the highest levels of art crime in the world.'

She dipped her head in acknowledgement, and he continued, pride climbing above self-justification, 'Obviously, the bulk of my business is above board. I have a small, specialist gallery in Edinburgh ...'

'Specialising in what?' Penny asked, 'are you still concentrating on Italian?'

'Not so much in the gallery, that covers much wider interests, quite a bit of twentieth century work, but a high percentage of my main business these days comes from my client list. They're the ones wanting the Italian work.'

'How much is 'a high percentage'? Do you buy on their behalf? Or more on spec?'

He checked her expression. She was, he was fairly sure, aware of what they were really talking about, and he nodded. 'Buy, yes, and source pieces occasionally. They probably account for a third of my turnover.' Her eyes lit up (she knew that 'third' would, in truth, be

something nearer two thirds) and, reading greed in her expression, he made his decision.

'Who did you say you are currently working for, Penny?'

'Strictly speaking, I'm working for myself, on behalf of galleries in Newcastle and Northumberland. There's a demand down there at the moment for good contemporary Scottish art ...'

He interrupted her.

'So you're not tied to a regular employer?' and when she shook her head, continued 'It's just that I have a proposition to put to you, initially temporary but ...'

The immediate interest on her face prompted him to continue, 'I need an assistant. Urgently need one for the next couple of weeks, extremely urgently. Thereafter ... well, we'll see. But I make a regular annual, usually annual, visit to a number of clients in the north of Scotland and the islands, Orkney and Shetland. This year's visit is due to begin this coming Sunday. I always take an assistant but due to unforeseen circumstances, I am temporarily without one ... I was wondering whether you would be able to step in to fill the gap?'

Penny looked doubtful.

'Eric, I really don't know ... I wouldn't like to let you down or anything, and, the cost ... it might be difficult ...'

'But are you free for next week? From Sunday to the following Sunday?'

'Well, I *can* be, it's up to me to organise what I do, when I do it, although I'd need to check which auctions were coming up, just in case, but generally I'm pretty much able to suit myself. Will you be going to auctions on this trip too?'

'Certainly Aberdeen ... but that would be part of the idea, you would do some of the buying instead of me ... I'll pay all costs, of course.'

Penny made a mental note to wear some of her cheaper clothes in future, or at least stick to the memorable pink jacket.

'Instead of you? Because I'm not known?'

'Yes, that's about it.'

'Oh I guess I could manage that ...' And Penny smiled at him, almost genuinely, glanced at her watch, and stood to leave. 'I'm sorry, I'm going to have to go.' She reached into her bag, handed him a business card, 'This gives you my contact details - email me with

arrangements and I'll confirm for definite ASAP, but I'm pretty sure it'll be OK.'

'He's gone for a Scottish tan this summer.'

That same morning, DC McCallan, from Luke Darbyshire's team, had compared the pink-complexioned man his companion had discreetly indicated to the photograph of the slimmer and definitely more sun-kissed version they'd been sent by the Italian CID, currently clipped to the inside of today's auction catalogue, and added, 'Scottish diet too.'

That was indicated more by a soft plumpness to his jaw rather than a protruding gut; the dark hair was shorter but sensibly covering a skull whose shape didn't deserve to be revealed, and instead of the relaxed glance sideways (looked like he'd been snapped as he exited some Venetian gallery, after a couple of glasses of vino) his eyes and mouth were today pursed with self-regard. Crossing the room he looked physically awkward, in the sense of ungraceful, though 'Hippo' would have been an overstatement. Not bad looking, although not exactly good looking either.

McCallan and DS Lloyd had arrived at the auction house early and the pair of them now stood as far as possible to the rear of a huddle of what were clearly the more inexperienced bidders, all in place long before the regular dealers made their appearance. They'd identified their man almost as soon as he had appeared but felt obliged to make a proper comparison.

'Yup, that's our bloke,' Fran confirmed, 'that's McGarry. Now we just need to spot *her*, whatever her name is ...'

'Without having a fucking clue what she looks like ...'

'True. Hopefully they'll speak to each other, and we'll be able to tell from body language or something ...'

'Aye. Talking of body language ... you shagging Darbyshire?'
Casually antagonistic.

