

Beyond understanding

Vonny Thenasten

For the Golems

This edition was printed 3 July, 2026.

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Front cover taken from *Catharion* by Vonny Thenasten

ISBN: xxx-x-xxx-xxxxx-x



This novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental

Acknowledgements

Page 66 *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, by Daniel Paul Schreber

Page 255 This is based very loosely on the curse laid on the reivers in 1525 by Gavin Dunbar, Archbishop of Glasgow

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Beyond Understanding

Hey, that's no way to say goodbye
- Leonard Cohen

Unsettlement

DIY

It was unexpectedly quiet when Lucinda pushed open the door, and for a split second she had the strangest feeling she had come to the wrong place.

It was one of those buildings constructed by stringing together a maze of dimly-lit concrete corridors, leaving the visitor to trust to luck to arrive where they thought they ought to be. But the huge blue arrow on the wall reassured her, and settling her coat over her arm, she followed it with only a momentary hesitation.

In principle she approved of the utilitarian passageway but that didn't stop her feeling slightly chilly at its grimness, and passing a dark doorway she glanced in, hoping for some visual relief, but the room was bare except for a lonely-looking set of stepladders and a toolbox.

She sighed. While it was always possible that she'd chanced upon some kind of installation, she hoped not. Art was one area in which Patrissia professed herself to be a traditionalist, and Lucinda had spent a good few hours searching for an exhibition she thought her friend might enjoy. Unfinished DIY, while fine as glib social commentary, probably wouldn't go down well.

As she approached yet another corridor she was relieved to hear a low confusion of voices, and pausing briefly to check her phone she turned the corner, slightly disappointed not to have already come across Patrissia in some half-hidden niche lighting a cigarette or being chatted up. Things happened when her friend was around, and while Lucinda certainly didn't envy her life, she did enjoy the spark of jealousy that lit up inside her when they were together.

Confronting her now was a striplite table with, behind it, a young woman smiling with a puppyish eagerness. Fishing two pound coins

out of her purse, Lucinda took the cheaply-printed programme in her gloved hand and began to weave her way towards the far wall, confident that if Patrissia were there, eventually she would attract her attention one way or another.

A swift scan of the overlit room revealed no sign of her, but as Lucinda paused between two loose groups of chatterers her eyes were caught by the shiny glass and chrome of a staircase, and looking up she spotted Patrissia's back leant against the transparent wall of what seemed to be a lookout point on the mezzanine. She smiled to herself and began an internal countdown, in no doubt that half of the men there would eventually find an excuse to escape from an imaginary crush below to seek out her friend.

She wished them luck. While Patrissia had always been a pushover, actually getting through to her was an entirely different matter, and Lucinda would not recommend it to anyone of even a slightly fragile nature.

Sure enough, as she began to mount the stair she noticed a dark-haired man standing in the opposite corner with his eyes fixed on Patrissia's outline. She shook her head. Whatever it was that her friend had, it would take a twenty-foot wall and a vow of chastity to dim its effect, and perhaps even that wouldn't be enough.

As Lucinda reached the top of the stair, Patrissia's head slowly turned towards her, as finely-tuned to the self-assured click-clack of an approaching woman's heels as she was to the jangling self-importance of those unfortunate men intent on what they hoped would be an easy pickup.

Lucinda was surprised to see that she seemed to have come out without makeup—it must be ten years since she had seen her so bare. Not that it would detract in the least from her fascination, which Lucinda had watched almost with awe surviving any amount of fallout from her antics with those who became involved with her.

Patrissia's habitually neutral expression turned to a warm smile. 'Welcome to Olympus. The gods seem to be from-home today. More room for us!' With an elegant shift of weight, she unglued herself from the wall and shook out a cascade of impossibly perfect black hair.

‘Hello Trisha,’ said Lucinda, leaning to kiss her cheek, ‘it’s good to see you. I thought you might not come.’

‘You’re my only friend, Lu. If I’d stood you up I’d be on my own.’

Was this a serious or a sparring day? As happened often, Lucinda already found herself struggling to find an appropriate response.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. Forget it.’

‘You didn’t, Trisha. I’m just surprised—’

‘That I have no friends? Surely not. You of all people know what I’m like.’

‘Well, yes, but—’

Patrissia laughed. ‘You’re so sweet, Lu. Sorry for making you feel uncomfortable. Let’s talk about something else. Not art, though, if you don’t mind.’

‘I was about to say that—’

‘It was nice of you to suggest coming out, and I’m sure there’s a whole load of interesting stuff down there but I don’t think I’m in the mood. I’m sorry.’

Lucinda gave up with relief. ‘It got you out, anyway. Jamie said you haven’t left your house for days. It’s not good for you, you know.’

‘I know.’ Patrissia had slumped back against the glass wall, her long black hair hanging like a nun’s veil. ‘And I do appreciate your concern. You’re right, I need a change. I’ll be moving into Marc’s place soon, though. Maybe that will help.’

‘Maybe.’

Patrissia snorted. ‘I know you think it’s a bad idea but I’m being practical for once.’

‘Practical?’ Lucinda was bemused once again at how easily Patrissia had steered the conversation the way she wanted. It was an art in itself. ‘The house is huge, Trisha. What will you do with it all?’

‘I’m feeling the need for more space and air, and there’s room for a proper studio. The extra bedroom will be useful too.’

Lucinda had been surveying the floor below to give herself time to catch up with the conversation. Twenty or thirty people were standing in small groups and a couple of younger women with backpacks and an air of studious earnestness were making the slow rounds. They reminded her of her own time at art college, and of how seriously she had taken it all.

She was just thinking how she would do things differently now when she heard Patrissia say, 'That might help me sort myself out.'

This was unexpected. 'Sort yourself out?' she echoed without thinking. 'Is there anything wrong?'

'Don't look at me like that.' Patrissia moved away from the wall, as though suddenly wary of eavesdroppers. 'Something's happened, Lu. I don't know what, but I'm scared.'

'It's understandable, but it'll pass,' said Lucinda, still trying to catch up and unable to think of anything else. It rather threw her that Patrissia seemed to have become vulnerable, however temporary it might turn out to be. But whatever Patrissia had to say, asking her to be specific wouldn't work—it would come out eventually, in one guise or another. 'Hmm, well, we needn't stay,' she added, starting to feel restless. 'What do you say to a quick tour and then a bite to eat? I've got a couple of hours.'

'Can we skip the tour, do you think? I need a cigarette.'

Lucinda felt herself relax. She had lost any interest she might have had in looking at the offerings below.

'That's fine with me. I don't think there's a lot to see here.'

'Come on then, I'll buy you lunch and you can tell me how much you're looking forward to meeting Ciara.' Seeing Lucinda's expression, she added, 'Jamie told me. I think it's a smart move.'

'I didn't suggest it, he did.'

'Yes, but it must have been Ciara's idea. You'd never have got anywhere without her OK anyway, so you're saving time.'

'I hope so. We'll see.'

She followed Patrissia down the stair, relieved at the change of subject and relaxed enough to resume her mild obsession with how

magnetically her friend attracted admiring eyes. It really was amazing to see.

‘So what’s happening with you?’ Patrissia asked as they emerged into the cool autumnal sunlight.

Lucinda put on her gloves and smoothed them carefully. ‘Oh, the usual. Zara takes up a lot of my time of course, and Daisy, and the business. Apart from that, not much.’

‘Hmm, it’s a funny time of year, isn’t it? Summer’s gone, winter’s poking its nasty little talons out of its eyrie, and we’ve been so busy making the most of every moment that there’s nothing to harvest, so we wait, not really understanding that there’s nothing to wait for.’

‘Sorry?’

Patrissia paused in her stumpy walk to toss the butt of her cigarette into a gutter. ‘I was reading the fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper yesterday, and it occurred to me that there aren’t any grasshoppers left. We’re all ants, but we have grasshopper brains. Not a good combination.’

‘I’m not sure that I follow you, but I’m guessing that it’s rather a pessimistic view of things.’

‘I know.’ They walked on in silence. ‘I appreciate your concern for me, Lu,’ Patrissia said eventually. ‘You’re a good woman—much better than I am. I don’t deserve your friendship.’

Lucinda stopped. ‘Whatever is the matter, Trisha? What did you mean about being scared? What of?’

Patrissia had continued down the street and didn’t seem to hear her. Irritated, Lucinda checked the time. They had wasted forty-five minutes of her precious lunchtime already.

‘Trisha, wait! Where are we going?’ There was a junction ahead, and Lucinda hurried to catch up.

‘There’s a pub over there.’

It didn’t take long for them to get served and Patrissia headed immediately for the garden, already reaching into her bag for a cigarette while Lucinda followed her, carefully negotiating the way

with their glasses of wine. They found a small table in the corner that was only half in the shade.

‘How’s Philip?’ Patrissia began after lighting up.

Lucinda wiped the dirty-looking seat with a tissue and sat down gratefully. ‘Oh. Fine, I think. I haven’t seen him since the weekend — Jamie stayed over at the house to look after the girls and we went to the Devon cottage.’

‘You don’t look that bowled over. Did you have another row?’

‘Not exactly, but it was rather strained. He’s involved in a tricky case and insisted on giving me a full review. I wouldn’t have minded but I thought some of the things he said... He’s quite prejudiced in some ways.’

‘Philip? The model of moral rectitude?’

‘Well, indeed. I think he’s forgotten he’s dealing with real people, and that being shut up in prison is actually an horrendous experience. He talks about it as if it’s nothing.’

‘I’ve always thought that six months in clink should be part of their training. Preferably repeated every six months.’

‘I’m coming around to your point of view, I think,’ said Lucinda laughing. ‘He certainly has little sympathy, and doesn’t seem to realise that not everyone is a hardened criminal. I’m beginning to think he’s not nearly as nice as he pretends, although he puts a lot of energy into looking after his wife.’ Her face fell. ‘She’s paraplegic now and he seems to care about her comfort a great deal.’

‘Hmm. I can see that could be galling.’

‘I was raised to respect loyalty, but... God, I don’t know. Maybe it is that. Maybe I’m becoming more selfish, or more righteous or something.’

Patrissia was gazing around the garden. ‘Isn’t that the girl who was on the desk at the exhibition?’

Lucinda twisted her head. ‘I think so, yes.’ She twisted back. ‘Did I hear you say you were going to use one of the rooms at Marc’s as a studio? Are you thinking of doing some more painting? I think you should.’

‘I want to, yes. It’s funny, when I did that portrait last year I thought it was only the beginning and that art’d gush out of me like a spring tide, but it just didn’t happen. As soon as I finished, it was like a tap had been turned off. I don’t know, maybe I’m not an artist at all, just a dabbler. I know I have talent but that’s not the same, is it? You need dedication and I—’

‘You were always more interested in the artists than the art!’ Lucinda showed her big white teeth. ‘Johnny of course, and that action painter. Then the sculptor—or were there two sculptors?’

‘I can’t remember. You’re right in a way, Johnny was always on at me about knuckling down. But that’s the thing: the portrait was different, and I keep looking at Marc’s stuff and thinking that he’d be so much *less* if they weren’t there. Which would be better for me, of course, but still.’

‘Do you think about him much?’

‘Marc?’ She glanced around the garden, her face expressionless. ‘Occasionally.’

‘Oh, come on. Jamie thinks you’re nowhere near over him.’

‘Does he?’ Patrissia shrugged, examining a fingernail. ‘I suppose it might come over like that, but it’s more like...’ She lifted her gaze. ‘I want to put myself *into* something in the way Marc did with *Pan* and that horrible *Lachesis*—have a mirror that really doesn’t lie, something to judge myself by. I admire him for risking that. I guess Jamie picked up on that somehow.’

‘He’s quite astute in his way, you know.’

‘Yes, he is, but he’s got it wrong this time. I’m over Marc, I’m just not over his judgement of me. I need to know if he was right. The past few months...’

‘You mustn’t be hard on yourself, Trisha.’

‘Maybe it’s time I *was* hard on myself. Marc certainly thought I ought to be.’

*

Lucinda departed at precisely 2.30, leaving Patrissia to finish their second bottle of wine. The garden was now completely shaded

by the dirty brick walls and the ragged, unkempt trees that somehow managed to obscure every inch of sun. Patrissia pulled her coat closer and poured the remains of the bottle into her glass.

A young woman came out of the back door and paused to light a cigarette, turning this way and that trying to keep the flame out of the newly blustery wind. It was the girl from the exhibition again. She looked rather prettier in the soft afternoon light than she had under the striplight, and Patrissia felt a small frisson of anticipation as she approached, a sweet and open smile on her face.

‘Could I borrow your lighter? They never work when you need them, do they?’

‘Pleasure.’ Patrissia made a show of searching in her bag. ‘It’s here somewhere.’

The girl pointed to the table. ‘Is this it?’ She picked up the smooth cylinder and hefted it appreciatively. ‘It’s nice. Was it a present?’

‘Yes. A long time ago.’

The girl blew out a plume of smoke in a long sigh and handed it back. ‘Thanks. You were at the exhibition, weren’t you? Are you one of the artists?’

‘No, but I am a painter.’

‘I thought so. I really wanted to be an artist but I don’t have the talent.’

‘Everyone has talent. You just need to be determined.’

The girl smiled. ‘I guess I just don’t have the oomph, then. It doesn’t bother me though. I meet a lot of artists and OK they have a pretty wild time but most of them are messed up, aren’t they?’

It was Patrissia’s turn to smile. ‘Yes, you’re right there. You’re better off out of it. Why don’t you sit down?’

‘Would you mind?’

‘No, of course not.’

The girl sat and began to talk. Patrissia was comforted by her low and reflective voice and by her familiar scent of Chanel, and as she recounted the small inconveniences and moments of triumph

of the day Patrissia made appropriate murmurs of surprise and agreement, the noises of indifferent collusion.

The girl needed little encouragement, and as the smooth rhythms of sound continued Patrissia allowed herself to slip into her habitual reverie.

Often there were just the voices, the continuing conversation.

Yes, I'm grateful. But not to you, crow-man.

Why do you call me that?

How can anyone expect me to behave properly when I'm like this?

What are you like?

Can't you see?

You hide yourself away so there's nothing to see.

But sometimes it was as if she were drugged or dreaming, and merging boundlessly into some hallucination where it was never the first time and always the first time, a place she knew and didn't know, with an inside and an outside where edges sublimated into shapes and the shapes flowed into each other, familiar but unknown.

The voice recedes and a cool, clean breeze lifts and disperses its tones through the soft air.

Sometimes she is carried by the breeze and finds herself watching swathes of grass bend graciously on vast prairies: today she is moving through a shaded colonnade. She is pure and naked beneath simple, rough cloth, a brown robe, its weight hanging lightly from her breasts.

She is alone, the hollow slap of her sandaled feet echoing out into the thin air of a blazing summer's day, her heart scarless of love and her body intact of its fruit. And detached. That most of all.

A pinpoint of black on a far horizon absorbs her attention, such as it is: the landscape outside the columns isn't blurred, but it has only a vague form. She feels it as a series of gradations and inclines that lead her weightlessly from here to here without will or movement.

The ragged black speck grows larger second by second, and is suddenly beside her, a thin and angular crow-like figure whose broken

stride matches hers, whose hard eyes unveil her at every step, whose beak and claws she fears and desires equally.

They walk apart, at the extremities of the ruined marble way, the space between them filled with dusty cracks and thorns and invisible, biting insects. She feels safe with him there, and keeps her eyes lowered, only glancing up to reassure herself he is there.

The way narrows and she has to move towards the centre, nearer him, the low thorns beginning to scratch her legs and the insects to crawl over her feet. The robe she is wearing is no protection and it fades into the air leaving only a faint transparency surrounding the sharp pinkness where the thorns have touched her.

They reach the point where her body, and his, start to fade. There are no more thorns, there is no more path. Neither dark nor light, neither moving nor still, all is here, and neither complying nor resisting, she feels him enter her, inhabiting her like a skein of geese in an evening sky. There is no end to their motionless flight.

Later, kneeling in her cell, she prays for him and him alone in breathless gratitude for his indifference.

‘I’d better be going, I suppose. He won’t like it if I’m late.’

Patrissia brought herself back. ‘I’m sorry, I was somewhere else for a moment there.’

‘Yes, I could tell,’ laughed the woman. ‘I’m sorry I talked so much.’ She gave a shy smile then hesitated as she rose to leave. ‘I’ve just moved here and...’ She trailed off. ‘I don’t suppose you’d like to meet up sometime?’

‘I’d love to,’ Patrissia heard herself saying. ‘I’m Trisha, by the way.’

‘Iona. Pleased to meet you. Here’s my number. Maybe you could call me?’ She bent and kissed Patrissia’s cheek, a hand resting lightly on her arm. ‘We could go somewhere if you like, or I could cook?’ Her young, translucent skin showed a faint flush. ‘I don’t have much money after all the bills.’

‘Of course, that would be lovely,’ Patrissia smiled. ‘We’ll have a nice girl’s night in.’ She sat back in her chair and lit a cigarette, watching the girl’s back as she left by the side gate.

Seduction. Oblivion. Return. Retreat.

Hugging her jacket tight to her she gazed into the twisted branches above, feeling the smoke warm her.

A new voice rose up in her mind, as clear as the girl's had been.

A breathy songing through distant reeds as hooded crows settle in broken trees. A frozen marsh, a dying light.

What do you mean? Don't be silly. That's not what it is.

The second voice sounded like Lucinda's.

Patrissia emptied her glass, feeling slow tides flow and ebb inside her, not exactly thoughts or emotions, but drifts of consequence and meaning: Iona, Jamie, Marc, Johnny. Lucinda.

Lucinda. If there was anybody she could trust it was Lucinda, and yet it seemed to Patrissia that their snatches of intimacy were always a surprise to both. It was almost as if they had become accidental lovers who had drifted together somehow, undramatically, each waiting for the other to drift away again, without rancour or recrimination, towards something more exciting but which never seemed to arrive.

She checked the time, wanting to order another bottle, but the voice that accompanied her constantly—her own voice, in all its sarcastic and cynical power—chided her.

You're an artist, are you? So where is your art?

She lit another cigarette. She really missed Johnny.

Making dates with strangers

The chiding worked for once, and leaving the pub by the side gate Patrissia took the tube to Covent Garden, on the way buying some gouache pencils and a pad and a cheap folding stool from a weary-looking woman behind a market stall.

As she made her way through the bustling square she felt again the hollowness of her desires. It had been easy with Johnny, who had always chosen the spot and the subject, throwing down his rucksack with an unanswerable 'Here!'

Eventually the flow of the crowd washed her into a placid corner. At first she studied the faces of passers-by but there were too many, and too many that spoke of hurt and anger, or cunning and deceit. She was tired of drama, and sitting and lighting a cigarette, she flipped open the pad and rested the tip of a pencil on the paper, waiting.

As the passing clouds all but obliterated the evening light, a memory came to her of another day, a day of ferocious sun, her eyes and belly on fire, her fingers oily and sticky from sending a stark, burnt forest of columns soaring invisibly into a violet sky. And later, the heat and sweat of their bodies fading into the soft purple night.

She looked down. Her pencil was paused in the deep cut of a flute, and she saw that she had begun to sketch the colonnade. Suddenly angry, she crossed it out, obliterating it with crude slashes that bit into the paper, then ripping out the page, she watched a tear fall onto the fresh sheet.

Helpless in the face of an overwhelming sadness, she sagged under the weight of yearning and loss, her hands squeezing and mauling the crumpled ball of vellum as if it were her bleeding heart.

The flash of a white shirt caught her eye and she watched under bleary eyelids as a man sitting at a table opposite got up and began to walk towards her. With an effort she forced herself to sit up, dabbing her eyes on her sleeve, grateful for her impulsive absence of eyeliner.

She had noticed him earlier, nursing a single coffee and watching her. She wondered why he was so interested. He couldn't be more than thirty, and she'd seen off her forty-first birthday a couple of months before, never mind her hair being a tangled mess. Yet his eyes hadn't budged from her, not even for the flesh parade of youthful legs and breasts that made the men at the other tables look as if they were at a particularly crucial tennis match. He was too far away to have seen the tears at least.

As her eyes cleared, she saw that he was quite small, casually dressed in a light jacket and jeans, and walking with a smooth sauntering gait that she was very familiar with.

Italian?

Yes. A mummy's boy.

She wasn't interested in any kind of boy. The actual sex would be athletic and quite possibly painful, which she wouldn't mind, but he'd be emotional, and impossible to get rid of.

God, he's coming over.

Surreptitiously wiping her eyes again, she closed the sketchbook with a slap and dropped it onto the unused paints and brushes in the bag at her side. Buttoning her jacket, she rose and picked up her bag, pulling the hem of her skirt further down, wishing it wasn't quite so short. But she wasn't quick enough.

'Scusi, Signora. Permesso? Your bag looks heavy. May I?' His hand was already on hers and before she could protest, he lifted the bag off her arm. His movements were smooth and practised: she had barely felt anything except for the sudden lightness.

'I was watching you draw. May I see it?'

Patrissia forced a smile, avoiding his eyes. 'Sorry, I'm late,' she gabbled. 'I have to go. Thanks for offering.'

She tried to take the bag back, but he held it fast, putting a soft hand over hers. 'Take my card, anyway.' His smile was wide and friendly. 'I'm a life model, and I need work. I can keep still for a long time.'

Pulling half-heartedly at the bag, she felt somehow guilty for refusing his help. 'OK, but I don't need a model at the moment, sorry.'

'Maybe you know someone who does?' he said, pressing a silver-embossed and roughly-textured card into her palm with his other hand.

'I don't know. Maybe.' She was desperate now, not confused but unable to marshal her thoughts, a sack of paleolithic responses. 'I'll call you if I do. I've got to go now.'

'You're very kind, *Signora*. I am Salvatore—Sal. See, here.' He pointed to the card. 'You would be helping me very much. Perhaps you will give me your number in case you lose my card?' His voice was light and musical, persuasive.

'Sorry, I don't give my number to strangers.'

Patrissia was still trying to pull her hand away without success, but twisting away from him she managed to fumble the canvas chair shut with her knee and free hand. She could feel a wave of panic rising inside her, the whole-body panic whose only release was in flight or in the turmoil of another's will.

'Look, I really do have to go.'

Watching her efforts, he shrugged patiently. 'But I think you are Italian, and all Italians are brothers in this grey land.'

Turning unthinkingly at his words she found his smiling eyes drawing her, his grip on her hand unassailable, and for a few seconds she felt the everyday world of street-dirt and casual unpleasantness peel away into the heart-pounding free-fall of acquiescence.

'Don't worry, I'm just a guy looking for work. I'll leave you in peace now.' The pressure of his hand relaxed. It had been firm and warm, and Patrissia felt a confusing sensation of relief and dismay as it withdrew, unconsciously allowing her own small hand to linger while he stepped back. A few moments longer and she knew she would have done what he wanted.

He touched his temple politely. 'I hope we will meet again. Remember me when the moon is bright. *Buona sera, Signora*.' And

with a nod and a final knowing smile he turned and began to walk away.

Patrissia closed her eyes and breathed out, grateful for her escape but still, in a deep and persistent part of her that craved the bliss and rawness of life, disappointed not to have the opportunity to experience that thrilling moment of surrender again, surrender to the sensual secrets of the self. The frightening, blissful senses.

'There are no limits to our desires, Patrissia, and there are no judgements to be made about how we seek to fulfil them. Our obsessions reveal us in our depths and heights and it's our duty to pursue them to exhaustion. They are our ideals and they're the door to the eternal, to the world as it truly is.'

'Is that really true, Johnny?'

'Yes, it's really true.'

'And love?'

'Love is a word, an arrangement, a judgement of a desire. Definitions are not desires. Submit to the feeling, Patrissia, no matter what that feeling is, no matter where that desire leads. Don't be afraid.'

And in that moment, lying beside him, she hadn't been afraid. His voice was a southing wind, her body a distant wraith, her soul a ragged veil through which the world would burn away. Before Marc, before Theo, before all the others—before this—she had known the glorious light.

So long ago.

And one day he was gone. She had switched off the light and the fire and ice that burned with it, and only the brutal, sordid truths of the real world were left.

I know all about brutal truths, don't I? Go down that path and everyone becomes contemptible sooner or later. Me first, of course.

She felt a sudden need for the warmth of the Italian boy's hand again, but the moment had passed. He was already too far away. Breathing out, she pulled her coat tight around her. It had been a close thing.

'I'm here every day!' He had stopped as he turned the corner into Henrietta Street and was waving. 'Don't forget me!'

'OK. *Ciao!*' Patrissia smiled and waved back before she could stop herself.

Once he was out of sight, she bundled the chair under her arm, picked up her bag, and feeling as ashamed and angry as if she had propositioned him and been rejected, walked purposefully towards one of the café tables and sat down.

Digging in her overflowing bag, she found the battered red packet, and smoothing it with distracted fingers, she pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with a shaking hand and blowing out a plume of blue smoke. But rather than relax her, she felt the tension spread from her neck to her eyes and brow.

Making dates with strangers again, Patrissia?

She had switched him off, but Johnny would not leave her alone. She had renounced the Escher-esque ladder of High Art easily enough, but Johnny's presence and even his voice had lingered as she had descended into the world of work and compromise, of words and deceits and the numbing tawdriness of ambition and power, where the beauty of exploration and expression were reviled and where only conquest—and the conqueror—were valued. Where her fearful spirit died.

'A destination is an ideal and yet you have chosen to try to drag it into this imperfect world and own it. I thought you were better than that, Patrissia.'

And she *had* been better than that, while she was with him. Without him she had retreated into the world she had been raised in, where she was confident of her talents and where the rewards were tangible, even if they were valueless. Where she didn't need Johnny, or anyone. The safe, sordid world.

There had been many men since Johnny, nice men, sweet men, angry men—but none she could trust enough, none she could allow to touch her as he had done.

And then there had been Marc, who she had hoped might grasp her hand as Johnny had, would share his strength with her and lead her back. But he had shown her that she was not good enough,

because she was afraid. He too was afraid, and together they had buried the light so completely it made her feel as if it could never be resurrected. Yet he had remained with her, joining the other voices in the continuous, scathing dialogue. Any argument could persuade her, any tiny obstacle was enough to discourage her. It was outrageous, but far from being outraged she was grateful at how easy it made her life.

Grateful?

How could she be grateful when she knew that he was right?

From time to time, listening to the voices, she wondered if she was going out of her mind, but that didn't concern her—and that was another thing: often, she felt she was only an observer of her body's trickery as it made decisions without her, and sometimes it seemed that she no longer had a will or desires of her own. She had given herself to fate, knowing that it impoverished her.

Wisdom and gratitude are good things.

Who says?

You say, because you are afraid.

The voices had become easy to ignore. Much of the time they didn't even make sense, saying things she had never heard, things she couldn't imagine Johnny or Marc saying, things she had never allowed herself to think.

So you say.

A wind had sprung up from the corner where the Italian boy had departed, and pulling her collar closer Patrissia closed her eyes making the babble of voices recede, leaving only the cool wind and the dusty, dry scent of vetiver. She realised that she had headed automatically for the table where he had been sitting moments before and all she felt at that moment was the distance between her and that other human being: a familiar hollowness that remained with her even when, as happened sometimes, her body led her to submit to some smiling stranger.

Shivering in the raw evening chill she stabbed her half-smoked cigarette into a polystyrene cup, feeling cold, abandoned, and a hundred years old.

The locks

Patrissia banged her front door shut and leaned back against the cool wood. It had taken her a while to get home. She'd had a queasy feeling that someone was following her, and had changed trains a couple of times, even once crossing to the other line and going back a station.

Leaving her bag and other paraphernalia on the mat, she walked down the passageway to the kitchen, switching on each light as she passed, and going straight to the fridge, she took out the waiting bottle of red.

What about the locks?

Standing in front of the open fridge door she tried to remember if she had latched the chain and activated the new high-security lock she'd had fitted a couple of weeks before, and suddenly apprehensive, she went back down the passageway to check, wondering how many new locks she'd have to buy when she moved into Marc's place. He had done nothing to it in almost thirty years of living there. She doubted he'd even thought about putting bolts on the sashes and French windows. There would only be the neglected original catches, a piece of cake.

The lock and latch were in place. Running her fingers over them, she felt their claustrophobic weight.

Who's out there?

Nobody, stupid.

She returned to the kitchen, stepping quickly down the long passageway. The Aga wasn't lit and when she touched it, it felt cold and clammy to her fingers. Taking a candle from a drawer she roughly stuck it to a saucer and put it on the front edge of the useless stove.

Two large plastic sacks of empty bottles had made their home beneath the kitchen table. Kicking off a sandal, she touched her toe to a herniated bottle and was comforted by the dull clink as she always was when she accidentally kicked them. She liked them there, and uncorking the fresh bottle she poured herself a large glass, tipping it to her lips as she sat down.

Almost immediately, the phone rang, making her jump. It was Ciara, her niece.

‘Is Jamie there?’ came the melodious voice, without preamble.

‘Sorry, Ciara, I haven’t seen him all week. Is he supposed to be here? He didn’t say.’

‘No, he’s supposed to be at work, but I can’t get hold of him.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Paddington.’

‘Why don’t you pop round for a drink in case he turns up? He’ll call before he leaves for home, won’t he?’

‘He ought to.’

Patrissia emptied her glass and refilled it as she waited, listening to the random street noises for what seemed like minutes. She heard a sniff, then ‘OK, I might as well—I’ll be about twenty minutes. I wonder where he’s got to?’

The phone went dead.

Patrissia leaned forwards, her cheek in her hand. She wished she hadn’t stayed so long at Covent Garden. There was no excuse. She knew very well that she was making herself available. She’d done that a lot since Marc’s death.

The whole Marc episode still haunted her. They had been together just a few months, months of uncertainty, misunderstanding and accusation, and, as it turned out, deception, in the middle of which his daughter, Ciara, had suddenly appeared, complicating things further.

And then he had died, but instead of the feeling of shock and release that she expected she found herself stuck in a dull impotent numbness that she couldn’t shake off. Ciara had left her alone until after the funeral, when she had reappeared, seemingly intent on insinuating herself into Patrissia’s life as she had Marc’s. She was polite and even sympathetic, but Patrissia couldn’t get the thought out of her mind that she didn’t mean her well.

Finally, she had turned to paint as a source of succour, convinced that she was on the edge of something significant, but her initial enthusiasm had quickly waned, and as the days progressed

she spent most of her time trying to distract herself, wandering from room to room, aimlessly rearranging furniture and moving things from shelf to cupboard and back again.

On top of that, she had begun to hear noises and other voices as she had when her mother had died, and dark images flickered uneasily out of the corner of her eye. Once or twice she found herself crouched in the corner of the kitchen, an empty bottle in her fist, waiting for unknown terrors.

And she couldn't stop thinking about Marc. Most mornings she woke sweating and in the middle of an unending conversation with him that continued sporadically through her waking hours, and that only drinking could drown out.

You killed me, Patrissia, as surely as I lie here.

It was an accident.

Nothing is an accident.

Not knowing what else to do, she bought books of mystical teachings, and went to lectures by passing gurus. Some days she would go to a gallery and lose herself in the eerie or apocalyptic symbolism of a Friedrich or a Bosch. Lately she had begun to leave small piles of leaves and flowers from the garden in corners and by doors, in the vague hope that it might keep Marc's spirit at bay.

Your fault.

Not me. Claudia.

Glancing at the clock, Patrissia tapped a finger restlessly on the table and then, remembering the locks, returned to the front door. Ciara had suggested she get them fitted and Patrissia didn't want to give her the satisfaction of hearing their solid thunk when she opened the door to her.

What will you do about the girl?

I don't know.

She's very pretty.

So's Ciara.

Ciara? What's she got to do with it?

‘What will you do now, Ciara?’

The leggy blonde sitting opposite Patrissia sniffed and lit a cigarette. Patrissia hadn’t seen her for several weeks, since the last time she and Jamie had stayed over. Neither of them had been in a good mood and Ciara had gone to bed early complaining of backache, leaving Patrissia and Jamie to finish the bottle. When he had gone up an hour and another bottle later, Patrissia had sat in the kitchen listening to their low-voiced bickering through the ceiling.

‘Jamie says Lucinda’s looking for someone to come up with some new designs for her ceramics. She’s got a good reputation, hasn’t she? I might try that.’ Ciara grinned mischievously.

‘I suppose they sell well enough, yes,’ said Patrissia, taking in Ciara’s loosely-cut blouse.

The baby.

‘Apparently she wants something a little more modern for her new range,’ said her niece, pulling at a stray thread on her sleeve. ‘I’m surprised—her traditional stuff does so well. But then again, she’s in the same boat as any other commercial outfit, I suppose. Ideas in the pipeline, and all that. She certainly pays well.’

‘You don’t have to worry about money any more, Ciara, neither of us do,’ said Patrissia, remembering her own pregnancy and the whiteness and emptiness of the toilet bowl after she had flushed the fibrous brown sac away. It was the brutality of consequence, the God of her childhood speaking to her.

‘I know, but I can’t quite believe it yet.’

‘No, neither can I.’ Patrissia shook her head, searching Ciara’s face as she took a pair of nail scissors from her bag and cut the errant thread decisively. ‘Why my father should remember us lost souls so handsomely in his will—it’s completely beyond me,’ she continued, fiddling with the neck of the paint-splattered old jumper she had put on. ‘The damned man made my life a misery but I doubt he felt a moment’s guilt or shame in his life.’

Ciara looked at her aunt curiously. She couldn’t imagine her allowing anyone to get close enough to make her miserable. Angry

and frustrated, yes, but powerless? It just didn't fit. Not for the first time she wondered what the real story was.

'Hmm, parents! Mamma's got it into her head that I'm going to be murdered in my bed. She's always pestering me on the phone or coming round to make sure I'm all right. It's a pain in the arse. Going to Lucinda's place in town a couple of days a week would be a relief.'

Patrissia nodded. 'Well, if you do get the job, you can stay with me whenever you need to. I'll be moving into Marc's place soon, so there'll be plenty of room.' She lit a cigarette. 'You *are* still happy that you sold me your half of his house, aren't you?'

'Yes, of course.' Ciara smoothed her hair off her face and leaned back, recrossing her legs. 'I didn't expect to get anything. I mean, how do people do that? How could Marc treat me like a leper when I was doing my damndest to be nice, and then leave me half his house?'

Patrissia's face darkened. 'Guilt, shame. He knew what he ought to do, there's no doubt about that, but he was too scared to do it.'

'Scared? Of what?'

'Of his past, of taking responsibility. He never grew up, Ciara.'

Patrissia was on difficult ground. Yes, Marc had impregnated and then abandoned Claudia, abandoned Ciara, deceived Patrissia, but what would it have cost him not to have done those things? Hadn't she abandoned Claudia too, and deceived Marc? Why else did she need him to forgive her? And what was *her* excuse?

'He hid so much of himself—I keep thinking more of his abandoned children will turn up on the doorstep.' She put her hand to her mouth. 'Oh, I didn't mean—'

'Don't worry, Trisha,' said Ciara, tapping her cigarette on the ashtray at each syllable, 'I'm not offended. I'd feel the same in your position.' She leaned forward to refill her glass. 'And I'm delighted you wanted to take the house off my hands. What a ghastly hole! I never liked it, and it saves me the hassle of selling it. With the money from that and Jamie's half of their house we should be able to afford something quite nice, with plenty of space for a nursery and nanny flat. I saw a lovely place last weekend, actually.'

Patrissia's face showed no emotion as she asked, 'What did Jamie think?'

'I went with my father. He liked it, too. I'm sure Jamie will.' Emptying the last of the bottle into Patrissia's glass, she sat back in the sofa cushions contentedly with an expression of mild concern. 'Are you sure it's such a good idea to move into Marc's old place? It needs a hell of a lot of work.' Her eyes roamed Patrissia's living room, appreciating the cosiness of its warm tones and understated elegance. 'Yours is *much* nicer since you did it up.'

'You think so?' Patrissia followed her gaze disinterestedly. 'I'm already getting tired of it, to be honest. Anyway, I'm thinking of getting a dog, and Marc's has a big garden. I'll be fine there.'

'Don't you find his house rather creepy, though? I know I do.' Ciara shuddered theatrically. 'I couldn't live there alone.'

Patrissia glanced at her, her eyes hard. 'It's a bit run down, that's all. It's much bigger than this place, and the living room will make a good studio,' she replied, exhaling sharply. Then, in a softer voice, 'The garden's nice and private with that big wall—I've always wanted a walled garden. I'll be able to sunbathe in the nude without scaring anyone, anyway.'

'Don't tell my mother!' laughed Ciara. 'She'd have the boys round with the rolls of razor wire before you could shout 'Rape!'.' The smile dissolved into puzzled amusement. 'I'm glad everything's all right between us again, Trisha.'

'So am I.' Patrissia refilled their glasses, avoiding her gaze. 'We shouldn't fight, we're the only real family each of us has.'

Real family? No. I'm just a curiosity to her.

'Jamie still not been in touch?'

Ciara sniffed and glanced at her watch. 'No, and it's getting near nine. I wonder why he hasn't called?' She picked up her phone. 'I'll try him again.'

'While you're doing that, I'll just pop down to the shop. I'm almost out of ciggies. Won't be long. Make yourself at home—you know where everything is.'

*

Jamie checked his watch. *Bugger*. He'd have to tell her he'd lost track of the time.

He scanned the room. The Elgin wasn't his favourite pub, in fact it was a bit of a dump, but it was on the way to Patrissia's and the parking was OK. Straightening himself on the uncomfortable stool he flipped a page of the crumpled and stained newspaper on the bar but however hard he tried to read it, the type remained resolutely unread.

He glanced at the door, but it was only an habitual scan for likely women, and he didn't do that any more. At least, he didn't *want* to do that any more, but lately he had started to recognise a familiar ennui that he couldn't shake off. It was the same feeling that he'd had in his marriage to Lucinda, that he was only a means to something else and didn't really count, that the only things keeping them together were agreements and duties.

He stared at his hand, curled despondently around his pint. He didn't even have Roy to take his mind off his predicament. Ciara had made it clear that she didn't approve of his friendship with the odd-job man. She hadn't said anything specific, but whenever he arranged a drink with him she found reasons to prevent their meeting. If he managed to get away for an hour or two she texted him with irritating frequency, and eventually he had given up, embarrassed at the looks Roy had given him each time he had made his excuses.

Ciara was a mistake—*another* mistake, Jamie corrected himself—but he couldn't face letting it descend into the dreary suburban melodrama of infidelity his marriage to Lucinda had become. He would just have to put up with it.

Sighing, he took out his phone and began to text her. She'd tell him to hurry up, and he didn't want to hurry. All he wanted was a quiet drink, relax, unwind. He checked her last message again, just to reassure himself. Yep, she was still at Patrissia's. Putting the phone down without finishing the message, he stared at the rows of bottles behind the bar for the fiftieth time, and shifted on his stool so that he could see what was going on behind him in the mirror.

The foreign-looking bloke he'd noticed earlier was still chatting up the blonde in the corner. She didn't seem to mind too much—she was probably doing the same as Jamie, just delaying going home. She wasn't too bad-looking, but for some reason Jamie got the impression that she didn't have anyone waiting for her. The foreign bloke might be on a winner, then.

Jamie smiled to himself. How many times had he sat in pubs just like this, waiting for women just like her? You had to be pretty desperate—lucky too, in his experience. Mad, bad or sad—take your pick. No, far better to have someone at home waiting for you. He stared at his glass. Someone you wanted to go home *to*, preferably.

It seemed as if every day Ciara found a new way to ignore or disparage his feelings and desires. They had barely begun to know each other when she had decided it was time to get pregnant. He had arrived home one evening to find it all arranged. He had been tired and distracted and hadn't really listened until she had pointed to a large chart blu-tacked to the kitchen wall. Then she had lectured him on the best positions for conception.

After that, it seemed that every conversation was about babies, or preparing for babies, or what Jamie *had* to do because she was having a baby. He'd heard it was the same with cancer patients. Once they knew, cancer became the reference point that everything else revolved around. He couldn't object—there was nothing he wanted more than for her to bear his child. But all he felt from her was a self-absorbed desire to become more self-sufficient from him, to divert what affection she had for him into something that would be hers.

What was worse was that she had conceived in the second month of trying. The chart had disappeared, and so had her willingness to experiment—actually, her willingness to have sex at all—and she had made it clear that her body was now her and her mother's province. It would be *her* child. Jamie would be the father, but only in the way Marc had been Ciara's father. A circumstance, nothing more.

A movement in the mirror caught his eye. The blonde was trying to get up. She looked bored, and Jamie guessed she was trying to give the bloke the brush-off but he wasn't being a good loser—he

had his hand over hers, stopping her pulling it away. Jamie would definitely have taken the hint by now.

He checked his watch again. Maybe he had time for another pint.

There was a crash behind him, and turning, he was just in time to see the woman hit the floor. A couple of other customers were already holding the bloke's arms, but he was too strong for them. Struggling free, he spat at the woman, then, to Jamie's horror, he produced a thin knife and slashed at one of the men.

The pub was completely silent for a second, the attacker standing back from his keepers, holding the knife like an inverted cross in front of his chest, a sneer on his face. Then, with a sudden grin, he turned and sauntered out the door into the street as though nothing had happened.

It had all taken less than a minute. Jamie realised he had been holding his breath, and let it out slowly, giving his neck and shoulders a shake. That was unexpected, but at least nobody seemed badly hurt. The woman was being comforted by one of her rescuers, while the barman was examining the other one, who was holding his arm. He was grimacing and sucking his teeth, but Jamie couldn't see much blood.

He sighed. He would have liked to stay just a bit longer but it was definitely time to disappear. He tapped a quick message to Ciara saying he was on his way and picked up his briefcase. He'd have to lie about where he'd been or he'd get an earful. Honesty was all very well, but a peaceful life was preferable.

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Ciara heard the front door click shut and the sound of locks being turned.

'Is that you, Trisha?'

'Yes.' There was a quick clatter of heels and Patrissia appeared, breathing hard.

'Have you got new locks? They sound very chunky.' Her smile turned to a faint concern when she saw Patrissia's face. 'Is anything the matter?'

'I don't know. I just saw about ten police cars screaming down the road,' said Patrissia, shrugging off her coat. 'Sorry, I'm a bit jumpy this evening—all the noise gave me a fright. It's probably just a pub fight.'

'Well, you're safe now. Jamie's just texted me. He'll be here in a minute.' Ciara watched disapprovingly as Patrissia dropped her coat onto the floor by the sofa. 'I imagine he'll want to get home, but we can stay a bit longer if you like.' She sat back and crossed her legs, showing her slim, toned calves to full effect.

'Actually, if you wouldn't mind, I'd appreciate it,' said Patrissia, reaching into her bag for cigarettes.

Claudia used to sit just like that. You remind me of her so much. No wonder Marc was scared of you.

She looked round distractedly. 'Have you seen my lighter? I could have sworn I put it in my bag.'

'On the table. Here,' said Ciara, handing the slim silver cylinder to her along with her glass. 'Drink this, it'll calm you down. I'll get another bottle.' She smiled. 'It looks like Jamie'll be driving.'

Patrissia sank into the sofa and pulled her legs up beneath her. Lighting her cigarette, she took comfort from the firm chunky click of the lighter's mechanism as she listened to Ciara's bare feet slapping down the passageway and across the kitchen tiles. For a slender woman Ciara made a lot of noise. The fridge door slammed shut.

The lighter felt warm and heavy in her hand as she folded her fingers lightly around its smooth metal and let her hand fall into her lap. It was empty more often than not and she always kept a couple of cheap plastic ones on her, but when she had got annoyed with it and left it in a drawer one day she had been uneasy until she had retrieved it a few hours later.

'Refill?'

Patrissia hadn't heard her niece return. 'Please,' she said, nodding. 'How are you two getting on?'

'He's finding it a bit stressful,' said Ciara, resettling herself in the other corner of the sofa. 'He's working as hard as ever, so we don't

see much of each other during the week. I keep busy though. I'm seeing Lucinda in the morning about the settlement.'

Patrissia arched her eyebrows. 'That should be fun for you. She hasn't met you yet, has she?'

'No, I'm still an unknown quantity.' Ciara grinned. 'She was a bit put out that Jamie wasn't meeting her himself, but he's too busy to think about it properly at the moment. Besides, she'd walk all over him. She sounds an absolute bitch.'

'Oh,' breathed Patrissia through a cloud of smoke, 'Lu's all right. She and Jamie weren't suited, that's all. It wasn't exactly a marriage of convenience, but it certainly was never a love match.'

'That's what Jamie said. I think that could work, though,' said Ciara thoughtfully. 'One partner might be in love, and the other one goes along with it because they know they're safe,' she sniffed. 'I don't see any problem with that.'

Patrissia pursed her lips. 'I'd have thought it would virtually guarantee that at least one of them was unfaithful—and that means both, eventually. I suppose that's part of the deal, but it's bound to end in disaster, isn't it, especially if either of them is religious at all.'

'Most marriages do, don't they?'

'Well, yes, but you might as well at least try to get it right, don't you think?' Patrissia felt her breath start to come faster. 'You don't want to *invite* disaster. Otherwise, what's the point? Why go through all the hassle of getting married at all?'

'I thought about that a lot when I had my abortion,' said Ciara, evenly. 'He said his marriage was on the rocks, but he didn't leave her, did he? Not even when he knew I was having his child.'

'They usually don't, do they? But that's not the point. Jamie—'

'Isn't it the point?' Ciara interrupted, staring into the hissing fire. 'Jamie told me about his affairs. He said it never crossed his mind to leave Lucinda.'

Patrissia leaned forward to flick the ash off her cigarette, feeling Ciara eyeing her.

'I was surprised he didn't mention anything about you.'

'Me? Why should he?'

‘You keep saying how alike you and I are, and he fell for *me*. It’s hard to believe he wouldn’t have tried something.’

Patrissia laughed. ‘I think I’ve fallen into the role of bitch-sister, as far as I can tell. It’s quite sweet.’

‘Hmm.’ Ciara’s expression was unreadable. ‘Lucinda doesn’t seem to have minded that much either, until me. That’s what he says, anyway.’

‘He’s telling you the truth, she didn’t,’ said Patrissia, carefully. ‘She was more upset that her friends were so easy for him to charm into bed. I say friends, but maybe that’s the wrong word—she’s a bit too self-sufficient for most people, I think. Apart from Antonia, they were mostly women she met through work, and there might have been an element of spite for her in their enthusiasm for Jamie.’ She leaned toward the small table. ‘Do you want a refill?’

‘Please.’

Patrissia held the bottle up to the light before carefully pouring the second half of its contents into the two large glasses. ‘Are you really saying that you’d agree to an open marriage?’

‘What?’ Ciara looked up from her phone. ‘Oh—I don’t know. Passions fade, life goes on—I suppose so, if we both agreed. You have to be practical, and isn’t it better to accept that than to go through all the upheaval of reinventing your life every few years, especially if there are children? It’s not like there’s a soulmate waiting around the corner, is it?’

‘No, that’s true,’ said Patrissia neutrally. ‘And I imagine having children changes a lot of things.’ She pulled a face.

‘Breaking up can’t be good for them, can it? On the other hand, I’m an orphan, in a way, and I have no complaints.’ Ciara paused reflectively. ‘It’s a horrible thing to say, I know, but I’m so glad I wasn’t brought up by Marc.’

‘I can understand that. He was a difficult man,’ said Patrissia, more stiffly than she intended.

‘You can say that again!’ Ciara stopped, her voice softening. ‘I’m sorry, forget what I just said. I don’t want us to fall out again.’

‘No, it’s OK, Ciara. I know I’m still sensitive about him.’

The uneasy silence was interrupted by the doorbell.

‘That must be Jamie. Ciara?’

‘What?’

Stubbing out her cigarette, Patrissia rose to her feet. ‘Jamie behaved like a kid with Lu because she treated him like one, and now I think he’s looking for a grown-up relationship, in spite of appearances.’ Her voice was calm, serious. ‘Well, as grown-up as anyone gets. I hope you want that, too.’

‘Why are you so concerned all of a sudden?’

‘I’m your aunt, and Jamie’s a good friend. I want you both to be happy, that’s all. Think about what I said.’

She touched Ciara’s hand, and with a last glance, left the room.

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Jamie appeared a minute later, rubbing his eyes.

‘Ready, Ciara?’

‘Where’s Patrissia?’ said Ciara, trying to stare past him down the passageway.

‘On the steps. She wanted to look around outside for some reason.’

‘Oh. We were having a nice chat. You don’t mind if we stay for another half an hour or so, do you?’

‘It’s been a long day and it’s getting late—’

Ciara inclined her head towards the front door and made a face.

‘Oh, OK,’ he said, glancing over his shoulder. ‘I suppose not. I don’t want to leave it too long, though.’

She nodded. ‘D’you want a drink?’

‘No, that’s OK.’

‘Have you been to the pub?’

‘I’m tired and I have to drive, Ciara.’ He indicated the front of the house. ‘What’s she looking for, d’you know?’

‘There was some excitement earlier. A pub fight, I think she said.’

‘Oh?’ He moved closer and lowered his voice. ‘Is it me, or is she acting odder than usual lately?’

‘Shh.’ Ciara raised her eyebrows as Patrissia reappeared through the door carrying another bottle.

‘Anything happening out there?’ Jamie asked lightly.

‘Not as far as I can tell.’ Patrissia put the bottle down on the table, and looked around distractedly before picking it up again. ‘It’s pretty quiet. Lots of stars.’

‘You look like you have something on your mind.’

‘Do I? I don’t think I have. I was just wondering if I ought to get one of those security lights for the side passage.’ She sniffed and handed him the bottle. ‘Open this, would you?’