Returned, in chilly triplicate, 'No. Are you?'

He snorted. 'Just wondered why you've been brought in ...'

'Because I'm brighter than you lot, of course.'

'Better looking than our Lucy, too ... She's right fucking pissed off about you going off with him for a week.'

'That's her problem. What about the woman in the pink jacket?'

He looked to where she indicated with a minimal tip of her head. 'Wouldn't mind giving her one ... You mean is she McGarry's accomplice? Possible, I suppose.'

'Anyone's *possible*. I wanted certainty.'

'Don't want much do you? Like she's going to hold up a fucking placard or something? You're just gonna have to wait ...'

'Or make it happen.'

'Aye. Bet you'll have shagged him by the end of the week.'

'This week? Fifty quid says I won't. You on?'

'Christ, not so fast! Not this week, and not fifty. Twenty, for the week you're away with him?'

'Cheapskate. Not worth keeping my legs crossed for a mere twenty quid!'

That had been Monday.

At the end of Friday Fran returned to Portobello in time to catch up with Mike. A mate rather than a boyfriend, they had finished up in bed together a couple of times but both were loath to take things further for enough semi-valid reasons for it not to cause friction. More often than not they shared an after-work pint, he and she being the only two unmarrieds who didn't have far to commute. This evening she felt in dire need of his easy, intelligent familiarity after four days of the shallow McCallan, the bitter, bitchy Lucy and the unsurprisingly hostile other two DS's in Luke's team. Luke she'd seen for no more than an hour, all told.

Only after catching up with all that had been going on in the team, the office gossip, did she remember to ask, 'How'd your wedding go on Saturday, Mike? No-one too shocked at the red curls? They're mostly washed out now ...'

He shook his head, looking a bit rueful.

'No, well, there *were* a few shocks, but not about my hair.'

He took a mouthful of beer, then grinned in recollection, 'Bit embarrassing really; Ian, Lydia's husband, his sister was someone I'd picked up a few months ago, *and* I'd had to have a word with his mother when she came to the station to collect her.'

'Picked up? What for? Did they recognise you?'

'She was on the street – obviously under age, almost certainly on drugs. She was just cautioned on that occasion, not far gone, in either direction, and we hoped she'd not try again. And yes, they both

recognised me, but pretended not to, for Ian's sake, once they saw I wasn't going to say anything. Out of politeness, not hostility, which was fine by me.'

'Your sister's marrying into the criminal fraternity is she?'

'Far from it! It was a bit of a weird set up, very small, and a wedding not the time to start asking those sort of questions. Ian's obviously something else again – good few years older than this girl. Different breed, almost, to his mother too.'

'So what did you find out about him?' Fran glanced up, finishing the last of the chips they'd ordered to go with their beer, 'You *did* check him out, of course?'

He looked only minimally shamefaced. 'Not a lot, really. Less than expected. Lack of info on him could be because he'd not that long moved up here from south. One thing, though, his address is Ainslie Place.'

Fran's widened eyes acknowledged its prestige as Mike continued, 'He had to give an address, for his sister, and when I checked that I found he'd been burgled. Nothing taken and it was only about a week after he moved in so they thought it likely to've been someone targeting the previous owners.'

'Owner? He *owns* the flat? Or rents it?'

'Good point. Don't know. It's a two bed one, they can go for up to half a million. Might be a company perk or something, of course.'

'What does he do?'

'Don't know that, either. Lyd said something in computers ...'

'Which covers a multitude of sins.'

'Aye.'

Fran had been watching him, 'You sound as if you're not entirely sure about him?'

He looked uncomfortable, 'Well, it's not 'not sure', exactly. I'm pretty sure he's straight, well, fairly sure. We've met up a few times and he certainly plays his cards close to his chest, but that in itself can't be held against him. Thing is, Lyd is totally in love with him, like I've never seen in her before, really, really happy, and I wouldn't want to upset that in any way, not with even a hint of unfounded suspicion. But I've never let on directly to him I was CID, and I don't know if he knows. Lyd doesn't usually mention it unless she has to.'

He indicated her near-empty glass, 'Same again?' and at her nod went up to the bar, leaving her pondering, again, on the necessity of

keeping their occupations quiet for longer than customary when meeting new people. One of the reasons she tended to socialise more than she perhaps would have chosen to do with colleagues. Not that Mike came into that 'wouldn't bother otherwise' category.