‘Sure.’

‘How’s work?’ asked Patrissia as she watched him pop the cork.

‘Busy. How’s life?’

‘Bearable. The sale’s gone through, at least, so I’ll be moving into Marc’s place in a couple of days. I’m looking forward to that.’ She watched as Jamie topped up Ciara’s glass and poured a careful measure into hers. She held it up in front of her, apparently studying the colour, before tossing it back. She held it out again. ‘Stop messing about, Jamie, fill her up.’

‘You don’t sound that happy about the move,’ said Jamie, shaking his head as he complied.

Patrissia joined Ciara on the sofa, drawing her legs up beneath her. ‘I am, really. I’ve been here too long.’

‘Maybe it’s time for a complete change?’ said Ciara, picking up her own glass. ‘Didn’t your father leave you property in Italy? There’s nothing much keeping you here, is there? Or at least take a long holiday. Why not? I would.’

‘Yes, he left me quite a selection, but they’re all rented out.’ Patrissia was holding her wine close to her chest with both hands,

her head low. 'Except for the main house. He gave that to the Church.'

'Bloody hell!'

'It's not as bad as it sounds,' Patrissia said through pursed lips. 'It's a hospice now, and I can't think of a better use for a such a damned monument. Secundus is already installed there.'

'Secundus is running it? He has his fat finger in a lot of pies,' snorted Ciara derisively.

'No, he's not running it, Ciara. He's a patient.'

'Oh. He really is ill then? He wasn't making excuses for keeping me away?'

'He's dying. I was told he won't last long.'

'I still think he knows more about Claudia than he let on.'

'Almost certainly. But we've both tried to worm what he knows out of him. It's too late now. Actually,' Patrissia mused, 'I own Secundus' house too. I suppose I could use that as a pied-à-terre if I wanted to. He won't be needing it any more.' Her head fell further, and she stared into her glass. 'Once I've tidied up the ends at work, I'll be able to do more or less what I like. Here's to that.' Tipping the remains of the glass into her upraised mouth, she held it out. 'Again, please, Jamie—if I'm allowed.'

'Fat chance of stopping you,' he snorted, avoiding her eyes. 'But what did you mean about your house being a monument? What to?'

'You haven't seen it, Jamie. My family have lived there for three hundred years. They built it, furnished it, bolted the gates and—well, nothing's changed since then. I suppose someone must have put in heating and running water at some point, but apart from that...'

'It sounds like quite a pile. Has it got priest's holes and all that?'

'No, but it's certainly impressive. My father was very proud of it. My mother hated it, of course, and so did I. You can't escape from a place like that.' Patrissia gave him a brief smile and turned to Ciara, smoothing her skirt. 'Have you decided what you're doing with the money?'

‘My father’s taking care of it—investments, a trust, things like that. I’m leaving all the arrangements to him.’

‘I thought you were going to put it toward the new house?’

‘I know, but he was concerned that we’d have enough for the children’s education, so he offered to help us out.’

‘Oh.’ *Children*. ‘Will you keep working?’

‘For the moment. It’d certainly be useful if Lucinda gives me the job. I’ve a few ideas already.’

‘I reckon you’ve a good chance,’ said Jamie, interrupting her. ‘You’ve got a great portfolio, haven’t you, darling? She’s bound to be impressed.’

‘I guess we’ll see tomorrow.’

‘What time are you meeting her?’

‘We’re having brunch. Actually—’

‘What?’

Ignoring him, she turned to Patrissia. ‘Trisha, would you mind if we crashed here tonight? It *is* getting late and it’s been a tiring day.’

‘Of course you can,’ Patrissia smiled, looking relieved. ‘Then you’ll be nice and fresh for the big match.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Lucinda.’

‘Oh. I’m looking forward to it, actually. I think we could sort a few things out.’

Jamie looked at her with a worried frown. ‘You’re not going to piss her off, are you, Ciara? I don’t think that would be a good idea.’

The two women looked at each other.

‘It’ll be fine, Jamie, don’t worry. She knows she won’t be able to push me around, that’s all. Trust me.’

‘I do, of course I do.’ He stretched out his arms, yawning. ‘Maybe I’ll have that drink now, if we’re staying.’

‘There’s another bottle in the fridge,’ said Patrissia. ‘You know where the glasses are, don’t you?’

'I'll work it out, I expect.'

*

When they had gone to bed, Patrissia found herself sitting at the kitchen table, her foot idly stroking the sack of bottles, which emitted a comforting clink. That and the faint patter of rain on the window gave her a sense of peace for the first time that day.

It had been sweet of Lu to think of taking her to the gallery, and Patrissia knew she should have been more appreciative. Lu was such a good friend. There had been several occasions over the years when she had felt the boundaries of their relationship blurring but Patrissia had never taken it any further. It was something in her friend's cool air—it would be a serious step for both of them, Patrissia knew, more serious than Lu's marriage to Jamie, and certainly more serious than any of her own relationships, even Marc—even Johnny. Lu was a serious woman, and if they got together, there would be responsibilities that Patrissia knew she would not honour.

She sighed and clinked the bottles again. Men were so easy in comparison. Even Iona would tie her down much more than a man could, wanting to know everything, and getting suspicious and jealous.

Iona. It was such a sweet name, but the more she thought of what she really wanted the less attractive an affair with Iona became. Patrissia could already feel the ennui that would descend if she took up her offer. It would be more of the same, more treading water, more nothing, going nowhere. She needed to be dragged back into life, not away from it.

A quiet thump interrupted her thoughts and she cocked her head, listening, but there was no more sound from the bedroom above. And what was Jamie doing with Ciara? Patrissia ran through the evening's conversation. It was hard to believe they had been together only a year—passion, Ciara's at least, had certainly faded there. Poor Jamie. He had no trouble attracting women, but he did seem to be attracted to quite the wrong type.

My type.

Pursing her lips, she sat for a moment letting her toes slide over an invisible bottle in the bag. It was smooth and solid and if she concentrated she could discover the whole shape without disturbing the rest of the silently clinking heap. She couldn't remember such a nothing time. Months of insignificant and frustrating tedium lay behind her, and the prospect of anything *happening* seemed so remote she had begun to think that she had fallen into some kind of circular maze, simply retreading worn—and *such* worn—paths.

A sudden bleakness overcame her, and giving the bottles a last tap she stood up heavily to perform her evening routine. Heap the dishes, check the doors... As she made her way to the front door, her gaze wandered to the corner of the hall where Marc's *Lachesis* figure stood, and once again she found herself examining its every angle, trying to imagine how she had become this spiky fury to him.

She felt like screaming. How many hours and days had she spent going over their affair in front of this damned mannequin, reliving her confusion and anger and dismay, her frustration, the brief moments of pleasure—and how many times had she ridiculed herself for giving in to such a hopeless obsession? It was so uncharacteristic of her she had begun to think she was losing control of her own mind.

But one thing that had come to her while she was berating herself was how brief their time together had been. A couple of hours here and there, the odd evening, some weekends—it hardly qualified as a fling, let alone the debilitating and deeply significant connection that compelled so many of her thoughts.

She brushed the smooth marble spheres of the figure's eyes lightly with the tip of a finger, then let it meander down the sharp planes of the cheeks to the long neck and heavy, slacking bust. That was as far as she could go without risking a cut from the hacked and jagged edges of the stone or from the barbed copper strands that encircled and hung from the torso and arms like tattered rags or sloughing skin.

Standing there day after day she had come to believe that Marc had involved himself more with this twisted, barbed doll that had lived in the corner of his dusty studio for so long than he had with her, had sweated and groaned and wept with it rather than risk opening himself to her.

Part of her hoped that one day she'd descend the stair to find this stone cold, disfigured alien gone, and in its place would stand the soft reflective woman of his original sketch: that he would have forgiven her. What had he said? *'It's all about you and your plans'*. He had thought it was a power game, love reduced to a game of emotional roulette. Patrissia shook her head. She had never had a plan, not for him.

She thought of their last days together, his capitulation to her and their journey to Cornwall, reliving her own forced optimism and his grateful compliance—at least, what she had interpreted as gratitude. They had been almost civilised to each other for a day, and then he had died.

One day.

All she could remember before that was her pushing and him resisting, the times she had walked off in a huff, and the showdown at the Royal Oak where she had laid down the rules.

Starting to feel cold in the chilly hall, she went to turn off the lights in the living room, hugging her thick jumper close to her. All this *stuff* seemed to have taken up residence in her.

Johnny's in the attic, Marc's in the cellar, Lucinda's claiming the kitchen, and Ciara's organising the house. I'm left sitting on the stairs, listening to their busyness, making way as they pass. And there's no escape.

He's in a meeting

'How nice to meet you properly at last, Ciara. Jamie's told me so much about you.'

Ciara took in the neat honey-blond hair and fashionable tailored outfit at a glance. 'Has he, Lucinda? I doubt that very much.'

'Oh, it's truth, is it?' Lucinda was disappointed. She watched as Ciara shook out her hair and smoothed the lapels of her jacket, as fashionable as her own. Her eyes took in the slim, toned body and smooth skin. She was even more attractive than Lucinda remembered from her brief glimpse at the pub on the day she discovered that Jamie was planning to leave her.

'That's what I prefer, yes.'

'Well then, yes, you're right, he's told me almost nothing about you,' Lucinda acknowledged with a nod. 'You *are* Patrissia's niece, though, aren't you?'

'Marc's daughter, Patrissia's niece, that's right. And you're the daughter of the Honourable Percy Bethesda and Miss Selina Frobisher.'

'The very one. You've done your homework.'

'Oh yes. I wondered if you had any more lawyers in the family.'

'There're no lawyers—Oh, I see, you mean Philip.' Lucinda laid her briefcase on the table and deftly removed a neat sheaf of papers.

'Sleeping with your legal representative isn't new, Lucinda, but I'm surprised—you have enough money to get his attention without stooping to that, I'm sure.'

'I have, yes.' Lucinda took a moment more to study the woman who had persuaded her husband to leave her. She might easily have been Patrissia's sister. 'Jamie told me that you'd inherited Marc's house with Patrissia.'

'Yes, and my grandfather left me more. But it's vulgar to haggle over money, isn't it? Yet you seem to want to screw Jamie out of his share of your house.'

‘That’s business, Ciara. It’s nothing personal. Do you know it costs over a hundred thousand pounds to raise a child these days? I can’t afford to throw money away.’

‘It’s not yours to throw away.’

Lucinda’s blue eyes shone. ‘Yes, well, we’ll let the courts decide that.’ She snapped her briefcase shut. ‘Where’s Jamie, by the way? I rather hoped he’d be here.’

‘He’s in a meeting.’

‘Already?’

Ciara gave her a sharp look. ‘He doesn’t need to avoid *me*.’

‘Avoid you?’ Lucinda smiled her big-toothed smile. ‘Why on Earth would you think he was doing that?’

Ciara nodded. ‘Thank you for the papers. We’ll have our solicitor look them over and get back to you.’

Lucinda turned to leave, but as she reached the door, she stopped with her hand on the knob. ‘We don’t need to fight, you know, Ciara. I feel no hostility towards you—nor towards Jamie, actually. That things between us went the way they did is just circumstance. None of us is responsible, and personally, I harbour no resentment.’

Ciara gave her a hard look. ‘Then why cheat Jamie out of what’s his?’

‘You’re very direct, aren’t you? I’m not cheating, I’m presenting evidence in support of my case and asking the law to decide. Jamie is at liberty to do the same.’ Lucinda paused, her face serious. ‘I meant what I said, you know. We might as well be friendly. We can discuss some designs for my new range, if you like. Jamie said you might be interested.’

Ciara looked at her quizzically, pushing some stray hairs from her face. ‘I don’t feel very friendly, I must say. But I *would* be interested in the work.’

‘Why don’t we meet somewhere and talk as people?’ Lucinda took a small notebook from her bag. ‘You remind me of Patrisia when she was younger. I like her a lot, by the way, although she makes it quite hard for me to show it.’

Ciara giggled before she could stop herself, and broke into a smile. 'I know what you mean. She doesn't open up easily, does she?'

'Not often, no. A lot more since Marc's death. She seems scared, now, and she was always so strong. I'd like to talk to her about it, but she doesn't want to, and I know her, she won't give in.'

'You've known her a long time, haven't you?'

Lucinda smiled. 'Since we were at art college together, yes. She's always known what she wants, and hasn't been shy about getting it.' The smile turned into a laugh. 'There are plenty of broken hearts and egos in *her* cupboard.'

'I can imagine.'

'I doubt you can, actually. You've probably led quite a sheltered life in some respects, as I have. It's only because I know Patrissia that I can really believe that people can do such outrageously selfish things—things that harm other people.' Her smile had disappeared. 'There aren't too many women like her—clever, beautiful, fun, adventurous—she's a solid-gold man-magnet. But it's not that simple. She's not aggressive or bitchy or anything, but she *is* utterly selfish, and she likes to promote conflict in her relationships—while at the same time being utterly charming—and if there's no conflict she gets frustrated. She's physical too.'

'Yes, I've witnessed her frustration. She's very hard when she's like that, isn't she? Completely unamenable.'

'I'd say so. There's no way of pleasing her because being pleased is the last thing on her mind. I think I'd call her an escaper. She really wants someone who will either ignore her, or challenge and beat her, give her an escape from her own venomous will. Marc was on the right track there, at least. But then she sets up the conditions so she has an excuse to escape when it gets too much or she gets bored. Win-win for her.'

'Hmm, you've obviously made a detailed study of her.' Ciara wasn't smiling. 'Why are you so interested?'

'Because she ruins the men she's with. She's destructive.'

'But I thought you said you liked her? It doesn't sound like you do.'

‘She’s not malicious, she’s just...I don’t know. I suppose because my own relationships, such as they were, haven’t worked out that well. She’s *my* nemesis, as well as her own. She’s living proof that the idea that selfishness gets you what you want, isn’t actually true.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘I’m always serious. It’s one of my main faults.’ Lucinda’s blue eyes lost their hard glare. ‘I don’t take things lightly, never could,’ she said with a trace of weariness. ‘I’m reliable, caring and truthful—and boring.’ She laughed as Ciara started to speak. ‘Don’t shake your head like that, I know my reputation, and it’s true. Actually, it’s rather depressing. If you think about what goes on between people—partners, lovers, friends—and how many people get hurt—well, it’s hard to miss that everybody loses. Boring has its attractions.’

Lucinda’s face had become soft and reflective as she was speaking, almost sad. Ciara put her hand on her arm, sympathetic in spite of herself, and handed her a tissue.

‘I sound like a reality seminar, don’t I?’ said Lucinda, gratefully patting her nose. ‘I suppose it’s not surprising—I read a lot of background when we found out that Zara was autistic. They were all so gung-ho, but it was actually incredibly depressing. It rather makes you wonder when you realise that our default situation is frustration and despair.’ She laughed. ‘Of course, the Catholics have always known that. The only recourse seems to be to distract ourselves—good or bad works, it doesn’t really matter—and the more distraction the merrier. Patrissia has the right idea if you think of it like that.’

Ciara looked at her in surprise. ‘I wouldn’t have expected you to come out with something like that, Lucinda.’

‘No? Why not? What has Jamie been saying?’

‘Oh, don’t worry, he’s always nice about you. He just doesn’t think you’re very flexible in your view of the world. It sounds like he got the wrong end of the stick.’

‘I’m sorry Ciara, would you mind if I sat down for a second? I’m feeling a little faint.’

‘You’re not pregnant, are you?’

‘Of course not.’ Lucinda shook her head.

‘Help yourself.’ Ciara waved at the chair opposite. ‘Shall I order you something? A coffee?’

‘No, thank you. I can’t stay. I just need to sit down for a couple of minutes.’

‘What were you saying about Trisha? She’s escaped from somewhere?’

‘No, sorry. I’m not very with it today. What I meant to say was —’ Lucinda sat on the edge of the chair, placing her briefcase carefully beside her. ‘It’s just something I happened to be thinking about last night. I was always one of Trisha’s admirers—still am—and I wondered what it was that was so fascinating about her. I think it’s that she offers hope that there’s a way, or perhaps many ways, to forget about the ordinariness that wrings the life out of our souls.’

Ciara realised that her hand was clamped painfully to the handle of her tea cup, and she put the cup down, rubbing her fingers. ‘You make her sound almost saintly.’

Lucinda snorted. ‘Hardly. One day she’ll annoy someone who’s less civilised than she’s expecting, and they’ll hurt her very badly.’

Ciara looked at her. ‘Are you OK, Lucinda? You look pale.’

Lucinda took a tissue from her bag and dabbed at her nose. ‘Call me Lu. Yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry, Ciara, I don’t know why I’m telling you all this,’ she said, smiling wanly. ‘I expect I’m coming down with something.’

‘Don’t apologise,’ said Ciara, picking up her bag and sunglasses. ‘It sounds like you could do with a friend as well as a pill,’ she continued with a sigh. ‘And actually, I could, too.’ The sigh turned into a sniff. ‘OK, let’s meet. What about tonight?’

‘That would be nice, but I don’t think it’s possible. I doubt I’ll be able to find a babysitter at such short notice.’

‘Why not get Jamie to babysit? He loves being with the girls.’ Ciara picked up her phone. ‘I’ll text him and see what time he’s getting back.’

‘You know, Ciara, I think we might quite like each other.’

‘Don’t get carried away, it’s only a drink. But you’re right, it would be better not to be enemies.’ She laughed. ‘I never thought I’d be saying *that* to my husband’s ex-wife.’

‘Your *husband*?’ Lucinda raised her eyebrows. ‘I think we’d better save that conversation for another time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We’re all Catholics, aren’t we? In the eyes of God, marriage is forever. But, as I say, let’s leave that for another day. I’d like us to meet tonight as at least *potential* friends.’ She stood up. ‘I’d better go, I’ve got another appointment. Let me know what time.’

‘Friends are the only ones who’ll tell you things you don’t want to hear. You’ve made a good start, Lucinda—*Lu*. Till tonight, then. I’ll call you when I’ve heard from Jamie.’

Fuck, what a circus

Patrissia was sitting at the kitchen table when the doorbell rang. It was Jamie, smiling and on time.

‘Thanks for helping me out, Jamie. I appreciate it,’ she said brightly as she kissed his cheek.

‘Instructions from Ciara, Trish. She wants me out of the way while she negotiates with Lucinda. They each had half my arse at the last count, I think.’

‘I’m in the kitchen. Come through, I’ll open a bottle.’

Jamie followed her, pausing half way along the passageway to reply to a message.

‘You don’t sound that happy, Jamie,’ Patrissia said, as he dumped his briefcase on the floor and sank wearily down into a chair. ‘Is everything all right?’

He leaned forward heavily, planting his elbows on the big pine table. ‘Yeah, I’m only kidding. But they’re a bit more pally than I’d like.’ He flashed a grin. ‘But what do I see here? You’ve been busy —Who’s that?’

Patrissia followed his eyes to the easel set up between the windows. ‘Oh, that’s Johnny, my painting tutor at college. I thought I’d return the compliment.’

‘Ah, the famous Johnny!’ Jamie approached the canvas, pointing. ‘Why have you left out the eyes?’

‘I don’t know. It didn’t seem to need them.’

Jamie put his face up close and tilted his head. ‘It’s funny, you would’ve thought it wouldn’t look finished, but it does.’

‘I know, Jamie. It’s rather disconcerting.’

‘Why?’ He waited for a response, but she had looked away. ‘Oh, well, he won’t accuse you of flattery, anyway.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘When they say *‘Warts and all’* I doubt they mean it literally.’

‘Oh but they do. You can’t pick and choose the bits you like, Jamie, it’s all or nothing. Warts and boils are all part of it.’

‘I wouldn’t try persuading Ciara of that,’ Jamie muttered, his eyes dark. ‘I never knew anyone who spent so much time in front of a mirror.’

‘You get to know yourself, Jamie. You should try it.’

He laughed. ‘You also get to think that what you look like, and think, and dream, is the most important thing there is.’

‘Well, it’s true.’

He looked at her, wondering whether or not she was joking. ‘I know too much already, Lu and Ciara make sure of that. And you, of course.’

‘Hmm, yes, well it doesn’t show. Actually I was going to ask you something.’

‘What?’

‘I’m thinking of doing some male nudes, and I was wondering if you’d sit for me?’

He grinned delightedly, shaking his head. ‘I’m flattered, but I don’t think Ciara would be happy with that, do you?’

‘D’you need her permission?’

‘I’m sure *she* thinks I do, Trish, and, to be honest, I wouldn’t be happy with her posing for a bloke. We all know how that goes, don’t we?’

Patrissia laughed. ‘I promise not to seduce you, Jamie.’

‘It’s not me you have to convince.’ He looked disappointed.

‘I’ll talk to Ciara.’ She picked up her phone, but he took her wrist.

‘Not now.’

Patrissia looked at him searchingly. ‘Why not?’

‘It’s not a good time, trust me. She hasn’t said anything, but I get the feeling she’s already got a bee in her bonnet about you.’

‘Why? I haven’t done anything.’

Jamie shrugged. 'I guess Claudia's on her mind, with the pregnancy and everything, and you know she suspects that you know where she is. I haven't said anything, before you ask.'

'Is that all?' Patrissia tossed her head. 'I wish she'd get used to the idea that Claudia's not going to figure in her life. How many parents does she need, for God's sake?'

Jamie's mouth opened, but she covered it with her hand before he could speak. 'It's OK, Jamie, I see what you mean about it not being a good time. I'll leave it to you to ask her.'

He grunted and looked at his watch. 'I don't mean to hurry you, Trish, but time's getting on and I promised to babysit the girls in a couple of hours. Where do we start?'

A flash of surprise and annoyance crossed Patrissia's face, then she smiled. 'The question is, rather, *'Where do we stop'*? I'm getting in some house clearance people to take all the junk and baggage, but I have to decide if there's anything that isn't either of those, and you're here to try to make me chuck it *all* away.'

'A clearout?' Jamie looked around the kitchen. It was cool, smart, bland, tasteful. 'Hmm, well, the best thing to do is to close your eyes and just do it, you know that.'

'Yes, I do and I've never had trouble before, but for some reason I can't quite make myself at the moment. It's rather disquieting.' Jamie saw her glance at the portrait before turning back to him with a determined look.

Yes, a proper clearout.

It's about time.

'Right, we'll start at the top, shall we? Bedrooms.'

Jamie followed her up the stairs, the scent of her body in his nostrils, faint but definite. She smelled like Ciara, when Ciara smelled of anything except perfume and cosmetics, which wasn't often, he reflected ruefully.

Patrissia pushed open the door to her bedroom, and coming in behind, Jamie almost ran into her, surprised at how small it was. He didn't know what he had expected, but something other than this barely-furnished pit. The double bed—not the king-size of his

fantasies—the wardrobe, and the dressing table took up most of the space.

Patrissia yanked out a drawer and upended it onto the bed. Bras, knickers, tights and other crumpled necessities of female life tumbled in a tangled heap. She contemplated them for a moment, then pouted.

‘These can all go.’

‘What about the vibrator?’

She laughed, picking up the pink shiny plastic toy from its bed of knickers. ‘The battery’s running out.’

Jamie fluttered his eyelids. ‘You need a man, Trish. Keeping tools charged is our speciality.’

She glanced at him. ‘You look disappointed, Jamie. What else were you hoping for? Whips and handcuffs?’ She laughed. ‘They’re in the wardrobe. Take a peep if you want.’

He looked at her with puzzled frown.

‘You’re not shy, surely?’ With a grin she started round the bed.

‘Trish! I—’

She flung open the doors. The wardrobe was empty except for a stack of canvases and a black book.

‘Oh, I’d forgotten—I’ve already cleared them out,’ she laughed, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

It’ll end badly, you know that, don’t you?

‘Is that Marc’s famous thoughts?’ Jamie grinned, picking up the black book. ‘I never understood that bloke.’

‘You and me both, Jamie. I don’t know why I kept it,’ she sniffed, brushing dust from the cover. ‘He was very proud of it, you know. He said it gave him peace.’

‘Well, to be fair, nobody’s going to be overstimulated by a hundred blank pages, are they? Lucky it’s not a talking book—that would really screw with your head, wouldn’t it?’

‘The sound of silence...’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. I was just thinking.’

‘Well, time’s getting on. D’you want to make a start?’

Patrissia threw the book back into the wardrobe and clicked it shut. ‘Yes, good idea. Most of what’s left is in the spare bedroom. We don’t need to go in there.’

‘OK.’

‘No, Jamie! Concentrate! You’re supposed to make me throw it *all* away, remember?’

‘But—’

‘No buts!’ She took his hand. We’ll just keep two each of the underwear—you choose.’

He looked at her, feeling the warmth of her body flowing into him, and dropped her hand. ‘Is this a come-on, Trish? Because I don’t know if I can resist.’ He looked serious.