When he returned he'd remembered an earlier conversation. 'You never said what DI Darbyshire wanted with you. I presume that's where you've been all week?'

Fran smirked, and tapped the side of her nose. 'Can't say. Top secret, undercover and all that ...'

'Oh, go on, you can trust *me*.' The glint in her eyes said she was dying to tell someone, and he moved his pint aside, folded his arms on the edge of the table and leant forward and smiled at her, his mouth widening further as she blushed.

'Well ... he didn't exactly say I had to keep it a secret but I don't want it spread about, so keep it to yourself. He's after nailing someone who's running some art smuggling racket and wants me along as a sort of disguise ...'

'So you're to act as some art-lover?'

'No.' She giggled, anticipating his reaction, 'He wants me to act as his wife, because we have to go on a honeymoon cruise!'

Rather than the laughter she'd expected, Mike's face registered startled.

'Cruise? Not from Leith? Up to Shetland?'

She nodded, surprised.

'Next Sunday?'

Fran nodded again.

'That's the one Ian and Lydia are going on. Christ, what a coincidence.' He took a mouthful of his beer, thoughts busy, and then, eyes alight with amusement, said, 'Honeymoon with DI Darbyshire eh? How far do you have to take the 'wife' thing – is he going to insist on his conjugal rights?'

'I *knew* I shouldn't have told you!' Fran said, repressively.

'Bet you wouldn't mind if he did though,' and he laughed as she dipped her head, hoping that the black swing of her hair would cover her apparently tell-tale cheeks.

He took pity on her, giving her time to recover. 'Actually, Fran, if you get a chance, could you keep half an eye on them, on Lydia and Ian. Let me know what you think, whether or not he's, I don't know ... *genuine*? Nothing heavy, obviously, but ...'

'What sort of thing are you worried about?'

'Well, nothing really, nothing concrete, just a gut feeling, and not even a really convincing one. Just that there's something that doesn't add up, not necessarily bad, but I haven't a clue what. It might be nothing at all.'

'You and your sister are pretty close, aren't you?'

'We're close, yeah, Lyd's less than a year younger than me. We had a pretty chaotic childhood. Same father, not that we remember him, and Mum told us nothing about him except his name, but we decided he must have had a bit more sense than the men that came after because we've got a much stronger work ethic than the rest of them.'

'The rest?'

He scowled, 'Three more. Idle shites, not a bit like me and Lyd.'

'I'll certainly keep an eye out for them, let you know.'

'Always provided Darbys here lets you out the cabin now and then!'

Thirteen

North Yorkshire, Friday 6th August

Checking emails over his usual midday breakfast, Ed Hetherington read one from Greg Chalmers, asking him to send a 10% discount email to a Davey Cartwright.

He replied, with brevity: *wtf is this all about?* and received an unusually instant reply, in Greg's usual style:

Cartwrights doing photos Ork/Shetd for Turist B & asked did we want some. El lked @ his work & says hes gd so I said we'd interested. U said U want to re-do. He'll prob. bk but discount makes more def..

It was unlike Greg to consult him on bookings, to consult him on anything he didn't actually have to, but Ed had to admit he had said the brochure needed re-doing now that the ship had been completely redecorated, it was just one of the many jobs he hadn't yet got around to. It was also unlike Greg to have those sort of ideas, unless Ed was at last setting him an example. Shaking his head, laughing at his optimistic self, he tried phoning Eleanor, but there was no reply, so he emailed her, asking her to give him a ring when she could manage it.

It was Sunday before Eleanor phoned him, by which time he'd checked out the photographer's work for himself and done as Greg asked.

'I know, Ed, Greg's not usually this proactive, but in this case he might have had a good idea.' She still had not managed to get the balance right when speaking of her husband to her brother; today she was over-defensive, which didn't bode well.

'But *was* it his idea, that's what I'd like to know?'

'You're thinking it could be Simon?'

'I know that if it is Simon who's put him up to it then there's every reason to be suspicious. But that's not the only reason I wanted to speak to you, obviously; it's been too long. How are things with you and Greg? Still OK, he's not causing you any trouble? Not bullying you at all?'