‘Don’t be silly, Jamie, it’s just a bit of fun. Come on.’ She took his hand again. ‘Try not to choose the itchiest ones though, will you? I won’t be shopping until Saturday. Although—’ She paused, ‘I suppose I don’t actually *need* to wear any underwear—’ She winked. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think I’d better leave you to it, Trish. Call me when you’ve finished in here. I’ll be downstairs.’

Patrissia sat on the bed, picking up and studying various pieces from the heap while she listened to the heavy tread of his feet going down the stairs. She picked up the vibrator and switching it on, set it on the edge of the bed. Then taking a plastic bag, she filled it with her favourite things.

The spare bedroom was next door. Taking the bag, she went out and stood on the landing for a moment before entering. There was no sound from below.

He’s listening.

The room was twice the size of her own, and bare except for an old, huge, battered mattress, some large mirrors set at floor level, a couple of crumpled suitcases and a pile of blankets in a corner.

Lifting the top blanket, her face showed no expression as she let her eyes take in the assortment of leather, metal and soft fabrics underneath. Picking up a scarf, she wound it slowly round her neck, lifting her chin.

Opening the top suitcase, she stroked the fur coat crumpled inside. It had been Claudia's once, she remembered, as she took it out and smoothed it, picking at the hard clumps. Marc had liked her to wear it in bed sometimes.

Abruptly, she rolled it up and put it back in the suitcase, then turning, went out to the landing where she listened intently. There was still no sound except for the low insistent hum of the vibrator. He was probably sitting in the kitchen.

She smiled, and retrieving the humming bird from her bed, squatted against the banisters. Taking the end of the scarf between her teeth, she pulled it tight and began to stroke her stomach and thighs, feeling the vibrations fill her.

*

Downstairs, Jamie strained to hear the changing note, his heart racing. *Was* she only playing? He felt the pull of her, her scent, her voice. What did she think she was doing? Ciara was her *niece*, for fuck's sake.

Going to the sink, he filled a glass with water. When he turned off the tap, the hum had stopped. He raised his chin, listening, and then jumped as Patrissia appeared at the door, two plastic bags in her hand.

'All done upstairs, Jamie, you're safe. Do you want to check?' She held the bags out.

He put down the glass. 'Seriously, Trish, I don't do that any more. Why—'

'What are you scared of? It's only sex. But, just for the record, I don't want to sleep with you.'

'That's not what the signals are saying.'

'I can't help it if you've got your signals in a twist, Jamie.'

'I don't think I have. But let's drop it. What's in there?' he asked, pointing to a glazed door.

'Oh, that's the hot tub. Do you want to try it? It's very relaxing.'

'Yes, I'm sure.' He smiled. 'So what else is there? You haven't got much in the way of decoration, have you?' he observed, glancing around. 'No pictures, even.'

'No. I gave all my paintings away when I left college, I don't know why.'

'Lu's still got hers. Have you seen the attic in our—her—house? There's fifty, at least.'

'Really? She never mentioned them.'

'It's OK, you didn't model for her—I checked.'

Patrissia laughed. 'I did do some modelling, but not for my fellow students.'

'Why not? Oh,' He slapped his head. 'Of course, your tutor. I imagine he wouldn't have been impressed.'

'Hmm. Well, you're wrong. Johnny wasn't above a little voyeurism.'

'What? You mean he liked to watch you with other men?' Jamie's mouth dropped open. 'That's weird.'

'Maybe. Have you never fantasised about things like that?'

'Are you kidding? It'd crucify me.'

She shrugged. 'Some people enjoy being crucified, I suppose.' She paused. 'There's nothing you can imagine that someone hasn't done, Jamie. Everything is permitted if you find the right person, if you can persuade them, or they let you make them.'

'Let you make them?'

'Oh, come on, you can't be that naïve.'

'I don't want to hurt anyone, Trish.'

'It's not like that. You're not hurting them, or at least, you are, but you're giving them much more than the pain.'

'I don't know what you mean. It's not for me, anyway. Did you enjoy it?' he continued after a moment.

‘It wasn’t a matter of enjoyment. Johnny was into sensation for its own sake, and, at the time, I didn’t see any reason not to go along with him.’

Jamie took a sip of water. ‘I knew you were adventurous, Trish, but I didn’t imagine—’

She sighed. ‘I wanted to try everything, no boundaries.’

‘All or nothing? Live in the moment? You’re not going to pretend that you’re like that now, are you?’ He regarded her quizzically. ‘Lucinda might put a stretcher in the back of the car with the holiday bags just in case, but you, well, you’ve already got the escape capsule primed and ready in your bag.’

‘You’re right, Jamie, and I *did* escape, eventually.’ She flicked ash into the ashtray. ‘I always do.’

‘All that kind of stuff—I don’t know. I can see that it’d give you a thrill,’ said Jamie, his head to one side, ‘but didn’t you ever wonder why he wanted to do those things to you, why he wanted to hurt you? Didn’t it seem strange, at *all*?’

Patrissia shrugged. ‘It’s only strange the first time. Then, well, you change and, I don’t know, you come to expect the pain and it gets so that nothing seems bad *enough*. You get to think it’s just a part of it.’ She sighed. ‘But soon it becomes ordinary and it just hurts. Then there’s nowhere left to go.’

‘Wow. I guess we’re all different.’

‘No, Jamie, we’re not. We’re all scared of pain, scared of pleasure, scared of being ourselves. We’re just scared. But some of us are more scared of letting our fears eviscerate us.’

‘Why did you split with him?’

‘I got bored. If there are no boundaries, then pretty soon there’s nothing to get excited about. Forbidden fruit, and all that. And people get hurt—people who don’t like being hurt.’

‘Are you saying *you* like being hurt?’

‘Of course not, but sometimes it doesn’t seem important. Women have babies, and being pregnant involves a good deal of pain and discomfort. Men fight... You can’t even say that it’s a decision, Jamie. I’m not a masochist—I doubt many people are. As

I said, it's just a part of it. Sometimes we want to see what it's like, or we see it as a means to something else.'

'And what about pleasure? You said you didn't enjoy being hurt, so what *did* you enjoy?'

'I just told you, it wasn't about enjoyment—'

'There had to be something.'

'If there was, I don't know what.'

'So where was the positive?'

'Stop it, Jamie. I've already said I don't know. I'm not an accountant, it doesn't have to add up.' She shivered. 'Does it feel chilly to you? Sometimes I get this feeling that someone's here in the house with me, and is absorbing the heat or dispersing it or something.'

'You said to me once that you thought Marc might be haunting you. Do you still think so?'

'I know, it's ridiculous, but it *does* feel ghostly. Lucky I don't actually believe in ghosts.'

'You believe in spirits though, don't you? You're superstitious anyway.'

Patrissia looked at him. 'Why do you say that?'

'You give yourself away more than you think, Trish,' he grinned. 'And women have guardian angels, don't they?'

'Don't poke fun, Jamie, I'm serious.'

'So am I.'

'You don't sound like you are.'

'I'm like everybody else, Trish. I don't want to believe that this appalling mashup is all there is,' said Jamie with an expansive wave of his arm. 'I mean, how much more fucked up could it be? Look at us! We all want to be in control of our lives but we just ain't, mate. Me and Lucinda, me and Ciara, you and Marc—if two people who say they're in love can't make it work even with each other, what hope is there?'

'There's always hope, Jamie. As you say, look at us. We haven't given up yet, have we?'

He sat back in his chair, chuckling like a favourite uncle. 'Not yet. But if hope keeps us going in the beginning, it isn't long till it turns into resignation or frustration, is it? Although I have to say,' he said, shaking his head, 'I don't think you'd have got bored with Marc.'

'No?' Patrissia sounded surprised. 'Why not?'

'Argument, dismissal and retreat were his weapons, weren't they? And while that's irritating, it's not boring.'

'Hmm. You noticed, then?' Patrissia snorted. 'Yes, he'd always argue—God, that's all he ever did—and if arguing didn't work, he'd lock himself away. Maybe that's it,' she continued, 'he's walled his ghost up in the study, do you think?'

'I wouldn't put it past him. He *lived* in an escape capsule. How many times did you tell me how hard it was to get hold of him? He didn't even answer the phone, did he? Or the door, come to that. D'you think he took his escape capsule to the grave?' he grinned, 'in case he didn't approve of heaven?'

'I wouldn't be surprised.' Patrissia took a cigarette from her bag and lit it reflectively. 'I've only recently realised that we never really discussed anything. I mean, we talked a lot but I don't think either of us really listened much. By the end I suppose we had to accept one another out of sheer exhaustion.'

'Did you love him?' Jamie's voice was suddenly serious.

'We were usually pretty miserable when we were together, so I can't have, can I?'

'Then what?'

'I don't know. It was a sort of compulsion.' She lifted her glass and Jamie automatically emptied the bottle into it. She raised it to her lips. 'I get taken over by things.'

'But you come across as being so cool.'

'I do, don't I?' Patrissia giggled. 'Just shows how fucked up the rest of you are.'

'What do you mean?'

She took a slow sip of wine. 'I might look in control of myself, Jamie, but I'm not. Maybe that's the problem. Sometimes it's like

there's a legion of devils in me, all pulling different ways and sabotaging each other. And then all I can do is wait till one of them wins. Marc was a bit like that too. Why else would he allow my sister to get pregnant? He was serious, intelligent, careful, and he had the fear of God in him. How could he have let her destroy his life?'

'But Trish, he was the adult. He destroyed *her* life, not the other way round. He should have known better.'

'Yes, he should have, but he didn't, and I can't believe he meant to cause such havoc. That's exactly what I was saying, isn't it?'

Jamie laughed. 'You're not trying to imply that you're possessed, are you?'

'Why do you laugh?'

'Oh, come on, that's just too medieval.'

'Mr Neanderthal tells me I can't be medieval?' Patrissia laughed. 'Open your eyes, Jamie. Who do you know who *isn't* compelled to do things that any rational person would call insane? And my sister was no angel, believe me. She would have known exactly what she was doing.'

'I think Marc was trying to avoid real pain because that was all he'd known up to then. And it's people who cause the worst pain, so he avoided them, but nobody can avoid being hurt. I probably hurt him as much as anyone.'

I don't like being hurt.

'I thought you said it was Claudia? And Ciara when she turned up like that?' He looked puzzled. 'So what's the answer?'

'Don't get involved at all, I suppose.'

'You seem to be pretty good at that—emotionally I mean,' said Jamie.

'Is it really that obvious?'

'To anyone who manages to retain a shred of sanity after you've hit them with the glamour, absolutely.'

'Don't be silly, I'm not glamorous.'

‘I mean glamour as in charm, the fairy folk, the love potion,’ said Jamie, as Patrissia pretended not to be flattered. ‘You know as well as I do how stupid men are. We’d eat our own eyeballs for you, and you know it. You don’t even have to try.’

‘But not Marc—or you, eh, Jamie?’ said Patrissia, attempting to disguise the smile that fattened her cheeks and brightened her eyes.

‘What do you think?’ Jamie’s voice took on a harsh edge that Patrissia hadn’t heard before. ‘Lu’s already scratched mine out, and she’s probably passing on recipes for barbecued balls to Ciara as we speak.’

‘Don’t be so pathetic. You have to stand up for yourself more than you do. It’s no good trying to please everyone, you know, you’ll get slaughtered. Stop fannying around.’

‘That’s easy for you to say,’ said Jamie, his head sunk between his shoulders. ‘You’re a damned attractive woman, and I don’t think you realise how the world works for the rest of us. For you, there’s always the certainty that there’ll be another man waiting, another chance.’

‘I’m flattered that you think everything is so easy for me, but it’s simply not true.’

‘Oh, come on. Men might run the physical world, but attractive women most definitely have the emotional world stitched up. We’re up against professionals.’ A flash of chagrin distorted his lips for a moment. ‘Marc knew that, too, I think.’

He cocked his head. ‘Did you hear something? It sounded like scrabbling.’

‘Stop it, Jamie. I’m not in the mood. Would you like some tea?’ Patrissia had stopped on her way to the sink and was standing behind him, blinking back tears.

‘What? Oh, yes. Thanks.’

Patrissia filled the kettle, taking two delicate cups from one of the cupboards, dabbing her eyes on the sleeve of the shirt she had rescued from Marc’s drawer. ‘I’ve never used these. We might as well christen them before they go to a carboot.’ She put them on the table, and went to the cupboard again, returning with a matching teapot. ‘Don’t tell anyone, will you? I’d be so ashamed to

admit I bought them.’ She filled the pot from the boiling kettle, putting it down by the cups. ‘Come on, Jamie, tell me why you’re really here. What’s the problem? Is it Ciara?’

‘I don’t know, Trish,’ said Jamie, grunting and leaning against the cold Aga. ‘I get the feeling she’s taking advantage of me all the time. It’s Lu all over again. You buy the house, donate the sperm, do what you can to let them know they’re safe with you—and then you can fuck off and die for all they care.’

‘What more do you want, Jamie? You’ve slept with two beautiful women. Isn’t that enough?’

‘Some of us have feelings too, Trish,’ Jamie’s voice sounded slightly out of control. ‘We like affection, we like welcome. *We’re* people too, not teacups that you can just put in the cupboard and forget about.’

Patrissia laughed. ‘Look, Jamie, don’t get maudlin on me, please. You and Ciara aren’t getting on. It’s a problem between the two of you. Tell her there’s a problem and try to sort it out between you.’

‘She doesn’t take me seriously.’

‘Oh, not that old chestnut. She’ll listen if you make her. Be a woman, Jamie! We don’t give up.’ She smiled a Lachesis smile.

‘I just feel like I’m in the same bloody mess I was in with Lu. Why’s it so hard to get a little affection?’

Patrissia sighed. ‘Jamie, where you are is your own doing. You talk as if you have no choice, but if you have money and a job, you did and you do. If you don’t like what you’ve got and you know what you want—and you seem to—then go out and find it. It’s the only thing to do. But you’re right, if it’s affection you want, you’ve chosen the wrong girls in Lucinda and Ciara.’

‘It *can’t* be my choice, can it? Not really.’ Jamie blew out his cheeks, running his fingers through his dirty blond hair. ‘*You* seem to know what you want, Trish.’

Patrissia put her head to one side. ‘Marc said that the first time we met. But you’re both wrong. I know what I *thought* I wanted, but that’s entirely different. I *thought* I wanted magic and mayhem—don’t laugh—but actually the mayhem just consumed my excess energy. I have too much energy, Jamie, and I get frustrated when it

has no release. I thought I needed emotional challenge and excitement, but I misunderstood. It's just physical. It's a hell of a thing to learn too late, I can tell you. I suppose that's why I chose the men I did. I wanted a fight, and I poked them until I got one, simple as that. It's quite childish. I'd have been better off picking up some random stranger.'

'You didn't have to poke Marc much, did you?' Jamie paused. 'Actually, when I first met you, you didn't come over like that at all. In fact, I thought you were the opposite, that you used your... skills...to smooth things over, to get everything running like a machine. A machine that you controlled, of course.' He stopped, his brow furrowed.

'Yes, it comes down to power games, doesn't it?' said Patrissia evenly. 'You choose someone who'll let you choose the game and set the rules. Then, if you're into personal empowerment, you can justify selfishness. If you're into anarchy, you can justify disruption and drama. Peace and love, you can justify submission: and of course you can mix it up so they never know what the current game is.'

Whatever, it still comes down to what *you* think *you* want.' She sighed. 'But then your thoughts change, and what you think you want changes.' She shook her head. 'It can't work, can it?'

'It sounds better than what I get from Lu and Ciara. At least when things change there's a chance that they could get better. Why are they so rigid, Trish?'

'I wish I knew. Dependency is the only thing that stops someone fucking someone else over, but it's supposed to be bad for you, because you get fucked over yourself. You probably won't believe me when I tell you I've tried really hard to be good, Jamie. That's why I was so keen on the meetings—I really thought they might work, you know, that I'd discover my real feelings, my motives, my obsessions, and that there was a chance that I could stop being myself, really I did.'

'Maybe you didn't try hard enough.'

Patrissia turned her glistening eyes to his. 'That's exactly the problem. You *can't* try hard enough, nobody can. There's no core, there's no real 'myself' to find. Motives are interpretations, as your

mate Foucault would say, so there are no real motives—all you can do is choose the set of interpretations you feel comfortable with, which usually means the ones that get you what you want. I know I'm repeating myself, but it seems to be the way it is. And then you choose to be alone, or you choose to be part of something else and you go along with the compromises that entails. In the end it's all just a choice, but the problem is, it doesn't seem to matter what you choose—'

'Foucault was against interpretation,' interrupted Jamie.

'It doesn't matter who said it, does it?' Patrissia's voice was sharp.

His shoulders drooped. 'No, I suppose not.'

'Jamie! Listen to yourself! You're useless,' Patrissia teased him wryly, settling back in her chair. 'You see how good I am?'

He looked up ruefully. 'Yes I see. When you put it as bluntly as that, it all seems pretty clear cut.'

'I know. Fuck, what a circus. Where are the drinks?'

Jamie had been playing with his phone, and now he abruptly stood up, pacing the room. He stopped in front of the easel, his dirty-blond hair shining like a halo round his head in a sudden burst of sunlight from the window. Patrissia's eyes followed his to Johnny's face. The brilliantly-lit, rugged and craggy face, all swirls and jagged edges, contrasted vividly with the smooth softness of Jamie's plump cheeks.

Johnny's portrait had taken twice as long as anything else she had done and she had poured her heart and spirit into it. She had been exhaustive in her determination to include every expression and hint of expression that she could find stored inside her. Gruffness in the tension of his neck, impatience in the flicks of hair...there was nothing of him hidden, no story to seek out, no mask to penetrate. But as Patrissia framed the two figures in their luminous coincidence, she could find nothing that comforted her.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

Jamie's lips and eyes were tight and weary when he turned back to her. 'Oh, just that with a few small changes, this could be Marc,' he said, pointing. 'I don't mean the features exactly, but the, I don't

know what the right word is, the *atmosphere*—I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's that neither of them seem likeable. I know Marc didn't like me, did he?

Patrissia contemplated the burning end of her cigarette. 'No, but he didn't like anyone as far as I know, so don't take it personally. He thought you immoral, but then he had standards unattainable by any human being.' She paused. 'Including himself. You're right about them, incidentally, neither *was* likeable. *I* didn't like them, but then I'm not likeable either, am I, really? Oh, don't put on that face, it's silly to pretend that being liked is important. Is that what you think's missing? Likeability?'

Jamie continued staring at the picture. 'What's missing is a sense that there's something worth knowing in him.'

'You mean Johnny? What about Marc?'

'They're both the same—hard.'

'And Lu and Ciara? They're hardly cuddly toys.'

'No,' Jamie sighed. 'But *you're* not like them, Trish. You might pretend to be hard, and you certainly have your secrets and lies, but—no, you're not like them.'

Patrissia suddenly felt afraid. 'Oh, Jamie, of course I am, we all are, deep down. The destructive must be indestructible.'

He looked at her. 'I don't understand. Why are you saying all this now?'

'Why not? You're the only one who listens.' There was a sudden edginess to her voice. 'I'm starting to realise that I'm not as good at some things as I thought. Or not as careful, anyway. Marc died because I was too bound up in myself to even buy a pack of Paracetamol. How ridiculous is that? All I had to do was think ahead a little bit and he'd still be alive.'

'Don't be silly, nothing's as black and white as that.'

Patrissia shrugged. 'I know, but you have to admit that's how it seems sometimes. And it doesn't affect the point. I *am* manipulative, and I *am* wilful, and I *am* careless of other people's feelings. I really thought I could change, you know. I wanted to

change, and I thought I had, but I haven't. Well, I have in a way—' She stopped, unable to disentangle the threads.

'There *is* a new me but I don't know what it is—maybe it's more adult, maybe it's just less able to deal with the fallout.' She lit another cigarette, blowing a slow cloud over the portrait. 'It's probably just age—you don't get the same allowances as an eight-year-old when you're forty. People begin to wake up to the fact that they don't have to listen to your screaming.'

'Don't give me that. You know they'll come running.'

She shook her head. '*Something* has changed. I'm *afraid*, Jamie. I'm lonely and I'm afraid and I don't know what to do, because I've never let myself feel like this before. It might have been OK if the old uncontrollable me wasn't lurking just out of sight. It sabotages everything.'

'But, Trish, every man you meet wants you. How can you be lonely?'

Patrissia looked at him. 'Well, *you* are. Why can't I be? Don't look so shocked, it's obvious.'

'It doesn't seem to be obvious to Ciara, and if Lu ever noticed she didn't give a shit.' Jamie's eyes were slits. 'And it fucking hurts.'

'I can see that.'

'Bloody women! They're so fucking absorbed in themselves and what they need—'

'Don't be bitter, Jamie, it doesn't help,' Patrissia interrupted in a soft voice. 'Men and women need and want different things, that's all. You—we—just have to make the best of it.'

'That's easy for you to say. They say men are simpler than women, and I reckon that's true. Sex, beer and a laugh, and we're happy. God knows what women want, but it ain't simple and it ain't the same two days in a fucking row.' He rubbed his forehead as if the thought was too big to cope with. 'You're always on about men being unfaithful, but how can we be faithful when we don't know the person we're supposed to be faithful *to*?'

Patrissia shook her head. 'It's just a game, Jamie, just a game. There has to be reward and punishment, I suppose, and emotions

are all we've got to play with. We give and then we take away. It's just what we do.'

'Then it's a fucking cruel game.'

'Yes.'

I lost Claudia. I lost Marc. I lost my baby.

'Yes? Is that all you can say?'

'What do you want from me? Shit happens. All you can do is keep out of the way of arses as much as you can.'

He looked into her eyes. 'I guess that's why we both do it. We're two of a kind.'

'I bloody-well hope not!' Patrissia laughed. 'But maybe you're right, in a way. We don't live in the world, do we? It's just a picture-show for us.'

'Shall I get another bottle?'

'I think you have to go, don't you? It's past eight-thirty.'

'Shit!' Jamie tossed back the dregs of his glass and reached round for his jacket.

'Before you go, Jamie—You did psychology at university, didn't you? Did you ever read that book, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* I think it's called?'

He shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'It's about a mad judge, who was convinced that there were only two people in the universe: him and his *enemy*, and God. The three of them were connected by unbreakable ethereal strings, and they were conducting an eternal and infinite struggle throughout the worlds. Well, that's just how it seems to me sometimes. Just me, my current partner and an umpire, stalking each other through a battle zone. No escape.'

'Jesus, Trish, are you sure you'll be all right? Can I get you a drink before I go?'

'Oh, God!'

'What?' His head jerked round. 'What's the matter?'

‘Why does everyone keep saying that to me? Not only is my life repeating itself, I’m even having the same bloody conversations!’

‘It’s not surprising, is it?’ said Jamie, calmly, going to the fridge as he shrugged on his jacket. ‘There’s nothing new under the sun.’ He took out another bottle. ‘You think you’re different from everybody else? Besides, that bloke Philip said it all in the meetings: if you do the same things, you’re the same person. You have to change what you *do*, Trish, or everything repeats itself. Blimey, you just told *me* that. Not change your lover, or your job, or where you live, but change *yourself*. It’s possible, with determination—and the right partner. What are *you* doing differently?’

Patrissia looked at him. ‘You’re serious, aren’t you? Were you listening to me? You think it’s as easy as that?’

‘I didn’t say it was easy. I listened at the meetings, sometimes—and let’s face it, Philip was hard to ignore. So, are you going to continue sitting on your fanny criticising people for not coming up to your standards of entertainment? Because that’s all it is when you’re living in a picture-show.’

Yes, and it’s a horror story and I’m scared to death.

‘You know I’ve had this conversation before, too, don’t you? Sorry if you think you’re being insightful. Do you think I don’t know all that? That I’m living in a movie where I’m the heroine? It’s better than playing the victim, Jamie.’

He snorted. ‘Heroines don’t get any better breaks than victims. The payoff is just that the film’s about *them*. You might be the heroine, but you’re still—’ He hesitated.

‘Still what?’

‘I think you’re depressed, Trish. You won’t admit it, but—’

‘But what?’

‘Look at Johnny, look at Marc—why would you choose to be abused? That’s just perverse.’

I can’t take much more of this.

‘You’re an agony aunt now, are you?’

‘No more than you. You think you’ve got the answers, but Ciara’s more sorted than you—even Lu is.’

‘No, Jamie. They’re as bad as me, but they’ve chosen the narrow way. It’s easy to make decisions when you’re, I don’t know, *fixed* I suppose is the word. When you never change your mind.’ She snorted. ‘Anyway, I enjoyed our little chat, but I think it really is time for you to go now.’

‘Yeah, well, glad to be of service. I’ll do as I’m told like a good little boy, shall I?’

‘Fuck off, Jamie. I’ll let Ciara know when I want you again.’

‘You really are a bitch, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I am. It’s how I get what I want. Jamie?’

‘Yes?’

‘Thanks for helping me.’ She stood and kissed his cheek. ‘See you soon.’

There was a pause, then he broke into a grin. ‘Any time. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.’

‘Don’t you mean, don’t do anything you *would*?’

He laughed. ‘You might be right.’ He glanced at his phone. ‘Five messages.’

‘Tell her we were having sex?’

‘She wouldn’t believe it could last so long.’

Unverbesserlich

What my body can do

Lucinda sat at the kitchen table, a large yellow mug of camomile tea cooling by her elbow, its reflection bright in the window opposite.

The window was her favourite mirror. On the few occasions she had time to herself at home, she liked to sit just like this, her head and shoulders framed by the big lilac and red clematis she had planted against the mellow brick of the garage wall opposite.

Wondering if her jeans and white shirt looked too pressed and efficient, her gaze was drawn to the big blue trampoline in the far corner of the lawn, as it often was. She ought to do something about it. The girls didn't use it much—maybe they wouldn't notice if she had it taken down. It had been Jamie's idea, and once or twice he had tried to tempt her onto it, but she had flatly refused. She had never liked it. It was dangerous, not to mention an eyesore.

She focused again on her reflection. Usually, the sight of herself sitting at the plain old solid table, surrounded by the tasteful tones and artful curves of the kitchen she had meticulously planned and supervised soothed and comforted her, but today it gave her no pleasure.

She had been in an odd mood for the last couple of weeks, distracted and snappish with the girls. She had even had to apologise to her secretary after being unpleasantly sharp when the latter had called her about a problem with a supplier. She'd had trouble sleeping too. Restless, she had even briefly leafed through a heap of magazines while waiting for Philip the week before, wondering if giving the kitchen a makeover would distract her, but stale as she found it she needed its familiarity, however heavy it felt.

She stared at the phone lying on the sketchbook by her hand. It wasn't too late to cancel the model, but what was it she would be cancelling?

Taking a sip of tea, she began to suspect he would find her studio too amateurish. She had done her best to make the girls' playroom less childlike and had even braved the cobwebby attic to rescue a few of her college canvases for the walls. Would it be enough to assure him of her credentials?

She wished things were clearer. For one thing, out of all the fifty or so pictures in the attic, why had she chosen to hang Patrissia's portrait of Johnny? It was nothing like her own style, being full of the saturated hues, striking convergences of tone, and bold lines that she could admire in others but whose rawness she didn't have the courage to explore herself.

She had loved the portrait from the moment she had seen it when she had returned to the studio on a free afternoon to complete a piece that had become something of a chore. Patrissia had been angry when she had turned up unexpectedly, and had commanded her not to peek. But Lucinda had caught glimpses and had taken a good look when Patrissia strode out to complain to Johnny about something or other.

Patrissia had caught Johnny's fierce hardness perfectly, yet on closer examination Lucinda had seen something else in it too, a deep and sincere sensuality that had surprised and affected her, and, later, when she had come across the painting apparently abandoned among many others in the college storeroom, she had guiltily wrapped it in brown paper and taken it home.

She remembered how jealous she had been then, not of Patrissia's talent in rendering such subtlety in a work so seemingly brash, but that the volatile Italian had been in a position to discover and reveal a softness that the man himself so conscientiously concealed. But there was something else too, she realised. She had been jealous that Johnny had managed to get Patrissia's attention to such an extent.

Lucinda realised that she was still staring at the phone. Looking up at the big kitchen clock, she saw that fifteen minutes had passed. Five minutes till he would arrive. Just time to change her shirt.

The doorbell rang as she put the pin in her hastily-bunned hair and, undoing the top couple of buttons of her shift, Lucinda composed herself and went out onto the landing. The shadow on the glazed panels of the front door below grew darker and more solid as she descended the stairs. He must be wondering if he'd come to the right place.

With a passing glance in the hall mirror, she teased out a strand of blonde hair and opened the door.

'Signora Hurst? *Buongiorno*. I'm Sal. The model? You called me yesterday.'

The sun was fierce in her eyes and she blinked at the figure standing casually on the step.

'You're very punctual,' she answered, shading her eyes. She stood back, letting him brush past her into the cool hall. 'Come in.'

As she closed the door behind them, he turned with a smile. 'You are a friend of *La Signora Vecchia*? She is kind to recommend me to you. It will be a pleasure to work together.'

'I hope so,' said Lucinda, ushering him towards the kitchen. 'She said you were Italian. What are you doing in London?'

His sunny smile faded momentarily. 'At first I came to find my sister. Now I just look for work.'

'Did you find her?' Lucinda felt his black eyes on her and knew already she had taken a delicate tack.

'No. She ran away a long time ago.'

In spite of a mounting feeling that she shouldn't allow the conversation to become so intimate, she continued, 'It must have been bad if she had to run so far.'

'Yes, it was bad. I think she doesn't want to be found.'

'Hmm, well, let's get on,' said Lucinda. She had planned the session in detail a few days earlier, but now she felt uncertain how she had meant it to go, and added hurriedly, 'I've made a few sketches of the kind of thing I'm after. We'll see if any of them work.'

She thrust a thin sheaf of her charcoal drawings into his hand, grateful for the diversion.

‘OK.’

Following him through the doorway she watched as he dropped the drawings onto the table and picked up the sketchbook. She wanted to protest, but she felt unable to move as she let him leaf through it, studying each page.

The drawings he had discarded so abruptly were conventional studies that she had spent some time thinking about—illustrations, effectively, safe and easy. Whereas the sketchbook...She wasn’t sure she wanted anyone to see them. She certainly hadn’t meant to show them to this stranger, art or no art.

He studied them with a frown of concentration. After a few minutes flipping back and forth he folded the cover back and pointed.

‘I think this one first. It’s clean and it will give you a chance to know what my body can do.’

Lucinda’s chest felt tight, and she heard herself say abruptly, ‘I’m sorry? What do you mean?’

‘If you are to paint me, you must know how I stand, how I bend, what interests you about me. This will show you. I like it.’

Lucinda took the sketch, recognising immediately her copy of a Schwabe faun.

‘Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose so. But—’

‘These are nothing,’ he interrupted, dismissing the discarded drawings with a flick of his head. ‘*Caricatura*. This is not what we are here to do, no?’ He raised his head enquiringly, his face serious.

Lucinda felt like a student again, Johnny at her shoulder disapproving of her conventionality.

‘I don’t know why you’re here, Lucinda.’

‘To get a job, Johnny. I have a certain talent that I want to exploit. I’m a good student and you’re a good teacher, and I’m learning what I need to learn, that’s all. I’m sorry I’m not as much of an artist as you’d like, but you have Patrissia for that, don’t you?’

He had looked at her then, his deep-set eyes cool in acknowledgement, and had quietly moved on to the next student.

And now she had her own studio, and her personal model. What was she here to learn this time?

‘I suppose we can start with that,’ she agreed hesitantly. ‘Would you like a drink before we start? Coffee? Tea? Water?’

‘Just a glass of water.’ He looked around. ‘Where is the studio?’

She pointed. ‘Just through there. You can undress in there.’ She opened the playroom door. ‘There’s a robe behind the door.’

He walked into the playroom and began to remove his shirt.

Lucinda felt her calm returning. ‘I’ll just get the water.’

*

In the kitchen, Lucinda stopped and took a deep breath.

He’s a model, he’s used to being naked, she told herself. I ought to be used to seeing naked men too, but college was a long time ago, the models were public property, and it wasn’t in my house. Why did I ask him here? And I don’t like that sketch. Why did I let him choose it?

She stood for a moment looking through the window at the clematis, her face blank. He was just a model, wasn’t he? A sitter. He seemed to know something about art though, and that might be useful, if the day went well.

When she returned, he was studying a small triptych that she had hung between the two large windows. He was wearing the robe loosely, the belt at his waist barely tied.

‘Are these yours?’ he asked as she entered, nodding at the wall. ‘They’re very good.’

‘Thank you. They’re nothing special—I did them at college. They’ve been sitting in my attic for years.’ She glanced at the triptych then pursed her lips and smiled. ‘I thought I’d get them out again to try to remind myself how it’s all supposed to go.’ With a dismissive wave, she continued, ‘You’ll have to be patient with me, I’m afraid, it’s been a long time.’

He looked towards the easel. 'All these,' he swept his arm around the walls, 'are small, and your canvas is big. You want to try something different, yes?'

Holding up the sketch he had chosen, he slowly tore it in half. 'So we start with a blank canvas, in every way, yes? A blank book.' He smiled at Lucinda, who didn't know how to respond. Patrissia and Jamie had both made fun of Marc's 'blank book', the one that they smirkingly explained contained his beliefs. The expression wasn't particularly common and Lucinda briefly thought how surprising it was that Sal knew it.

He walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders. 'I'm going to ask you to do something: it is work, is art. I want you to touch me, hold me, get a feel for me. You must get to know me—not just a pretty boy, *no*? It is the only way, there must be a connection, otherwise it's just photography. Art is physical, you know that, you must feel it in your soul.'

'Perhaps.' Lucinda looked straight into his eyes. 'But I think for the moment I'll go with how you look.' She disengaged herself. 'I'll put the water just here, on the mantelpiece.'

'Now *that*,' Sal exclaimed, pointing to the painting behind her, '*that* is what we should be trying for.'

Lucinda's face fell. Of all the things he might have chosen.

'That's not mine, it's Patrissia's—the woman who gave me your card,' she said ruefully. 'It's my college tutor.'

'It has such feeling! The others, they are technically good...' He nodded. '*You* can paint like this, Lucinda,' he said, running his hand over the large crucifix adorning the neck of the figure in Patrissia's painting, 'but you must relax, let the paint take you where it will. You must feel me as a presence, as a man, not as an image to reproduce.'

He walked up to her, stopping two feet away. 'You are English, you don't allow yourself to get close, but I am Italian—without closeness, without contact, there is nothing. Posters, advertising, pretty pictures.' He put his hands on her cheeks. 'You are beautiful, you have a beautiful soul. We must seduce it so it shows us its pleasures.'

This is ridiculous. What am I doing? she was thinking. But before she could protest, he stood back.

‘Good. Now we can begin.’ He pointed at Patrisia’s painting. We will try to capture some of that—’ He stopped. ‘But no, we are too serious now.’ He inclined his head towards the trampette in the corner of the room. The girls had hardly used that, either. She would throw it away with the big one. ‘It’s a pity that’s so small.’

‘There’s a big one set up in the garden,’ Lucinda heard herself say before she could stop herself.

‘Perfect!’ He took her hand. ‘Let’s play for a minute or two. Really,’ he added, watching her face, ‘it will help. Art is serious, but it is also playful, and it is physical.’ Smiling, he took her hand. ‘The garden?’

Amused despite herself, Lucinda led him through the house.

He laughed when he saw the netted and padded trampoline. ‘Ah, so safe, the English! But it will do.’ Scrambling through the net, he wobbled onto the canvas and began to jump high and clumsily. He fell over almost immediately, and lay still.

Lucinda ran over and frantically pushed the net aside, taking his head in her hands.

‘Are you all right?’

He wasn’t moving, and his chest seemed not to be rising. Then his eyes opened. ‘Ah. Now your heart is beating!’ He made to kiss her, but she pulled back. ‘Join me!’ He began to bounce lightly and confidently.

‘Now, look Sal—’

Suddenly he was beside her. ‘Of course, we must get on. I’m sorry, Lucinda, I get carried away. You are paying me to model, not to play.’ Bowing his head, he continued, ‘From now on, we work. I will not interrupt. Please forgive me, I am a little too spontaneous for the English soul.’

Re-tying his robe, which had opened and twisted itself around him, he began to walk back to the house. Lucinda followed him, wondering how she had allowed him to divert the session so far off-track.

In the studio, she taped up the two halves of the sketch he had ripped up and settled him in position.

*

‘So, Patrissia is your friend?’

‘An old friend, yes.’

‘And you are rivals?’

‘What?’ Lucinda didn’t pause. ‘Oh, I see. No. We’re too different.’

‘But you are friends, you both paint, you are both talented and successful. I don’t think you are so different. You have different habits, perhaps, but—’

She felt him watching her as she stood back from the canvas, a frown of concentration on her face, perfectly still. Relaxing, she smiled, asking him, ‘I’m sorry. What were you saying?’ Without waiting for an answer, she continued, ‘How do you know so much about art? Were you at art college?’

‘No. I pick up bits here and there.’

‘You speak English very well.’

‘We were forced to learn it at school. And I watch English TV, have English friends, work for English artists...I pick that up, too.’

‘Of course.’ She bent back to the canvas. ‘Trisha said she met you in Covent Garden?’

‘Yes, she was drawing the colonnades, I think—she wouldn’t show me.’

Lucinda smiled. ‘No, she wouldn’t. She doesn’t like sharing her work. She’s very private.’

‘But she gave you the painting?’

‘Oh, no. One of her boyfriends stole it, and I bought it from him when she left him.’ The lie came surprisingly easily.

‘He was Italian too?’

‘What? Who?—Oh, yes, of course, Patrissia’s Italian. It’s funny, I think of her as quite English now.’ She looked thoughtful. ‘Ah, no,

her boyfriend wasn't Italian, he was Lebanese I think, or maybe Persian. I'm not sure.' She paused for a second. 'I remember the first time I saw her, she was shouting at a boy. Very Italian!' She stood back. 'OK, you can relax a bit now, I think I've got it.'

'It's nice to meet other Italians, to be able to express myself properly, in my own language.'

'Yes, I can see that. It must be hard to have a real conversation here.'

Sal shook his head. 'Conversation is easy, but feelings, emotions are more difficult. You never know what an Englishman is thinking or feeling. You—what's that word? Prevaricate?' He laughed. 'I looked it up in a dictionary. It's a very useful word to know.'

She laughed. 'Yes, it must be.'

For the next hour, he stayed as still as he had promised Patrissia. When he took a ten minute break, Lucinda continued painting while he went outside for a cigarette. Quite comfortable now, she barely noticed him returning until the flap of his feet on the lino made her look up.

'That was quick.'

He grunted as he disrobed and took up the pose. 'Patrissia has a sister, yes? Is she also an artist?'

Lucinda stayed intent on some fine shading. 'I think she did mention a sister once—It's a sad story. They lost touch for many years. A family squabble. They only got together again last year.'

'She lives in London?'

'Her sister? No. She's still in Italy, a village near Rome. What did Jamie say? Morlupo? Something like that.'

'I know it—my family are from the next village.'

'Really? How incredible!'

'Not really. Life is hard in the villages, and we peasants are despised in the cities. London has many attractions—the parks, the galleries, the theatres—'

'And the work. Yes, I can see that. I'll ask around for you, if you like, though I don't actually know many painters.'

‘That would be kind.’

‘Of course.’ She smudged a line. ‘But keep some time for me, won’t you? I tell you what. I’ll pay you in advance for ten sessions. How does that sound?’

‘It sounds very good, Lucinda, thank you.’

‘My pleasure. I think I’ll enjoy painting you.’

‘Thank you. I think I will enjoy you, too.’

*

When it got to five-thirty, Lucinda put down the charcoal and stood back, unexpected disappointment making her mouth hard. The lines were good, the volumes solid, it was accurate. *But*. Next time, she would start again. Perhaps with the trampoline.

‘OK, that’s it for today.’

Sal stood and stretched as Lucinda pretended to tidy away the pencils and charcoal. He took his time wrapping himself in the robe, quite subdued now.

She would have liked to sit with him in the garden for a while, but it was impossible. She cursed the fact that she had to go and collect the girls, and then reprimanded herself for the thought.

When he had left, she went straight into the kitchen to call Ciara. She seemed so much easier to talk to than Patrissia, and as they were laughing together over his choice of pose Lucinda realised that she wasn’t trying to impress her.

Ciara laughed. ‘Take care, Lu, you’ll get a reputation.’

‘It’s about time, isn’t it?’ Lucinda giggled and took another sip of wine. ‘I feel all fizzy—I don’t know what’s come over me.’

‘A gorgeous Italian stud, by the sound of it. Or didn’t you get that far?’

‘Really, Ciara!’ Lucinda’s teeth showed white as she glanced at her reflection in the window. ‘What *can* you mean?’

‘Well, how far *did* you get?’

‘Nowhere, if we’re talking bases.’ She giggled again. ‘But home base looked quite reachable from where I was standing.’

‘The fountain of youth ever floweth, with a little encouragement.’ Lucinda almost saw Ciara purse her lips. ‘So, when’s the next session?’

‘Tomorrow, actually. But I’ll be concentrating on the drawing. He’s going back to Italy for a week. His mother’s ill, and there’s no one to look after her.’

‘How sweet! You’ll have to be careful that you don’t fall for him, Lu, he sounds quite delicious. I’m almost jealous.’ She paused. ‘I wonder why Patrissia passed him on to you?’

‘I imagine she’s had her fill of Italian boys.’

‘He’s hardly a boy—From the way you describe him he sounds like he must be my age at least.’

‘You’re probably right. How old are you, Ciara? Twenty-six, twenty-seven?’

‘Thirty this year.’

‘The perfect age. I’ll be forty-one. Not quite over the hill, but I think it’s time to grasp any opportunity that presents itself.’

‘How does Philip fit in? I don’t imagine you’ve told him you’re thinking of sleeping with the help?’

‘Philip was a mistake, a backward step. He was a comfort for a time, but we’re going in opposite directions. He wants a soulmate to hobble into the sunset with, and I’m—well, that’s not what I want. I’ve had enough of being responsible and reliable for the moment. I’m going after some of Trisha’s mayhem and madness.’ She paused, her glass halfway to her mouth, a thoughtful look on her face.

‘Be careful, Lucinda’ said Ciara in a serious voice. ‘It might sound fun, but you have to have a constitution like Patrissia’s to stand it for long. The trouble with mayhem is that you can’t just tell it to stop when it gets too much.’

‘Isn’t that the point, though?’

‘Well, it’s your choice—and it might be my choice later, who knows?’ Ciara’s voice was sceptical. ‘A few years of kids, satisfy the

biological imperative, and then, well, I can't say that hobbling into the sunset will be my cup of tea, either. We only have one life.'

'I admire your determination. At your age I hadn't thought about things like that at all. I was content—Jamie was behaving himself and we were both making a lot of money.' She lifted her head and stared around the kitchen. 'All that was on my mind was granite worktops and doing my duty.'

'Your duty? My God, Lucinda—'

'Please call me Lu. I know, it sounds old-fashioned, but that's how I was brought up. Nice husband, nice job, nice house, nice children, nice friends—I managed to avoid those, at least.' She laughed. 'I think Jamie had slept with them all by the end, and you know, it never occurred to me even once to question why it was so easy for him, to ask myself what kind of friends they were.' She snorted. 'It wasn't they who were the pushovers, I realise now. It was me. What *could* they have thought of me?'

'Don't beat yourself up, Lu. But don't let it happen again, would be my advice.'

'Yes. I was too busy pretending to be superwoman. It's funny, my family were well-off and privileged and they rather looked down on the money-grubbing classes, as they called them.' She laughed. 'We were told what was expected of us and others—honesty, integrity and consideration from our friends and family, and, well, nobody else counted.'

'It's the same for everyone, Lu. We're still tribal animals.'

'I don't know. It all sounds so *safe* now. I think I was lucky meeting Trisha when I did. Difficult and—I suppose the word is *savage*—as she was, she made things happen. I mean, it wouldn't have occurred to me that it was even possible to leave your family and friends, leave your country. But she did it. Then an affair with her married tutor—and having the nerve to sleep with other men too...God! The rows they had! It was something to see, I can tell you. Shouting, screaming—they even had a real, physical, fight once, I remember. The whole place was in uproar for days.'

'Really? Patrissia? She doesn't seem like that. She's so cool.'

‘I think she decided eventually that it’d be easier to get her own way if she wasn’t so tempestuous. She’s a very clever woman.’

‘But you don’t think she’s changed?’

‘Not in the least. She’s changed her methods, that’s all.’

‘Do you trust her?’

‘In what way?’ Lucinda smiled to herself. ‘I wouldn’t worry about her and Jamie, if that’s what you mean. They’ve had plenty of opportunity and nothing’s happened yet, I’m sure of that.’

‘Why are you so sure?’

‘Jamie’s too nice,’ Lucinda said seriously, ‘and nice isn’t Patrissia’s thing. I wouldn’t like a fight with her. You wouldn’t believe the language she comes out with! And she doesn’t pull punches—I almost felt sorry for Johnny that time. She doesn’t let go when she’s got the advantage.’

‘Wow,’ Ciara replied sceptically. ‘And she looks so self-contained.’

‘Yes, she does, doesn’t she? Mind you, she has her inner bimbo, like all of us. My guess is that’s why she has the occasional fling with women. I don’t like to say it, but the ones I know about have been, well, let’s just say they probably needed help to put their knickers on the right way round.’

‘Ah, C&A customers.’

Lucinda looked nonplussed for a second, and then laughed. ‘My mother bought her underwear from C&A. She used to cut the labels out—I think it was probably the most exciting thing she ever did.’

‘I have to say I was surprised when Jamie told me Trisha sleeps with women,’ said Ciara. ‘We all get crushes at school, of course, but after that...I don’t know what I think about it. It’s not shocking, exactly, is it? More unexpected. Did she ever make a pass at you?’

‘Not that I can remember, but I was rather naïve in those days.’

‘Hmm.’ Lucinda could hear Ciara’s yawn. ‘I’d better ring off. I’ll call you in a couple of days to report progress. Lu?’

‘Yes?’

‘Get some photos of Sal!’

Lucinda laughed. ‘You’re terrible, Ciara. I’ll see what I can do. Speak to you later.’

Rendezvous

Lucinda's phone beeped again.

'Sorry about this, Philip.' She smiled as she tapped a brief lie into the phone. 'It's Ciara, looking for Jamie.'

Lucinda's date with Ciara the evening before had been rather confusing. Jamie had been half an hour late, and when he'd admitted he had been with Patrissia, Ciara had interrogated him until he had angrily left the room.

Later, in the restaurant, Lucinda had waited for an opportunity to defend him, but as Ciara picked and chose and sampled the food—complaining and sending back at least half of it—she had found herself warming to her bluntness, and as the drinks arrived and disappeared, their chat had turned into a giggling dismemberment of the people they knew.

'Jamie?' Philip interrupted irritably. 'Why does she think you'll know where he is?'

'I'm meeting him later to finalise the agreement. I'm sure I told you.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

And now she was sitting three tables away from where she and Ciara had avoided discussing the separation, or mentioning Jamie or Patrissia at all. She wondered at that. Delicacy of feeling wasn't one of Ciara's strong points, and with the pregnancy and the move Lucinda found it hard to believe she could resist such easy targets.

But Lucinda had more on her mind than Ciara's lack of interest in her aunt and lover, odd though she found it. Her immediate attention was focused on Philip's choice of restaurant. Ciara had taken her there the evening before, and even though Lucinda had enjoyed the contrast with her habitual places, by the end of the evening she had been exhausted by the noise and exuberance of the clientele. It certainly wasn't Philip's taste and it surely couldn't be coincidence.

Although he'd said it had been recommended by a friend, she had an unsettling feeling that he had somehow tracked her the evening before. Ridiculous as the notion was, that and the difficulty

she was having with her feelings about Ciara had put her in a sour frame of mind that she was having trouble disguising.

‘She and Jamie are at a bit of a low point. She’s turned out to be not quite what he was expecting, I think.’

Philip watched her face. He thought there was a glint of satisfaction in her eye as her nails tapped sharply on the buttons.

With a final exaggerated click she replaced the phone in her bag and looked up. ‘It all happened so quickly, I suppose, once he persuaded her that he was serious about her.’

Philip frowned over his plate.

‘What’s the matter?’ Lucinda asked, taking a sip of wine, her eyes shining. ‘Is the food not to your taste?’

‘You know what the matter is.’ His voice was low and had acquired a hard edge quite at odds with his usual air of relaxed confidence. ‘Jamie’s relationship with Ciara seems to constantly preoccupy you. Not to mention Patrissia’s escapades. Yet, whenever I want to talk about our plans—or the possibility of plans—you change the subject.’

She sniffed dismissively. ‘Of course I don’t, Philip. It’s just that we’ve managed to carve ourselves a relatively sane niche that we’re happy with. Jamie, Patrissia, Margaret—’

‘Don’t bring my wife into this. It’s not the same thing at all, and you know it. Margaret is a paraplegic living out her life, if you can call it that, in the often rather desultory hands of nurses and carers. Ensuring that she is as comfortable as possible is my duty and occupies a great deal of my time. But she isn’t a rival for my affections, whereas Jamie...’

‘Is there something on your mind, Philip?’

‘No more than usual. Which is to say,’ he said carefully, looking her in the eyes, ‘that it seems to me that your relationship with Jamie doesn’t seem to have reached a conclusion.’

Lucinda studied his heavy jowls as his attention returned to his meal, the loose skin swinging and glistening like a bloodhound’s jaw.