'Ed, I've said before, as soon as, *if*, there's a problem I'll tell you. Everything's fine ... you really don't need to worry.'

Neither of them were being entirely truthful, each mindful of the need to withhold what might be explosive information.

Ed at least knew that of Eleanor, knew what she was doing, and understood why. He hoped she did not know the whole of what he was concealing. Ending the call he said 'Tell Greg, if he asks, that I'll get an email off to Cartwright in the morning. Take care, love.'

Glasgow, Monday 9th August 2010

Davey received Ed's email with enthusiasm.

'Brilliant! Absobloodylutely brilliant!'

'What?' Fay walked over to stand behind her husband, putting her hands on his shoulders and bending to kiss his neck.

He pointed to the email on the screen. 'He's offered 10% off the cost of the cruise, with a further 10% if they use me. That's great, because I didn't know when I asked whether it would be an option or not. Plus payment for the job itself of course, if I get it – they're putting it out to tender he says. too.'

She read it over his shoulder. 'I like the bit about 'wishing us all the best for our forthcoming wedding,' he presumably doesn't know we've been married for five months already. Will that matter?'

'Can't see how ... but anyway it'll be a funny sort of honeymoon, me having to work some of the time, you do realise that?'

Davey twisted his head to look up at her, feeling obliged to warn her, in case she got upset about that. Ever since they come to Glasgow she'd occasionally gone completely off on one, right out of the blue. It was so unlike her, and he wanted to prevent any more if possible; she never explained what the problem really was, but he found it unsettling, and on one occasion more than a bit frightening.

She dismissed his concern.

'Oh I know that, don't worry about it – we can relax in between times can't we? And we wouldn't be having a honeymoon at all if it wasn't for the Tourist Board work in Orkney and Shetland, I'm looking forward to it.' And she kissed him again, feeling optimistic.

All she had to do was get herself organised and packed, because they had to be in Leith by Sunday afternoon. That gave her a few more

days grace in which to make up her mind whether, how much, to tell him. Postponed, at least, her having to make a decision now.

Fay had been away from this city for a long time. Had fled in the immediate aftermath, not stupidly, she'd kept her wits about her, despite there being no doubt she was terrified too. But surviving that, on her own, had taught her that she could cope, that she *would* cope. And there'd been a couple of lucky breaks, though she supposed there too she could take credit for recognising them, and making the most of the opportunity. But she'd been able to build a new life, a new identity and, what was more important, had learnt to live it while retaining her own self-worth, because it was certainly not everybody's cup of tea, wouldn't feature stark and unclothed on many CVs, but managing it on her terms had brought the money in.

And the next bit hadn't looked like bad luck at all at first, had, in fact, looked like very good luck, best luck of all.

She'd never thought about meeting anyone who would matter, hadn't thought that she could trust anyone that much. In fact, the whole idea of love and romance and all that seemed something dreamt up by the film industry. That and greetings cards.

Until she met Davey.

He was unexpected, nowhere near as flash as he might have been, as men in his line of work usually were and, it turned out, bloody kind-hearted. And good to her. In fact, right at the start, he probably saved her life. Certainly saved her from *something* because the situation they were in – her to start with, then he'd insisted on getting involved too – had been unexpectedly nasty. Threatening.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, when it was all over and they'd got away – and she'd got away with the story she'd told him about what had been going on there – when they'd got to know each other a bit, he proposed, she accepted, gladly, they married, quietly, and began what she thought was their life in Tyneside.

Then he'd brought her here. To Glasgow.

Had already planned to come here but had not thought to tell her, not from any underhand reason just that he was a man who lived in the present, not used, as she was not, to sharing a life with another so not yet versed in the giving of information. But it meant she was back to the place she had thought to have escaped from. Where it all began.

And she began to live in fear again, in secret again, because she had made the decision, in good faith to keep her past from him.

It had taken just three weeks before she was recognised, and though she'd been on the lookout, every minute of every bloody hour she had to spend going around the town, she hadn't seen this one coming. But it was, as she should have expected, one of the old neighbours. Mrs McNulty looked no different, after eight years, but although Fay knew she herself had changed, the woman still recognised her – she suppose she looked too much like her Mum to get away with it; seemingly she had only grown more like her. And there hadn't been any doubt in Mrs McNulty's mind, either. She wasn't one of the vicious ones, but naturally nosy even so, and Christ knows, under the circumstances there was enough to be nosy about.