‘Well, of course it hasn’t. Jamie’s still important to me. He’s Zara’s and Daisy’s father, and I’d like to think that he’s happy, just as you want to think Margaret’s comfortable.’ She watched him fork another morsel into his mouth, apparently without swallowing what was already there. ‘I can understand how that might not enthuse you,’ she added through tightening lips, ‘but it’s on my mind, and I want us to talk about what’s on our minds, otherwise what’s the point in being together? Ciara’s on my mind, too. Frankly, I think Jamie made a mistake getting together with her. I like her, but she’s not the warm type—she takes after Patrissia, and that can’t be good for him.’

Philip raised his glass, taking a delicate sip, and dabbed his lips. ‘Do you realise that you’re talking as though you’re jealous of them?’

‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘But you are. And now you’re defensive.’

‘I am *not* defensive, Philip. I’m just not sure what you’re accusing me of.’

‘I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just pointing out—’ He sighed. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘*Are* you sorry? Do you realise how judgmental you sound? We have a nice relationship but it seems you still have to scrutinise it, make sure it’s on track. Why would you do that?’

‘Because I’m interested in where the track is taking us.’

‘But didn’t we agree that neither of us would make demands of the other for the moment? *Let’s enjoy a period of sanity and calm*’, isn’t that what you said? Are you proposing a timetable?’

‘No, of course not,’ he answered, retreating. ‘Let’s not argue, Lucinda. We haven’t seen each other for a week. Can we just enjoy our lunch? Have you found a designer yet?’

‘Ciara said she might be interested.’ Lucinda’s face was wooden.

‘Oh, God! Well, it’s up to you, of course.’

‘What do you mean? She’s a very good designer—’

‘—and you’ll keep it in the family?’ He smiled faintly and refilled their glasses, carefully wiping the rim of the bottle with a fresh napkin.

‘Don’t be so smug, Philip. Who have you just taken on? Could it be your daughter by any chance?’

‘That’s the point I was trying to make—unsuccessfully, it seems. Madeleine is my *daughter*, family, blood. Jamie is no longer related to you, except emotionally.’ He gave her a puzzled look. ‘You had the chance to make a clean break. You don’t *have* to see him. Instead, you seem to be going in the opposite direction. You’re becoming *more* involved with him, not less. And if you employ Ciara, you’ll see even more of him.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘I think you should examine your motives in all this, that’s all.’

‘What an unbelievably pompous thing to say!’ Lucinda’s voice rose angrily.

There was a long silence. Philip pushed his plate an inch to one side and wiped his lips.

‘Well, Lucinda, clearly our liaison is no longer serving its purpose for you. I’m in favour of continuing, but you—I hope I’m wrong, but it seems to me that you’re no longer happy with our arrangement.’

There was a lingering silence, each avoiding the other’s eyes.

Lucinda nodded at last. ‘Yes,’ she sighed, ‘you’re right, of course. I’m tired of being civilised. It’s not your fault, nor mine, but I feel that things are rather too...*sanitised* is the only way I can put it.’ She raised her wide eyes. ‘I think I’d like to taste real life, not a facsimile of it.’

‘I’m sorry you feel like that.’ Philip placed his knife and fork more exactly to one side of the remains on his plate. ‘I have to say, I’ve been expecting this for some time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Forgive me for being so blunt, but you’re a nice woman who has never needed to consider what she really wants, because you’ve

never been denied anything. You've never had to fight for anything.'

'Where did that come from? My God! Are you actually accusing me of having an easy life? That's pretty rich coming from you. My ceramics business...'

'Don't take it as a criticism, Lucinda, I'm simply making an observation. Life has always been comfortable for you. Even Jamie's infidelity was only a minor irritation—you said as much yourself.' He held up his hand as she began to speak. 'No, I may be pompous, Lucinda, but hear me out. Comfort is what we retreat to when things go wrong or are just too hard, and we all need it. But you've spent your whole life in comfort. You mention your ceramics, but how did that come about? A customer approached you with a ready market, and you gave them what you had already done. I'm sorry, it doesn't really count even as effort, let alone struggle. You don't know what it's like to be uncomfortable. But nothing happens when you're comfortable.'

Her blue eyes were steely as she retorted, 'It certainly doesn't.'

'There's no need to take that tone, Lucinda, I'm not judging you.'

'No? Then what *are* you doing? It certainly sounds like you are.'

Philip picked up his glass by the stem, appearing to study the tulip-shaped bowl for flaws. 'Can't we just accept the way things are and try to make the best of them?'

'That's what I'm doing, but I don't know what you think *you're* doing.'

Philip took another careful sip of wine. 'Very well. If you value my opinion at all, then listen to me: do something uncomfortable.' He put his hand on his briefcase. The phone inside was emitting bars of a Mozart sonata. 'Keep in touch, Lucinda. Let me know how you fare. If you need to return to civilisation, I'll welcome your call. I still have very fond feelings for you.'

'Is that it? We break up just like that?' Lucinda stared at him, her breath suddenly quickening. 'Aren't you upset at all?'

'As I say, I have very fond feelings for you, and it would upset me more if we persisted in what seems to have become an unhappy

affair.’ He hesitated before opening his briefcase. ‘I wish you well, Lucinda, but be careful. Civilisation makes us soft, and believe me, I *know* what the jungle is like. I see the animals who live there every day, and they *are* dangerous.’ He smiled. ‘But who knows? You have it in you to become wilder than any of them.’ He leaned over and kissed her cheek. ‘Half-measures don’t work, however.’ He stood up. ‘Keep my number, it might come in useful.’

*

Only when he had left, taxi booked and phone clamped to his ear, did Lucinda breathe out.

Taking a slow sip of wine, she realised that she was more shocked at how calm he was than anything else. She had just broken up with her lover of a year, just like that. They had met for lunch, as they often did, and then, in the space of five minutes, they’d had a conversation where they had gone from being vaguely irritated with each other to consensual separation.

She stared at her phone. It had been so easy. She felt grateful and yet curiously disappointed.

They had liked and amused each other, and the sex was nice—so what had been missing? Excitement had always been low on Lucinda’s list of priorities—*priorities*, she thought, not passions or enthusiasms, but places on a list. Is that what she should be looking for now, enthusiasm? It meant to be filled with the god, so Johnny had told them. To be enthused was to be so overwhelmed with desire that nothing else mattered. She had never felt anything like that. No wonder people thought she was boring. Safe, predictable, Lucinda.

She wondered briefly if Philip had found her boring, but quickly dismissed the thought. And yet...

She remembered Johnny shouting and ranting at her and the others, trying to rouse them. And the little chat he’d had with her privately. She had never told Patrissia about Johnny’s offer to educate her in the *infinite realms of the senses*, as he had called it, and since his next enthusiasm had been Patrissia, who had been only too willing to be filled with him, she thought it best not to say anything.

And after Johnny, apart from the sons of stockbrokers and lawyers, whose enthusiasms had been even less alluring than Johnny's, there had been only Jamie, whose even-handed gusto she had thought would bring a gentle—and controllable, she had to admit—diversity into her planned *comfortable* life.

She sighed. Was she afraid of taking a risk, or was risk something that simply didn't exist in her world? What was a risk anyway? What did Patrissia consider risky? Or did it never cross her mind to ask herself if what she wanted *was* risky?

Want, that was the key. Did Lucinda want anything that badly? She shook her head. She couldn't even imagine what it might feel like.

Her phone rang. She looked at it lying on the table, wondering what she would say if it were Philip wanting to make up. She took a sip of coffee and tried to think, but nothing came to her. She stared at the phone a moment longer then reluctantly picked it up.

The fine lines on her forehead relaxed and disappeared as she heard Jamie's voice.

'Has he gone?'

'What do you mean?' Her voice sharpened again at the unexpected question. 'How do you know Philip was with me? I didn't tell you I was meeting him.'

'Whoah, don't get all excited. Ciara told me.'

Lucinda took a deep breath and when she spoke again it was with her habitual smoothness. 'Oh, she got hold of you eventually, did she?'

'She texts me every bloody five minutes. But when I'm actually in the room with her, she's on the phone with her mother half the time. Anyway, I'll be there in two minutes—I'm just around the corner.'

'All right. Coffee and croissants?'

'Sounds good.'

Jamie appeared five minutes later, wiping sweat from his forehead.

‘God, I’ll kill somebody if I have to stay in that office much longer. It must be a hundred degrees in there.’

‘Hello Jamie,’ Lucinda replied as she tore open two tubes of sugar and poured them into his cup. ‘I should have ordered you a cold drink instead, sorry.’

Jamie looked surprised at the softness in her tone. ‘Good idea, thanks. I’ll get us a couple of lemonades if a waiter ever appears.’ He rubbed his eyes and yawned deeply. ‘But I need the coffee first, I didn’t get much sleep last night.

‘Neither did I. It’s the heat, I think.’

A long sigh escaped him. ‘I wish.’

‘Bad dreams?’

‘Nightmare, more like.’ His normally smooth face was creased and sagging in the bright sunshine.

‘What’s happened?’

‘Oh, it’s Ciara, as usual. I can’t do anything right. Nothing seems to please her. I even give her a present, and—Well, you know the drill.’

Lucinda pursed her lips and tutted. ‘Don’t let her bully you, Jamie.’ She shook her head. ‘You’re too nice. Forgive me, but you blunder about, doing what everyone tells you, then you sneak off for a defiant little escapade like meeting me. That’s not the way, you know. Nobody knows or cares about you if you’re too nice. And another thing—’

‘There’s more?’

‘I was going to say that nobody’s really as nice as you pretend to be,’ Lucinda said calmly. ‘Why don’t you let yourself say what you feel? It might make things easier for you.’

Jamie looked at her. ‘Well, of course. But if I don’t give in I don’t get sex.’ He laughed. ‘And I like sex. I know it’s a cliché but it’s true, you know that. There’s no arguing with any of you. The

Sisters rule, and all we can do is comply with you or subdue you.’ He snorted. ‘So, dog or psycho? You made us like this, and now you get to choose.’

‘Don’t be so melodramatic.’ Lucinda took a sip of her tea. ‘Is that how you saw our marriage? As a power struggle?’ It was a question, not an accusation.

‘How else, Lu? You chose the wedding, the house, the number of kids, what we ate, what we drank, when we had sex, when we went out, when we stayed in—’

‘It wasn’t my *choice*, Jamie! It was just how things had to be.’ Lucinda sat back, listening to her own words. If it wasn’t her choice, whose was it? ‘Anyway, you always agreed!’

‘I usually did, yes.’ He stirred his untouched coffee, and in a gentler voice, continued. ‘But you didn’t show me any consideration, Lu, any care, and you never gave me any love. Not much sex, either, if it comes to that. But you were great at pain,’ he looked straight into her eyes. ‘Disappointment, disapproval, dismissal—that’s all I got from you.’

Lucinda looked down. ‘You’re not messing about now, are you? And you’re right. I’ve only just begun to realise how insufferable I was. Please forgive me. I’m sorry.’ She looked up. ‘But I wish you’d stood up for yourself more. You made it easy.’

‘And you made it hard.’ They smiled at each other. ‘I’m sorry too, Lu. Will you forgive *me*?’

‘Consider yourself forgiven.’ Lucinda took a tissue from her bag and dabbed an eye. ‘Maybe it’s time for both of us to grow up.’

‘Growing up is hard to do.’

Lucinda laughed and dabbed the other eye. ‘I used to like that song.’

‘You did, didn’t you?’ He mouthed the words to the inaudible tune, his eyes soft. ‘Anyway, what shall I do about Ciara? She’s your mate now, isn’t she?’

Lucinda arched her eyebrows. ‘As Patrissia said to you before, and as we’ve just agreed, you have to be straight, Jamie. It’s the only way. Know what you want, know what you don’t want, and talk. It’s

all any of us can do. If you love each other and if you both really want to be together, then perhaps all will be well. If not—' she sighed and stuffed the damp tissue back in her bag, 'then it won't be, I suppose.'

Jamie's head drooped. 'I know, I know. But what I *don't* know is if I *do* want us to be together any more. I can't stand it that she's so intractable, Lu. She's like a damned castle, everything's worked out and shut up tight in the right place and ogres are guarding the drawbridge. I feel like I'm just the help and entertainment.'

Lucinda's eyes glazed with an indefinable sadness. 'Maybe that *is* all you are to her, I wouldn't know. But if that's the case, you'd better make up your mind what to do about it, and soon.'

'What would *you* do?'

'It's *your* choice, Jamie, I can't help you.' Lucinda frowned and then leaned forward to pat his hand. 'I suppose you could always cast some runes.'

'What?'

Lucinda raised her eyes and put her palms together.

'You're telling me to pray?'

'Why not? You're a Catholic. What else is God for?'

'Are you serious?'

She shrugged. 'Perhaps.'

He stared at her hands and grunted. 'Philip's doing you good, Lu. I didn't know there was a sense of humour lurking underneath the chainmail.'

'It's not Philip, Jamie.' Lucinda's face lost its animation. 'In fact, we've parted company. I was bored with *him*, if you can believe that.'

'You, bored?' Jamie made a theatrically horrified face. 'But you don't get bored, Lu! Pissed off, yes, but never bored.'

'Well, I do now,' she murmured, taking the coffee spoon from his cup and idly stirring her own. 'I want some fun, Jamie.' She looked up. 'Maybe you can give *me* some advice.'

Her voice had an edge, as though the plea was genuine. Nonplussed, he could only reply, 'Hmm, good luck with that. It's easy to do stupid things that look like fun, but—'

'Are you really telling me that sleeping with my girlfriends wasn't exciting?'

'What do you think?' Jamie shrugged. 'I guess, the first one. Then, I don't know, after that... all the excitement's in the chase, not the conquest, I suppose you have to call it. Unless you're some kind of sociopath, of course.' He took a tissue that was poking out of Lucinda's bag and dabbed his neck. 'It's like everything else, you get used to it and then it's something you just do.' He smiled wryly. 'I mean, your friends aren't that interesting to begin with, are they? They're comfortable, secure, and, sad to say, pretty boring. I don't know what they tell you, but they're pushovers, Lu, and far more promiscuous than I ever was.' He looked into her eyes. 'It really was meaningless, you know.'

'Then why did you do it?'

'You have to ask that after what we said just now? Everything has a context—'

'Oh, please, not psychobabble, Jamie. You know how I hate that.'

'Babble it might be, but it's a useful way of looking at it. Instead of a princess, you're a narcissist, but it's the same story, just in different words. Everyone's waiting for the handsome prince, the wild shepherdess, the jack-the-lad. It just makes you sound more savvy if you call them alpha-males, or ESTPs or whatever. The only question is whether or not you want to hang around waiting for the perfect specimen. And the question is repeated every day. We aren't built to withstand attrition like that, so we succumb to flattery and the promise of adventure. It's the daily grind that gets us down, and escape from it is the best gift anyone can offer. That's how it seems to me, anyway.'

'So, if you know all this, why are you asking for my advice about Ciara? Surely you can analyse *her*?'

Jamie shook his head. 'Because it all goes to shit when you're unhappy, Lu. Things get skewed, you see things differently. You can't trust yourself.'

Lucinda bit her lip. 'Were you really that unhappy with me, Jamie? You always got what you wanted, it seemed to me, and I was left to do the organising and make the dinner. Are you saying you didn't enjoy screwing Antonia, for example? Your old mate Giles doesn't seem to mind.'

'Are they still together? I'm amazed.'

'The last I heard, yes. They've set up home together—she sold her flat and they bought a place in the Médoc. He spends most of his time here, of course, and she seems quite content playing Madame.'

'I don't know, Lu,' said Jamie, missing the faint smile smoothing her lips. 'There has to be something more than raising kids and fucking, doesn't there? I know we're only animals and all that, but...' He trailed off.

'Hmm, I don't know either.' Lucinda took a sip of wine and glanced at her watch. 'It's getting late. I suppose we'd better get down to business. I've decided that using a lawyer isn't productive, and that I'll settle for a fifty-fifty split. Is that OK with you?'

Jamie stared at her. 'But you've been haggling all fucking year! And Philip's firm doesn't come cheap.' He shook his head. 'Actually, I can't believe you just said that. What's happened?'

Stung, she was about to retort, then took a breath instead. After a few seconds, she continued, 'I've had a change of heart, Jamie, that's all.'

He sat back, his head tilted, his eyes questing. 'Ciara'll be pleased.'

'Yes, she will, and that's partly why I'm doing it. But mostly I'm doing it for me—and for you.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' said Jamie slowly, 'but I'm not going to argue. It's big of you, and I appreciate it. What did Philip say when you told him?'

'I haven't, yet. I don't suppose he'd express an opinion, he never does about things that matter.'

'Why did you split with him? You seemed happy enough. I thought you were made for each other.'

‘Yes, I think he did, too. It makes me quite ill to think about it now.’ Taking another tissue from her bag, she dabbed her lips. ‘I’m glad we decided to call it a day, actually. It was quite amicable.’

‘So that’s what this is about, a little revenge?’ Jamie grinned and then caught himself. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to gloat.’ *Fuck*. ‘So when did you split, exactly? You seem to be coping with it pretty well.’

Lucinda glanced at her watch. ‘About twenty-five minutes ago.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yes, I know.’ She hesitated. ‘Tell me, Jamie, am I really that cold?’ She looked at the damp tissue screwed up in her hand. ‘I feel quite upset—not about Philip, but that breaking up with him has affected me so little.’ She dabbed her filmy eyes and then laughed. ‘Do you think I need help? Truthfully.’

Jamie moved around the table and, perching on the chair next to her, put his hand on her arm. ‘Don’t be silly Lu, of course you don’t need help. You just have to lighten up a little bit.’ He smiled. ‘I’ve never seen you cry before—it’s a good sign.’

An insistent beep interrupted them, and Jamie frowned as he took out his phone. ‘Ciara.’ He tapped a reply. ‘I’m telling her the good news. She’ll be calling her mother—that should keep her occupied for a while.’ His eyes turned back to Lucinda, who had recovered her composure and was herself intent on her phone.

‘I’m just asking Philip to send me the final bill.’ She put her phone on the table and sat back. ‘So that’s that. Decks cleared, open seas ahead.’ She sighed. ‘We can sort out the money and everything quite quickly. I’ll get my accountant to call you. I’m glad we’re friends again, Jamie.’

She stood up as Jamie’s phone beeped again, and, leaning over the table, put her hand on his. ‘See you soon.’ She kissed his cheek. ‘I really do hope that things get better between you and Ciara. I’ll call you about the girls. They do miss you, you know.’

‘OK. Thanks Lu. I’d better go—things to do. See you later.’

Lucinda sat back down, watching him as he made his way untidily through the crowd in the square. He stopped once or twice to attend to his phone in an unhurried and quite comfortable way as people brushed past, absorbed in what he was doing.

He was finally lost to her view behind a large marquee, and Lucinda's gaze returned to her bag. Her phone lay silently inside—nobody, except perhaps Patrissia, would be contacting her today. The business was doing well and didn't need her. There was only the girls to worry about, and they were being well taken care of. She was free till six.

She shouldered her bag. The thought floated into her head that the loss of Philip was no loss at all. The overnight stays and odd weekends had been pleasant, but...No, there was no gap to fill. That was a relief.

She had automatically pressed the number of her usual cab firm, but when they answered she rang off without speaking. It was too familiar. Picking up her shiny leather briefcase, she started through the jostling crowd to find a taxi rank.

Emotional roulette

Patrissia stared at the bookcase. *Her* bookcase now, and *her* books. She sat back contentedly in the sofa and lit a cigarette. Her *house* in fact, not Marc's any longer, and not Ciara's.

Letting her eyes roam over the dusty room, she had the same detached feeling of familiarity-and-novelty she'd had when she was with Marc in the rented cottage in Cornwall, the same sense of borderline connection and lack of ultimate responsibility, the same unexpected lightness of place. There was so little of him. It was as if he *had* lived here, but in a non-specific way—he was just the tang of stale smoke that had worked itself into the fabric of the room, and the rows of nondescript muddy-brown books. A spectral dust, nothing more.

Returning her gaze to the neat rows of books she breathed out a slow plume of smoke. They demanded too much attention, she decided. If they were gone she too could live here invisibly. Except for one thing. There was still one job she needed to do.

Rising, she approached the ancient desk with its green-shaded reading lamp and slid out the top drawer. It was filled with letters, thirty years of them, Secundus' attempts to give succour to Marc, his lapsed protégé.

Thirty years.

On top of the heap were two empty envelopes that had fallen out of a volume of writings by St Catherine of Siena. It was the only book she had seen Marc read and the first one she had had the curiosity to search out.

One envelope had the word 'Ignatius' written in a pencilled scrawl that was all but illegible, a heartfelt stab into the grain of the paper. The space next to the name was rough and grey, as though something had been crudely erased. The other envelope was also inscribed with Marc's former name but it was written in a careful script in which Patrissia recognised at once the formal hand of Secundus.

Patrissia wondered, as she often did when she re-read them, what had become of the notes the two envelopes had contained.

She suspected that the pencilled one had been from a rejected lover, but although she had searched the room minutely, she had not found it.

Pushing the letters aside, she lifted out the box of photographs, spreading them over the shiny leather top of the desk.

Picking up the nearest photograph she held it under the lamp. It was of Claudia sitting lotus-like, her arms tied across her body, her chin lifted by a noose, her long hair spread over her shoulders like the shadow of a mountain top.

How could Claudia have done this without Patrissia suspecting? Surely she would have given away something even if she didn't dare share such a delicious secret with her little sister? But she hadn't dropped the tiniest hint.

Patrissia tried to recall the days before her sister's disappearance, but apart from the shouting and uproar, she could remember nothing but a vague feeling of intense frustration, but with whom or what she couldn't quite work out.

She didn't trust you, Patrissia. Nobody trusts you. You're jealous of her.

The voice came low and drawling from behind her. Startled, she jerked round, but there was no-one.

'Marc?' she called quietly. Is that you?'

The house was silent as she strained to listen, and tossing the photograph back onto the desk she went to the window and roughly pulled the curtains to. Conversations in her head were one thing, but that had been a real voice, she was sure. She hadn't imagined it.

The curtains hadn't quite met, and standing for a moment between them, Patrissia put her hands flat against the glass. The moon was visible behind a cloud, the ghostly light just enough to show the outline of *Pan* against the bulk of the big shed.

His voice? But who is he?

Not Marc. Someone else.

'Not Marc?' She realised she had echoed the voice out loud, and stepping back quickly she held the gap closed until her breathing

steadied, and then turning back to the desk, she picked up the lamp and slowly studied each photograph.

There were three models: Claudia, another woman, and a boy. The women's poses, despite the ropes and restraints, were soft, tender, fatalistic. They looked quite comfortable in fact, and while the *Pan* might resemble a debauched old madame from some angles, neither of the women looked like a candidate, especially Claudia.

Claudia again, Patrissia?

Patrissia sat down suddenly. *Was* she jealous of her sister? It seemed a reasonable question, but not one that she wanted to think about just then, and gathering the ten or so photographs of the boy she placed them side by side in front of her.

Though naked and priapic like the *Pan*, it was hard to imagine that the hard, pinched adolescent body captured in these photographs could be the model for the greasy god. Straining to free itself from its tight web of restraints, the overwhelming impression was of mute, angry frustration, quite unlike the flabby dissoluteness of the figure in the garden. It would have been easier if Marc had retained some features but for some reason he had chosen to break and distort the black-painted face so that it was barely recognisable as human.

Examine the object with your spiritual eye, Patrissia.

Relaxing as Johnny had shown her, she stared at the photographs until she felt her eyes begin to close. She sighed. It had never worked for her and she suspected that it was just another piece of Johnny's nonsense. Almost immediately she found herself thinking along another well-worn track, and picking up the leaflet with Johnny's portrait of her from the table, she went upstairs.

She had been thinking about the portrait for months, wondering what it meant, and why he had painted it, and had finally come to the conclusion that he had wanted to celebrate himself and his conquest of her—and he had indeed fashioned a fine prize for himself, one that achieved its object: to envy him his possession.

He possessed me.

He possesses you still.

The figure was beautiful, the face fashionably serene, but Patrissia couldn't believe how she had ever seen love or passion for her in it. The execution was detailed, precise and exquisite, but closed, dead. A model, a doll. She didn't even look as relaxed as the women in Marc's photographs.

She needed a drink.

Smalltalk

Patrissia put down her glass and looked round. 'I'm sorry?'

'I asked if you'd let me buy you a drink.' The woman was staring at her, a practised smile fading from her cheeks. Patrissia looked her up and down. She had noticed her on a couple of occasions when she and Marc had rendezvoused in the Elgin. The woman seemed to be enough of a regular to always secure the same seat at the bar, in the corner a few stools down from Marc.

Patrissia wasn't in the mood, but she felt an odd attraction, as though the woman might have something important to tell her. She checked her watch. Iona wouldn't be off till eight.

'If you like.' Patrissia resumed her study of the dried wine rings overlaying each other under her glass. 'Why not?'

'Another red here, please, Roger,' said the woman, lifting herself onto the stool next to Patrissia's, 'and one for me.' Taking out a cigarette she offered the pack to Patrissia, who shook her head.

'So, Patrissia, why are you drinking alone?' The woman lit her cigarette with a cheap plastic lighter. 'Marc's funeral was months ago, but looking at you, I'd think he wasn't dead at all. I've been watching you, and you could be him: same bar, same stool, same bottle—same *empty* bottle.'

'What of it?' Patrissia replied without rancour. 'It's none of your business.'

'You think not? What do you imagine Marc was doing when he wasn't with you? When you called him and he didn't answer?'

Patrissia straightened her back. 'That's a good question. He wasn't working, that's for sure.' She tossed back the dregs of her wine and picked up the fresh glass. 'What's all this about? Did you know him?'

'He was with *me*, Patrissia. I know all about you.'

Patrissia lifted her head. 'Where's my skull?'

'On your left thigh, about six inches above the knee. He was very observant, for a man.'

The fog of alcohol suddenly lifted, and Patrissia stared into the woman's eyes, glinting with mischief.

'You're Sally, aren't you?'

The woman laughed. 'Got it in one. Presumably you've seen the photos?'

'Yes.'

'There are more.'

Patrissia picked up her glass. 'Thanks for the drink.' She drained it in one and got off the stool. 'It was nice meeting you, Sally, but Marc's dead, and his history is dead. I'm not into resurrection.'

The woman shifted in her seat, taking in Patrissia's distinctly braless top and tight jeans. She licked her lips. 'Are you not? Then I'm afraid you're in for some bad surprises. You're living in his old place now, aren't you?'

Patrissia went still. 'Have you been snooping around?'

'No, of course not. I don't need to. I witnessed his will, and as I said, he told me all about you.'

'I find that hard to believe. He barely knew who he was himself. I doubt there was room in his head for anyone else.'

'Actually, you're wrong. One thing I know for certain is that *you* know very little about *him*.'

'You're damned rude for someone who's a complete stranger.' Patrissia's stare was icy as she watched the woman empty half her glass in an easy mouthful.

Sally laughed. 'Yes, I know. I must have got it from Marc. I'm sorry.' She paused. 'But that doesn't stop it being true, does it? Look, why don't I come back with you? I'll show you what I mean.'

'What will you show me?'

'I've got the photos in my bag. I knew you'd be here, you see.'

'Photos of what, exactly?'

'Things you probably won't enjoy seeing.'

'Such as?'

‘Marc, me and Marc, Claudia, a few others...No you don’t.’
Patrissia had made a grab for the bag, but Sally was quicker. ‘Yes, *Claudia*, the goddess you suspected inhabited him.’ She put the bag under her arm. ‘So, shall we go?’

Low-fat

Jamie slammed down the tonic bottle and brushed back the lick of hair that had fallen across his eyes.

‘But, Ciara, I’ve only just got back! I’ve hardly seen you all week.’

‘I know, Jamie, and I’m sorry. But Mamma’s alone in the house and she gets scared when Pappa’s away on business. Don’t be so possessive.’

‘Possessive? Bloody hell, wanting to be with your girlfriend is possessive now?’ Jamie held up his hands. ‘OK, OK. I’ll see you at the weekend. I might stay up in town for the next few days, in that case.’ He kissed her cheek. ‘I don’t suppose you feel like a little James Brown before you go?’

Ciara continued searching in her bag. ‘You forget, I’m pregnant. It makes you tired. But I suppose so, if you must.’

‘No, it’s OK,’ he sighed. ‘I’m pretty tired, too.’

Ciara clattered out the door, and he watched through the window as she climbed into the little open-top.

Turning back to the kitchen table, Jamie stared at his heavy briefcase. He had an early start the next day, and wondered if it might be better to go back to town now.

He wasn’t yet used to the house that Ciara had rented for them, and it felt strange to him. He wondered briefly if there was anything in the fridge, but decided not to bother looking. Diet this and low-fat that didn’t appeal to him, but it was all there was likely to be, he thought resignedly.

Ciara might have told him she would be staying at her mother’s. He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. A quick shower and he could be at Marc’s place by ten if he stepped on it.

Going upstairs to shower and change, his eye was caught by a magazine lying on the immaculately-turned bed, open at an account of someone’s miscarriage. A large colour picture of a tearful couple reading a book of children’s names took up most of one page.

Cheerful reading, he thought, before remembering that Ciara had said something about Patrissia having had a miscarriage. Jamie often

felt that she still harboured a lot of resentment towards her aunt, in spite of her denials. She certainly mistrusted her, and Jamie had learned early on that she wasn't one to let go of her suspicions. Maybe she thought miscarriage was catching.

After his shower he checked his phone, but there were no messages. He patted his pocket, making sure Ciara's key to Marc's house—Patrissia's house, he corrected himself—was still there.

*

The house looked dark and funereal, and as Jamie went up the weed-cracked steps to the front door he wondered why someone would neglect their house so completely. It had been empty since Marc's death, but it had obviously not been taken care of before or since.

He and Ciara had had a look round when she first learned of her inheritance, but they hadn't stayed long. Jamie got the impression she had been hoping to find some clue to her mother's whereabouts, or else evidence that Patrissia had been lying to her, but they'd found nothing, although the empty drawers and the general disarray had made Ciara suspicious.

He closed the door quietly, with an odd feeling that he was in a church. He remembered Patrissia telling him how Marc liked churches. It was certainly cold enough.

The spare bed was made up, he knew, because Patrissia had said she'd stayed there for a few days recently, and there would almost certainly be wine in the fridge. He would just have a quick drink and go to bed.

A shiver went through him, and looking down the gloomy passageway he wondered whether he was being stupid not staying at Patrissia's. He wasn't exactly avoiding her, but he had a feeling that things were getting too complicated between them and he definitely needed a break from complication.

Clicking on the light, the sight of the faded and stained old wallpaper and bare black floorboards made the place look even less inviting, if that were possible. Patrissia would have a job on her hands.

The door to the living room was half-open, and as he passed it on the way to the kitchen he glanced in, remembering the first time he had seen Ciara. He shook his head. What a day that had been.

The room was faintly illuminated and, curious, he pushed the door open. Piles of papers and photographs littered the floor. Patrissia must be having a clearout here too. He picked up a photograph that had made its way to the arm of the sofa and took it to the moonlit window to have closer look. He stiffened. It looked like Ciara, naked, and tied to a bed.

There was a click and the room light came on.

‘What are you doing here, Jamie?’ Patrissia’s voice came from the open doorway.

He jerked round. ‘What the fuck’s this? You didn’t tell me Ciara was posing for you. Or that it was this kind of thing.’ He stopped. ‘What are *you* doing here, anyway? Ciara didn’t say anything.’

‘I didn’t want to wait any longer. I moved in yesterday.’

He waved his hand. ‘What about these photos? Jesus Christ!’

Patrissia wrapped her bathrobe more tightly around her, and advancing, took the photograph from him and smoothed it gently in her palm. ‘It’s not Ciara, Jamie, it’s Claudia, her mother. They’re very old photos.’

Jamie’s shoulders relaxed. ‘Your sister? Who took them? You?’

‘No, they’re Marc’s.’

‘Bloody hell, he was weirder than I thought.’

There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs and a woman entered wearing a towel. With a shock Jamie realised it was the blonde who he had seen being attacked in the Elgin.

She held out her hand. ‘Sorry, I heard voices. You must be Jamie.’ He stared at her for a moment, wondering if she remembered him but there was no recognition in her eyes. ‘I’m Sally.’

The woman seemed perfectly at home, and Jamie looked questioningly at Patrissia. ‘It looks like I’ve arrived at an inconvenient moment. I was hoping to stay here tonight.’

‘That’s no problem, Jamie. Sally’s just leaving,’ Patrissia answered distractedly, still gazing at the photograph.

He took in the woman’s towel and mussed hair as she smiled and turned to Patrissia. ‘We haven’t finished our discussion, have we? Are there more drinks anywhere?’

‘In the kitchen. Help yourself.’

Jamie raised his eyebrows as she left the room. ‘Trish?’

Patrissia looked up. ‘Sally was one of Marc’s models. I really don’t know why she’s here, Jamie. She just invited herself.’

‘Jesus, do you think I’m stupid? But it’s your life.’

‘Yes, it is. And it seems that Sally’s part of it, one way or another.’ Her voice was detached, unfocused.

Jamie was about to speak when Sally reappeared at the door. He turned to her. ‘Actually, Sally, I think Patrissia would appreciate it if you left now,’ he said firmly. ‘Whatever you have to talk about can wait. Take the bottle if you want.’

‘Is that what *you* want, Patrissia?’ The woman was standing still, her arm barely keeping the towel closed. ‘There’s a lot more I can tell you about Marc and Claudia. Did you know that Ciara has—’

‘This really isn’t a good time,’ Jamie said, interrupting her. ‘I think you should go now.’

She sighed loudly. ‘I didn’t ask you. Patrissia?’

‘Yes. No. I’m sorry, I can’t think.’ There was a tense silence. ‘I don’t know. Maybe it would be best if you went.’ She sat heavily on the sofa. ‘I’ll call you tomorrow.’

‘You’d *better* get thinking, Patrissia,’ said the woman, pulling the towel closer. ‘But I’ll go, since it seems your knight errant here is determined to save you from me.’ She put her hand on Jamie’s arm. ‘You don’t know what you’re getting into. You and Patrissia can have a nice talk.’

*

‘Jesus, Trish, have you got a death-wish or something?’ said Jamie as soon as Sally had left. ‘That woman reeks of trouble.’

‘You don’t know the half of it. I’ve lost control of my life.’
Patrissia shivered and slumped into the corner of the sofa. ‘Don’t think badly of Sally, though, I think she’s trying to help me. Pour me a drink, would you? Why are you here, by the way?’ she asked, folding her legs beneath her. ‘Shouldn’t you be at home? Nothing’s happened, has it?’

‘Ciara’s gone to her mother’s. Something about the old bat being scared.’

‘Scared? Of what?’ Patrissia asked in a tense voice.

‘She didn’t say. Bloody hell, you’ve gone white as a sheet.’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘Trish, it’s definitely something. What’s the matter?’

She shook her head, her lips pressed shut.

‘OK.’ He started towards the kitchen. ‘I’ll make some tea.’

‘Don’t be long.’

‘What? Maybe you should go a bit easier on the wine, Trish, don’t you think?’

She turned her face to him, her eyes wide with panic. ‘Someone’s going to try to kill me.’

Jamie stared at her, scraping his floppy hair out of his eyes. Then he relaxed and turned to pour himself a drink. ‘Yes, well, you know how it is, Trish. You piss someone off and the next thing, they’re poisoning your toast.’ He took a swig and shook his head. ‘Come on, that’s pretty crazy, even for you. You live alone and you drink too much. It’s classic.’

‘I’m serious.’ Reaching forward, Patrissia picked up her drink. ‘You might be in danger too.’

‘Don’t be silly.’ Jamie sighed and absentmindedly checked his phone. ‘Mind you,’ he sniffed, putting it back in his pocket, ‘the woman who just left—’

‘Sally.’

‘Yes, her. You know the other night, when we stayed over? When you saw all the cop cars?’

‘What about it?’

'You were right, there *was* a fight, and Sally was involved. Don't tell Ciara, but I was in the Elgin before I saw you, and some bloke was trying to pick her up but she wasn't having any, and he bopped her.'

'He *hit* her?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't you do anything?' Patrissia's face was white.

'He pulled a knife—I guess that's why they called the police.' Jamie scratched his chin. 'I don't think anyone was badly hurt, though the barman looked a bit shaken up. You don't expect things like that to happen, do you?'

'Not here, no,' said Patrissia, holding her glass to her chest. 'I noticed some bruises on her arm, but I didn't think anything of it.' Her lips were pressed tight together. 'What did he look like?'

'Nasty,' Jamie said with feeling. 'But you don't need to look so worried, Trish, I doubt he'll be back.' His phone beeped. 'That must be Ciara again. Look, you won't tell her I was in there, will you?'

'Jamie, for God's sake!' Patrissia said in an exasperated voice. 'Why shouldn't you go to the pub for a drink? You don't have to lie to Ciara—and if she finds out you do, you'll end up in the same mess you were in with Lu. Do you really want that again?'

She was sitting with her glass to her lips, her arms held tight against her chest, clearly still shaken.

'I know you're right, but maybe I just fall for that kind of woman,' said Jamie, softly.

Patrissia looked at him and was about to speak when she hesitated, looking down at her glass. 'Actually *I* can talk, can't I? I still haven't told Ciara I found Claudia.'

'I know. Why the hell *haven't* you told her? You know she suspects, don't you?'

'She's made that very clear, yes.' She pursed her lips. 'But Claudia asked me not to.' Seeing his expression, she continued, 'Really, Jamie, I'm telling the truth. Claudia's quite crazy, and—I don't know, I suppose I thought dealing with Marc was painful enough

for Ciara without finding out that her mother's gaga. And she doesn't even know the worst about Marc.' Patrissia slumped down further into the corner of the sofa. 'He knew that Claudia was pregnant when he left Rome.'

'He told you that?'

'No. Sally let it slip out. She's a mine of information.'

Jamie waited for more, but Patrissia was busy opening a pack of cigarettes, tearing the cellophane off with a nervous twist. He waited till the performance was over before looking at her with a puzzled frown.

'I don't understand.'

'Marc was a lot closer to Sally than he was to me, apparently. He told her lots of things.'

'Wow. I'm sorry, Trish.'

'It's OK. I knew there must be a story, but some of the things she told me—I don't know what to think.' She inhaled sharply, and sniffing, flicked her hand towards the ashtray.

'But how did he get those photos of Claudia?'

'She was young, and a bit crazy even then. She probably thought it was exciting. He liked to hurt her though, and that was why my father got him defrocked. It wasn't just because of the pregnancy.'

'Hurt her? You mean he beat her up? I can't imagine Marc doing anything like that, mad as he was.'

'No, of course not. As far as I can make out she was OK with it.'

There was a long silence. Jamie stared along the empty bookshelves, and then turning, went to sit beside her on the sofa. 'Did he hurt *you*?'

'I wasn't submissive enough, apparently.' Patrissia's voice was bitter. 'He wasn't up to a fight.'

'Is that what Sally told you?' Jamie asked, putting his hand on her arm.

'Yes, why?'

'It sounds to me like she has an agenda, Trish.' He shook his head. 'You don't say something like that to someone unless you're manipulating them. What else did she tell you?'

'If that's what you think, maybe I shouldn't say,' said Patrissia, guardedly.

'It's up to you, Trish. But two heads are better than one.'

'OK. But this is just between us. Promise.'

'I promise.'

'Relax, Jamie, it's not about me.' Patrissia took a deep drag of her cigarette. 'She said that Marc's death might not have been accidental. The van that hit him was stolen, and they haven't been able to trace the driver.'

'What? How come they didn't tell *you* that?'

'I'm ashamed to say that I told them we hadn't been together very long, that we weren't that close. I know how selfish that was, Jamie, but I wanted it all to be over.' She took a deep breath. 'Sally told them she was his daughter. What do you think?'

'About Marc being killed?' Jamie shrugged. 'It sounds even crazier than someone trying to kill *you*. He was bloody irritating—sorry, Trish, but he was—but he was just a fruitcake. Although, if he liked to hurt people, like you said, I suppose anything's possible.'

'That's why I'm scared, Jamie. I'm not making it up. Do you believe me now?'

'Do I believe you're scared? Absolutely. But do I believe some maniac's out to get you? Well, unless you're hiding some appalling stuff, like you say Marc was—no, I don't.' He paused. 'Look, I've got a busy few weeks coming up, and I'm sure Ciara won't miss me—I'll stay over more often, if you like. You'll see, there's nothing to worry about.'

Patrissia looked at him. 'Can you stay tonight, do you think?'

He nodded. 'It won't be a problem. Do you want to ring Ciara, or shall I?'

Patrissia laughed. 'Don't be silly, Jamie, of course you have to call her. Bloody hell, even I'd be suspicious if *I* called her.'

'I suppose so.' Reluctantly, he picked up his phone and tapped in a message. The reply came almost immediately. 'It's fine with her. She's staying at her mother's tonight anyway.' His face was set.

'You look pissed off.'

'Wouldn't you be?'

'Why?'

'You mean it wouldn't bother you that your partner didn't care if they saw you or not?'

'It would bother me more if I depended on someone else to feel good,' Patrissia replied quietly.

'You've been reading too many women's magazines. It's nothing like as black and white as that. Of course you should feel good by yourself, but why would you be with someone if they didn't give you something you didn't have if you're on your own? Even if it's just touching, hugging—you know.'

Patrissia stopped listening. She was thinking about touching: who she touched, who touched her. Puzzled, she watched Jamie as he sat staring at the message, his jaw tight. Since Marc's death, he was the only man she habitually touched, she realised. Of course, she touched her female friends, but not other men, except as a prelude to sex.

'You're not listening, are you?'

'What?' Patrissia laughed and patted his hand. They were sitting on the sofa, quite close, Jamie hunched on the edge of the cushion, Patrissia with her feet tucked beneath her in the corner. She felt very comfortable.

'Jamie?'

'What?' He turned to her, his guileless face showing a faint anxiety. She put her hand on the small of his back and kneaded it gently.

'You're tense. Do you want me to massage your back?'

'No, that's OK.'

She continued lightly stroking him with her fingers and palms. 'You're a good friend, Jamie.'

He twisted his head to look at her. 'Thanks, Trish. You are, too.'

'Hmm. You know—' She hesitated. 'You know I said I didn't want to sleep with you?'

'I know.' He managed a faint smile. 'Don't worry, there won't be any creaking doors in the night.'

'I'm not worried. I was wondering if *you* wanted to sleep with *me*?'

His smile faded. 'Now there's a question. You mean sleep as in *sleep*? Or...'

'What do you think I mean?'

'I don't think we'd get much sleep.' He said it in a jokey way, but she felt his back muscles tense.

'Oh, we might, sooner or later.'

'Stop messing around, Trish. You know we can't, even if we wanted to.'

'Why not? Maybe we *could* just sleep, and what would be wrong with that?'

'You know what's wrong. And you know we wouldn't just sleep.' She caught his eye, and they both began to laugh. 'You had me going there for a minute.'

Patrissia began to stroke his back again, and said in a soft voice, 'I wasn't joking, I mean it.'

'But Trish—'

'You don't have to answer right now. I know how awful it sounds—how awful it makes *me* sound after all the lectures I've given you, but I feel safe with you, Jamie.' Her voice was serious. 'I've never felt that before. In control, yes, but not *safe*, not *in the right place*. You know what I mean.'

She stopped stroking him and reached for a cigarette, lighting it at the third attempt. Inhaling deeply, she waited for him to speak.

'Are you serious?' Jamie was rigid, his eyes wide. 'It could ruin everything.'

'I know. But it might save both of us.'

‘Save? From what? And what are we talking about? Carrying on as we are with added sex?’

‘I don’t know, to be honest. You’re not married, Jamie—at least, not to Ciara.’ She finished her cigarette and slowly scraped it around the ashtray until no spark remained. ‘Maybe everything would change, maybe not. What do you think?’

‘I think we have a hell of a lot to lose.’

‘And nothing to gain?’ Patrissia lit another cigarette, carefully, then leaned back, blowing a plume of smoke towards the ceiling.

‘Can I have one of those?’

‘Of course.’ She lit another cigarette and passed it to him. There was the faintest outline of her lips on the tip. Jamie studied it, rolling the white tube between his fingers.

‘You know how serious it would be if—’

‘—Ciara found out?’

‘I was going to say ‘if it turned out that we were good together’, actually.’

‘That would be bad?’

‘It’d just be very serious, Trish. I have two children, and a third on its way. I’m living with Ciara, I’m about to buy a house with her, and she’s already talking about wedding arrangements. Her father’s talking about giving me a job. And,’ he said, finally taking a drag of the half-burned cigarette, ‘I don’t want a fling, not with you. We wouldn’t fool Ciara for long anyway.’

‘So is that a no?’

‘It’s my thoughts, Trish. What did you expect me to say?’ he grunted, watching the thin trail of smoke. ‘Especially since you’ve already said you don’t want to sleep with me.’

‘I don’t know what I expected. I don’t know what I’m offering, if anything. I just know that—’

‘Then why mention it?’

They sat in silence for a minute before Patrissia spoke again. ‘What would it take, Jamie? Seriously. What would you want from me?’

He snorted. 'I'd want to know there was a chance of it lasting.'

'You don't think there is?'

'Not while you hedge so much. You've said nothing except that you feel safe with me. Why not just hire a bodyguard?'

'I don't need to pay for sex!' she laughed. 'And besides—'

'What?'

'I *do* want to sleep with you. I want to sleep with *you*. It's more than sex or friendship, but I don't know what to call it. You're the psychologist, you tell me.'

'Hmm, a degree doesn't make me a psychologist. I don't know, Trish.'

'Now who's hedging?' Patrissia shifted in her seat, smoothing her skirt.

'It's not that.'

'Then what is it?'

'I can't think what might change to make it work.'

'Change? I know the circumstances aren't ideal, Jamie, but when are they? What do you feel?'

He stared at her. 'Scared, actually.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't know what you want from me? Because it would have a devastating effect on my life?'

'Oh, come on, I'm not that poisonous, am I?'

He didn't answer.

'Jamie, *am* I poisonous?'

'Well, you are, rather. Lu's told me about how you've treated—'

'I know, I know.' She lit another cigarette, her face hard. 'Don't think I don't know how selfish and nasty I can be. But—' She stopped. 'I'm not making excuses. I'm a high-risk option.'

'The thing is, I've always liked you, Trish. And—'

'You'd love to get into my knickers?' They both laughed.

‘Of course I would. You’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever met.’

‘Well, now’s your chance.’

Jamie stared at the ceiling, and then nodded.

‘Can I trust you?’

‘To do what?’

‘You know what I mean. Can I *trust* you? Can I rely on you? I won’t wake up one morning to a note saying *Gone Away*?’

‘I can’t promise that, you know I can’t.’

He let out a long breath. ‘Then the answer’s no.’

Patrissia nodded, ‘OK’ and stretched, unfolding her legs. ‘I’m off to bed, then. You know where to find me if you change your mind.’ She kissed his cheek. ‘But no complaining later, if you do.’

Jamie watched her pick up her glass and cigarettes and head for the kitchen, his heart hammering.

Slippery

By the time Patrissia made it down to the kitchen the next morning, Jamie had gone.

She read the note that he'd left by the coffee machine and contemplated the steaming carafe of hot coffee and her mug ready next to it, then taking the kettle to the sink, she swirled and emptied it, watching the grains and flakes of scale slowly clog the shiny starlike plughole. Mashing the grey sludge down until it was all gone, she rinsed the bowl, then the kettle, and let the tap run while she washed another mug. Then she refilled the kettle and put it on to boil.

She felt restless, as though some unknown energy-source had been turned on in her, but there was nothing to do with that energy. Wanting to listen to something soothing she vaguely remembered Iona finding some CDs in a kitchen drawer.

It was a shame about Iona, Patrissia reflected as she shuffled the slippery plastic cases. Her easy air and lack of agenda reminded her of Jamie and they had spent two amusing-enough evenings together. But Iona wasn't stupid and soon picked up that Patrissia's heart wasn't in it, and when she had suggested a weekend away it had ended swiftly and badly.

Slotting the shiny plastic disc into her cheap music box, Patrissia made the tea, and then hugging the mug to her, made her way to the living room. The knob of the living room door caught her skirt and some of the tea spilled against her chest. She clasped the mug tighter, feeling the hot liquid scorch her skin.

She had been through Marc's bookcase many times, but had found nothing that interested her, and as she let her eyes roam over the scarred spines she found her hands reaching towards them.

She flicked through the first few as she pulled them out in case there was something that she might have missed, but it took too long and soon she was grabbing handfuls, throwing them on the floor, her breath shallow and her mouth dry.

When the pile was complete, she stood in the centre of the room, letting her eyes circle the walls. The mirror above the

fireplace was cracked in one corner and the mirror itself heavily impregnated with brown spots. She went over and stood close, staring at herself. Her pupils were tiny and her orbits dark—she looked like she hadn't slept for days.

Behind her in the mirror, she could see the bookcase, its shelves now bare and hollow. As her eyes began to enfold its emptiness, she noticed a large folder and roll of paper on its top, too far back to see easily from the room. Turning away from the mirror she stood on a chair and stretched up, feeling her breasts and knees pressing against the hard edges of the shelves as she strained to get her fingers to push the folder off, but it was beyond her reach.

Her legs trembling from the effort, she stood down, brushing her arms. 'Dust,' she said aloud, 'the whole bloody place is a monument to dust and ashes.'

And then the tears came, and she sank down slowly onto the pile of books, hearing the old leather slide and tear in her clenching hands.

*

She jerked awake to a ringing sound in her ears. Raising her head, she gradually realised it was her phone. Sliding onto the floor, she stood and hurried to the kitchen, bruising her arm on the doorknob as she swung through it.

It was only Ciara. 'Is Jamie there, Patrissia? He was supposed to be at work by now but I can't reach him.'