'Frances Hinds – well I never – it is Francie isn't it?' she'd said, and Fay had straight away responded to her old name, too deep-seated instinct she supposed.

Before she could say any more, beady little eyes had checked her over: 'Och – married now as well, I see.' and then as Fay watched she saw the memories click in, *all* of the memories, and she could see the old besom was thinking about what had happened, and about the fact that she'd disappeared straight after.

So quickly, to prevent any questions, Fay said, putting on her saddest face and thanking her lucky stars that she was wearing black (though she did most days), 'Married and widowed now Mrs McNulty – I've just had to come into town and sort out the death certificate – and I'm late for my appointment already, so I'll have to dash. Bye!'

She had turned away immediately, guiltily superstitious about invoking Davey's death, sick with the knowledge that this ought to be taken as a warning and that she'd have to tackle Davey about the impossibility of staying here. Just how much of the truth would she have to tell him to convince him?

Fourteen

North Yorkshire, Wednesday 11th August

They had shared the bed before, one night of chaste comforting, after which she had spent every other night on the couch in the studio, wrapped, as a consolation, in the fresh-washed blue silk shawl, clusters of its five-inch fringing threaded through her fingers.

Now, following the wedding reception so generously provided by Ed Hetherington; an occasion far more enjoyable than either of them had thought likely, thanks to the warmth and good wishes from those who came to share and celebrate their marriage, they had returned to Bernard's tiny house, their official 'going-away' honeymoon not due to begin until Sunday.

Upstairs and standing in the narrow space on the far side of the bed, Zoë said, 'I was thinking, there's not much in the way of wedding night surprise for you is there? You've seen all of me before.'

And then, before he could answer her, as she had done so many times before, with a total lack of self-consciousness, she grasped the hem of her plain white shift dress, pulled it up and over her head, so that it was inside out, turned it the right way round, folded it lengthways and laid it over the back of the chair before climbing onto the bed. He saw that he had guessed right – she had worn nothing underneath all day.

He had lit the large oil lamp which stood on the low chest beside him, and now was overwhelmed by the creamy softness of its light, and of her in it, shadows at the edges of the room violet dusk and gentle as old velvet. She was totally relaxed, leaning against the new cotton of the pillowcase, whose right-angled, straight-out-of-the-pocket folds were sharp enough to cast shadows. Her hair was gathered on her shoulders or fell behind her back, save a strand which reached below her breast, its straightness deviating slightly around the pale biscuit aureole. She had tucked her right foot under her left leg which was extended, soles of both feet a little grubby, hands loose on her

thighs, fingers interlinked, palms upturned. Peaceful, content and calm.

Without a mark on her skin, as if she was, once again, simply posing for him.

Not a mark.

Unblemished.

Unbroken.

She had told him she was a virgin, that first night. Not that he had needed telling because that was the reason he'd been drawn to paint her, that innocence, that as-yet-undiscovered secret knowledge, that inner yearning. She had said it was not from conviction, or fright, just from not having found anyone she wanted to be with. But she had said, some time in the early hours of Friday, she had said she wanted it to be him.

And he had straight away answered her, 'Not until you are my wife.' He hadn't known he was going to say that, but once he did he knew he meant it, knew it was exactly right, exactly what he wanted.

And now she was in his bed for the second time. Watching him, lichen-green eyes trusting. Waiting for him to begin, to show her what came next. The most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Quietly, because he barely had breath for more, he answered her. 'Yes, I have seen all of you. But last time I saw you I did not know I loved you. Now that I do ... everything's changed. You are different ... so lovely, and so different. But, you have seen nothing of me. Are you ... nervous of that?'

She grinned.

Madonna became wanton.

'No. Can't wait, to be honest. To see you ... and to feel you, your skin, the length of you, against mine, against me. Inside me.'

His breath caught in his throat. 'Oh my precious love, until you said that I was thinking I most needed to draw you, but now ... now drawing can wait.'