'Sorry, I haven't seen him this morning, he left early.' She brushed some stray hairs back from her face. 'Is everything all right between you?'

'We're fine, why?'

'I don't know. He wasn't his usual chipper self, that's all.'

'I haven't noticed anything different. Sorry, I have to go. I have to ring my mother to tell her I'll be late.'

Patrissia put down the phone, pausing in front of the mirror to dab at her smudged eyes. Staring at the top of the bookcase, she vaguely remembered that there was a set of steps somewhere, but

she doubted whether anything she might find would be worth the effort.

The house was cold and the sky outside was heavy and dark. She felt a shiver run through her. Marc had hidden so much from her, and she had found nothing in the house that threw any more light either on the things she knew or on any secrets he had kept to himself. And nothing about Sally.

Lighting a cigarette, she went to the French windows. One of the revelations that Sally had made was about *Pan*, and it was one that Patrissia was inclined to believe. She had told her that *Pan* was Marc's attempt at an exorcism, that he had tried to rid himself of some of his guilt by working it into the horrible figure.

Patrissia shook her head as she remembered Lucinda telling her that he had said something similar about his *Lachesis*. '*All the nasty things voodoo'd out*' was the way she had put it. It must have been that which prompted her own efforts to rid herself of Johnny, she realised. It hadn't worked.

It is horrible, Patrissia thought as she rested her eyes on the worm-faced figure glistening in the rain. *Too horrible to have staring in at you every day without a damned good reason.*

She turned away from the window and contemplated the room. The books were ready for dumping, anyway. Or perhaps donate them to Secundus' hospice? Anyway, now for the desk drawers. Sighing, she pulled them out and tipped their contents over the books. There were papers, sketches, notes, Secundus' letters—and the photographs.

It occurred to her that she was seeing Marc's life in a timeless heap, unchanging, complete. Even in death there was no clue to how he had remained the stranger she had abjectly failed in her attempt to know. She wished he had kept diaries—she could feel him around her, but only the bleakness and bareness and silence of him.

Wanting to be distracted, she picked up a photograph of Sally lying untidily bound and gagged over a chair, her legs open, a red cross scrawled between her breasts, her hair tied up in a rough knot.

Would he do this to his daughter?

Looking closer, Patrissia saw that as well as the ropes around her legs and arms, Sally was covered in thin threads of what looked like sewing cotton. It was wound around her face and neck in tight loops, the skin bulging slightly around each strand.

Patrissia drew her finger along the line of the cross, continuing down over the stomach, pressing lightly as if she could feel the warmth and softness of the flesh. Is this what Marc had done, she wondered, sitting alone in his creaky chair at nights, drinking? Or—the thought suddenly struck her—was Sally *really* his daughter? There had been a knowing look in Sally's expression when she had told Patrissia of her conversation with the police, an expression that Patrissia had taken as a shared naughtiness, but what if it were something else?

She imagined Marc's face, always so raw and tense, never comfortable, always waiting. What if it were true?

She looked at the photo again, imagining Marc's voice saying, '*It is a religious subject, in the way El Greco's subjects were religious. It is merely a way of expressing the extremes of suffering, the extremes of yearning. It is not romantic—if it were, it would merely trivialise and glorify such suffering and yearning.*'

As Marc's voice continued reciting his grim romance in her head, Patrissia listened, and sitting in the creaky chair and picking up another sheaf of photos she shuffled through them and asked herself whether her own story was any happier.

She didn't understand. This could have been their home, their retreat. She felt him beside her, waiting, observing, disapproving.

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Patrissia took a bottle of red from the fridge and picked up a fresh glass. Jamie had said something the night before—what was it? She hoped he would turn up soon.

Taking her drink into the living room she settled herself in the corner of the sofa, resting her arm on the plump cushion at her side. This was her house now. What would an observer make of it? She let her gaze wander around the room where she and Marc had spent most of their time together. Emptying the bookcase was the

only change she had made. It was still a grim place, but she was inclined to leave it. It's cheerlessness gave her comfort.

She picked up the sheaf of photos lying beside her on the cushion. He had been weak and he had been resentful, and his petty, tawdry mind was displayed for all to see in his work. The greasy, vicious *Pan*, the *Lachesis* with its self-inflicted bonds and wounds, and whatever Sally would have become. Clotho, perhaps, or Atropos.

But how would *she* fare in the paintings she told herself she was so eager to start? She remembered the day she had painted her self-portrait, the intensity she had felt and the rawness of her confession. There was no denying the truth of it—but where before she had seen openness and willingness, now she could see only calculation and wilfulness in the hard expression and cold eyes.

And the mirror-Claudia, the saving grace as she had thought—where she had seen acceptance and peace, she now could only see resignation and bondage far worse than in Marc's photographs. This Patrissia-Claudia had no life except that of the woman she reflected. Far from being a shared shadow of the One Soul, Claudia's face showed only subjection, emptiness and fear.

She opened a kitchen drawer and took out the brochure showing Johnny's portrait of her. No, she hadn't changed. The twenty-year-old in Johnny's picture—there was no innocence there, she could see that now.

Patrissia could feel tears welling up. The objects of the two portraits were identical, but Johnny had known her then as she now knew herself to be. She wasn't surprised he'd had to resort to acceptance. There was nothing to love in her.

She thought of her old house. She had lived there for ten years, and yet the eventual buyer had been delighted that it had felt so neutral, *so uninflicted with personality*, as she had put it. Patrissia had hidden herself well. If she was a painter, where had been her paintings, or any paintings? Before she had done the portrait, how long had it been since she had picked up a brush? Sixteen years? She couldn't bear to think of it. She hadn't even painted Marc. It was as if she had deliberately neutralised herself.

As she started to close the drawer, a glint of something shiny-black caught her eye, and she pushed the mess of odds and ends to one side.

It was the obsidian knife she'd bought in Portobello road, another prop belonging to her life with Johnny. Picking it up, she thought how clear it was what it was for. It wasn't for leaving in a kitchen drawer. She scrabbled around at the back. Yes, the blue velvet bag was there too. She wiped the sharp blade and sheathing it, put it in the bottom of her bag.

Closing the drawer, the brochure slid out like a magician's card. It ripped as she pulled it farther out and she threw it angrily at the kitchen bin. Why did the bastard keep hanging around? He had been worse than Marc with his sarcasm and put-downs. What did she have to do to rid herself of him?

Going to the storeroom behind the kitchen, she sought out her paintbox and then heaved the big easel next to it through to the kitchen. Returning to the small stack of canvases that Marc had never bothered to hang she flipped through them until she came to a crude and disjointed self-portrait. That would do.

She set up the easel in the bay window and fixed the canvas in it. This time she would do it properly. Luckily, the paint surface was fairly smooth, and pinning the torn and crumpled brochure to a top corner, she felt the tight bubbles of emotion dissolve and drain away as she chose her biggest brush and began to obliterate Marc's face. It would be the final test. If she couldn't rid herself of Johnny like this—then how? What if she couldn't pin him butterfly-like to the canvas as he had her? How big a pin would it take?

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As she stood back from the easel and wiped a gob of vermilion from her brush, Patrissia shook her head. It was him and it was good, but it wasn't final, and she wanted it to be final, to be an end.

She stepped back, and cursed as the corner of the table bruised her thigh. She had been surprised at herself when she first realised how irritated she was at not having a proper studio. It shouldn't matter, and it hadn't when she had been with Johnny. Anywhere,

any time, he would announce that he had to paint, to draw, to fuck...and she had accepted it as a fact of life.

Looking back, she could see how his insistence had often irritated, angered and sometimes humiliated her, but she had accepted him then, just as she had accepted Marc and his history, his unapologetic self-pity and his weakness.

How could that be? She was strong, successful, attractive—she shouldn't need to compromise, and yet wasn't that what she had done? Why did she always need to prove to herself that she could make choices that others wouldn't?

Turning back to the picture, she ran her finger along the swirls and loops in which she had so artfully imprisoned him. Neon and drama—this was who he had been. And what had *she* been? Just a dull and unfocused reflection of him. He had shown her the light and then little by little he had sucked it out of her until she was nothing but his shadow.

Sighing, she perched on a chair, averting her eyes.

And when the light had gone, there had been the others, and finally Marc, who knew only darkness. In that dim place she had made a present of the meetings to him, and like an indulged child he had made a brief and critical appraisal, and rejected them. As he had her. Yes, they had stayed together, and he, too, had eventually submitted. But he had submitted to a relentless, unconquerable fear—not to light, not to love, and not to *her*.

She needed distraction. Picking up her phone she pressed Jamie's number.

A primal nutrient

‘How conventional you are, Jamie,’ Patrissia teased, ‘taking your girlfriend to the zoo.’ She took his arm briefly. ‘I haven’t been for years. It’s nice. Thank you for asking me.’

‘My pleasure.’ Jamie looked even pinker than usual as he watched her stop to light a cigarette. ‘It’s funny, you have your oddities, but you’re easy to be around.’

‘Hmm, I don’t know about that,’ she said, moving close and taking his arm again. ‘I am when I’m in a good mood.’

They wandered slowly down the wide path. ‘Do the animals enjoy being here, do you think?’ said Patrissia, blowing out a plume of smoke. ‘They have it so easy! No responsibilities except the obligation to be themselves.’

‘A lot of people think it’s cruel.’

‘You only have to look at them—they get fed, watered, housed, they’re safe from predators—I’m surprised the zoo doesn’t hire out the cages for therapy days. Come and be yourself! Roll up! Roll up!’ She hugged his arm closer. ‘What d’you reckon?’

Jamie smiled, squeezing her arm in turn. ‘It’d certainly make it all less tame, wouldn’t it?’

‘Do you think?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘Maybe, maybe not. It depends whether we get cages to ourselves. I think I’d be quite happy here, actually. Plenty of food, sex, and some paints—’

‘Sex? Isn’t that a sure-fire way of disturbing the peace?’

‘Not if it’s treated like food. The right quantity at healthy intervals, from a hygienic source, regular variation—’ She glanced up at his face, suffused with silent laughter. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘You. I don’t think even Lu would admit how meaningless sex is to her. I don’t mean unimportant, that’s not what I’m saying. Just how divorced from her emotional life it is.’

‘I think she *might* admit it, actually. You have to have a big romantic streak to think anything else, don’t you? A primal psychological nutrient and outlet, that’s all it is—nothing to do with feelings. Women know that, though most pretend otherwise, at least, at first. I don’t imagine it’s different for men. Of course, it can be associated with love, but then so can a lot of things—flowers, chocolates, trips to Paris... We’re conditioned to believe that sex is a vehicle for expressing love, but how can it be? They spring from entirely unrelated sources. It’s almost parodic to think they have to be combined. Just think: what hurts most when a lover is unfaithful?’

Jamie looked thoughtful. ‘I don’t know. Lu wasn’t hurt or jealous, just pissed off.’

‘Exactly. You were getting sexfood, let’s call it, and she was undernourished—deliberately, I know, but still.’

‘There’s more to it than that. You invite someone to share your body, to enter your own personal zone—’

‘Ah, but privacy is a very modern notion. Did you know that a Jewish mother and her female relatives would examine the bedsheets after her daughter’s wedding night looking for blood from the required torn hymen?’

‘Yes, but I doubt they filmed the actual penetration.’

‘I’m sure they’d have liked to. And think of all those tribes who live in longhouses? And what about school dormitories and the things that go on there?’

‘OK, so privacy might not be essential for the act,’ Jamie conceded. ‘But what about afterwards? I don’t know about you, but that’s actually what I like best, the closeness.’

‘It’s satiety, Jamie. The brandy after a nice meal.’

‘Well, I think you’ve solved ninety-nine percent of humanity’s problems there, Trish.’

‘It’s not a radical idea, Jamie. Hippies, Eskimos, Red Indians—just about anybody who isn’t hooked on hierarchy and ownership embraces it.’

‘But you argued against Ciara about that just the other night!’

Patrissia laughed. 'And? I was arguing against people like Ciara, not—'

'What do you mean, people like Ciara?'

'Pragmatists, Jamie. I'm not disparaging her and her sort, but I do think there's something missing in them. Sex might very well be like food but it's also a sign, a ritual, and rituals are the things that bind us together—marriage, having a meal together, playing together, being together. It's not what you do that binds you, it's that you do it. Like going to the zoo. And pragmatists don't care for rituals.'

'If I had a choice between sex and going to the zoo, I know which I'd choose.'

'Really? I did offer,' she grinned.

'I mean, as a regular—You're taking the piss, aren't you?'

They both burst out laughing, and Patrissia kissed his cheek. 'Shall we find a café? I'm parched.'

They began to wander along another metalled path.

'You don't seem very interested in the animals.'

'I come here a lot with the girls.'

'Of course. I forgot,' said Patrissia, with a sigh.

Turning a bend, a low glass building blocked their view. Inside, a party of schoolchildren was swarming over the counters.

'Shall we sit here?' asked Patrissia, turning away and pointing to a table half-covered in discarded cups amid a carpeting of dirty white blobs. 'I don't want to go inside. I really couldn't take their inane chatter today.'

*

'So, tell me about Johnny,' said Jamie, holding the two polystyrene cups above the table. Patrissia had hidden the dirty cups under a spare chair, but her attempts to wipe the pigeon droppings away had only turned them into a film of grey streaks. He handed a cup to her and checked his chair carefully before sitting down. 'Well?'

‘What d’you want to know?’

‘Dunno. Why you got together, what you did together, why you split. You’ve told me a bit, but he does seem to keep cropping up. It’s funny, Lu used to talk about him sometimes. He obviously made a big impression on you both.’

‘What did she say about him?’

‘Aggressive, bullying, caustic. She didn’t like him much. But mainly she talked about your affair and how disruptive it was for the rest of the class, what with the arguing and so on.’

‘I suppose it must have been. I was young and Italian.’ Patrissia took a sip of coffee and glanced towards the open door of the café through which drifted the squeaky clatter of children eating. ‘I hadn’t learned how to be acceptably English.’

‘She says you spent a lot of time being angry with him.’

‘Yes, well, she saw only half the story,’ said Patrissia, lighting a cigarette. ‘It was an art college and we were there to learn how to be artists—and being an artist isn’t about what you produce, just as being a lover isn’t about how many people you seduce. We were learning to express ourselves, to give something of ourselves away, it didn’t matter much what. It’s the emotion, the ritual, that counts.’

‘But you have to produce *something*, don’t you? Otherwise it’s just words.’

She shrugged. ‘Lovers do love and artists do art. Proper artists, anyway.’ Her voice had a sour note. ‘The result might be beautiful or ugly, perfect or flawed, but the result’s not the most important thing.’

‘Lucky it’s not, I’d say. The people we love aren’t often perfect, are they?’

‘Bloody right. Johnny and I...I’m not surprised Lu only remembers the squabbling. That’s all she’d see from the outside. Yes, we fought in class, but that doesn’t mean we fought all the time. It was just part of the *process*.’ She frowned. ‘That’s such an ugly word.’

‘I guess.’ Jamie’s face creased into a tense smile. ‘Lu thinks you’re still angry, that you still have unresolved stuff with him.’

‘Yes, she told *me* as much,’ said Patrissia putting down her cup and lighting a cigarette. ‘Maybe you’re right. Actually, I did think about going to visit him, but I don’t know how that would help.’

‘Help what? Are you still in love with him?’

‘Of course not.’

Jamie nodded and looked away. ‘I think that’s what they call a dead giveaway, Trish.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. He must be almost seventy.’

‘Age doth not wither him, nor custom stale his infinite variety.’

‘Oh, back to sex, is it?’ Patrissia managed a faint smile.

‘You’re the one who said sex and love—’

‘I know, I know.’ She took a long pull of her cigarette, the blue plume of smoke bright in the cooling air. ‘Maybe you’re right. Maybe it would put him to bed for me, as it were.’

Jamie lowered his eyes, scraping his cup in circles. ‘Only you can say, Trish, but it might be an idea. Nothing can happen with me or anyone else until he’s out of the picture.’

Patrissia smiled and reached across the table to put her hand on his. ‘You’re right, Jamie. It’s been far too long. I have to stop procrastinating, I know.’

‘Doctor Freud at your service, madam.’ Patrissia felt his hand tremble as he pulled it away. He pushed his chair back abruptly. ‘Do you feel like walking a bit more?’

‘OK,’ said Patrissia as she watched him ostentatiously check his phone. ‘Can we look at the big cats? I love it when they roar, it sends shivers right through me.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard them,’ said Jamie, sniffing and clearing his throat. ‘They’re always sleeping when I’m here.’

‘Ah well, lucky you’re a big pussycat yourself.’

They followed the signs, and after five minutes, found themselves back where they had started.

‘It’d be useful if they did roar today.’ Jamie had been quiet on their fruitless search for the cats and now he was scanning the path

in each direction, avoiding her eyes. 'At least we'd be able to find them.'

'They must be somewhere,' said Patrissia, soothingly. 'What's the matter, Jamie? You look pissed off.'

'Nothing really.' They were standing where two paths crossed, and he was hunched by one of the bright white signposts, his eyes fixed on it as if trying to decipher an unfamiliar language.

'It's weird, isn't it?' he continued, reflectively. 'We know they're there, we look for them, but they manage to hide from us. Instead we find ourselves laughing at the monkeys and other furry little creatures that constantly shriek for attention.'

The children from the café had been assembled by their minder into a double line and made to hold hands, and as Patrissia and Jamie moved apart to let the ragged ladder by, a vision entered her head of the swirling spiral Johnny had held up to them on the first day of college. She had guessed that it was meant to be the staff of Hermes Trismegistus. The others had shaken their heads, and the most serious of her fellow students had looked at her pityingly as he had correctly identified it as a section of DNA.

'The form of every living thing is determined by the simple combination and order of four elements,' Johnny had commented. 'And as human beings we can think of those elements of life as love and fear, pain and bliss. In the next three years you will discover the animal that your own unique combination of elements forces you to be.'

A voice came into her head.

He was wrong, Patrissia. Fear is the driver. It is fear that determines the strength of your love, the pain you will bear, the bliss you will share.

For a moment Patrissia wondered if it was Jamie's voice, and as she made an effort to attend to his words she heard him say, 'It's as though there's something in us that wants to stop us confronting these dangerous creatures in case the fear gets too real.'

'That sounds about right,' she said distractedly, glancing round as a series of screeches announced the children's discovery of the reptile house. 'As long as we hear only the odd roar in the distance, it's manageable. We can throw a few more sticks on the fire, get

under the blanket and dream of home. It's only when we smell their reek, stare into their eyes, realise that to them we're just meat, and that whatever cages we put them in, they'll always be hungry.'

'What are you talking about, Trish?'

Patrissia forced herself to pay attention. 'Isn't that what you meant? How fear colours our lives? I'm sorry if I misunderstood, I don't want to spoil such a nice day.' She smiled. 'You're very easy to be with, you know. I've never met anyone with so few hangups!'

'Oh, don't worry, I've got hangups,' said Jamie with a snort. 'It's just that everyone else's seem to be more important, somehow. That's what they tell me, anyway. I'm one of life's followers, I suppose. I just do what I'm told, more or less, go with the flow. D'you fancy an ice-cream?'

'Hmm, actually, I would. But—'

'What?'

'Sorry, I'll shut up in a minute... Aren't you ever scared that one day you'll wake up with a tiger's breath in your face, and that the unutterable pain you've always imagined is about to tear your insides out?'

Jamie laughed and shook his head. 'Not that I can remember. Pistachio and cherry do you?'

'What's the matter with me, Jamie? Why am I so obsessed with all this horrible stuff? Oh, sorry, yes that would be lovely.'

He returned holding two large cones.

'You spend too much time alone, Trish,' he said as he handed her the fluorescent green and red confection. 'Too much thinking.'

'I ought to be used to it by now. I've been alone most of my life.'

He looked at her. 'Then you've probably been thinking too much all your life.'

'Well, that's the main reason people get together, isn't it? To stop being eaten alive by their imagined monsters?'

Jamie took a messy bite out of his ice cream. 'To tell the truth, I'd say that somewhere in you is something that *wants* to be surrounded by monsters, to smell their breath.'

‘Hmm. What about you?’

‘Me, I’d probably just offer it some breath-freshener. I don’t have much imagination.’ He held up his cone, now dripping on to his hand. ‘I’m fed, the sun’s out and I’m with the most attractive woman I’ve ever known. It’s enough for me.’

Patrissia touched his cone with hers and took a tongueful of pistachio. ‘I’ve never thought about it like that before, imagination being a curse.’

She raised the cone in another toast. ‘Hmm, well, here’s to the moment. May it last forever.’

Unredeemable

Patrissia came to a slow stop at the T-junction, peering through the windscreen for a road sign to anywhere, but there was nothing except more of the overgrown hedges she'd been trapped between for the last mile. She swore loudly and with passion.

She had spent the past couple of days thinking about what Jamie had said at the zoo. His words had had a strong effect on her, which in itself she found curious. There was something unresolved with Johnny, yes, of course, but while she knew she missed him, she couldn't pin down what she missed except that he *wanted* her, and that was hardly novel.

What was she afraid of? Change. *Loss*. There was nothing new in that either, but it wasn't clear to her what she would achieve by seeing him. What could change? What more could she lose? There was nothing left of their connection as far as she was concerned. What would she even *do* if they did meet?

Eventually, she had given up, and that morning she had just got in her car and left. Awake at six, she had thrown a coat on the back seat, stopped at the first garage for petrol and cigarettes, and put her foot down, excited and happy.

Her mood had lasted until the motorway ended. She'd made good time from London, but as soon as she had got past Exeter, everything had gone into slow motion. The queue at the last roundabout had been the last straw, and she had dipped into the next country lane. And now she was lost.

She looked at her map. She ought to have just passed the cottage she and Marc had stayed at the year before, but if she had, she hadn't recognised it. She glared through the windows, looking for a glimpse of sun, but it was hidden behind thick grey cloud.

Exasperated, she wrenched the wheel round. Any direction was better than standing still. And then, there it was, the sign to Zennor. She had been right. Relaxing, she lit another cigarette and turned the music up. She didn't want to think. It didn't seem to help.

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‘Patrissia?’

‘You don’t sound surprised to see me.’

‘I thought you’d turn up sooner or later. I’m surprised it took you so long.’

‘I don’t want anything. I don’t know why I’m here.’

‘Well, come in, anyway. Maybe we’ll find out.’

Patrissia stepped over the dirty threshold and started to take off her shoes, then changed her mind when she saw the state of the floor. She glanced at the litter of dirty cups and plates heaped over the sink.

‘If you were expecting me, you might have done the washing-up, Johnny. Or, at least, had some woman do it for you.’

‘There are no women any more, Patrissia.’

‘Not for want of you trying, I imagine.’

He grunted. ‘We’re ruled by our obsessions, overt or disguised. We can sublimate them into life or into art, but they’re always with us.’

Patrissia looked around the room at the battered mugs and plates, the old brushes and tubes on the overflowing table—it was as if the turmoil of his life had shipwrecked him there.

‘Well, I don’t see any evidence that you’ve managed to overcome nature.’

He smiled. ‘They wouldn’t be obsessions if they could be satisfied.’

‘I don’t even know what my obsessions are, Johnny, unless you count unsuitable lovers.’ She dumped her bag on the floor and planted herself in front of the dishevelled old man.

‘So you haven’t come to sleep with me?’ he asked mildly, moving his rollup to the other corner of his mouth and crossing his arms.

‘Not specifically, no.’

‘Pity. I remember—’

‘So do I. You introduced me to pain, Johnny, real, physical pain, and I don’t thank you for that. But it was only a habit for me, not an obsession. *You’re* the one who used pain as currency.’

‘Pain, art, love—they’re all the same thing in the end.’

Patrissia smiled. ‘Still the same ragged old wise owl, eh, Johnny? Well, I have to disagree with you. They’re not the same thing. And I’m sticking to art and love.’ She paused. ‘I know I said I didn’t know why I came here, but actually I do. It’s to be honest with you at last. After we talked on the phone—’

She stopped. She wanted to tell the truth, but what was there to be truthful about? She was angry, but she couldn’t think of a reason for that either, except the way she had turned back into her naïve twenty year-old self when she had heard his voice on the phone the year before. ‘*The elusive, infinite, eternal connection. What rubbish it all sounds, doesn’t it?*’ he had laughed. And she had to agree. It did sound like rubbish now, coming from him.

‘I didn’t love you, Johnny, you know that, don’t you?’

The look on his face echoed her own surprise. ‘I didn’t really believe the things you said, either, and you knew it. *That’s* why you ‘let me go’, as you put it.’

‘That’s not what you said at the time.’

‘No, I know. Most of the time I didn’t think, to be honest. It was nice fucking my tutor, of course, and the other stuff—I don’t know. It drowned out everything else. I suppose it might have been more than that, but—I’m sorry, I didn’t come here to hurt you.’

‘You’re not doing a very good job.’

Patrissia ignored him, her mind suddenly racing. ‘There was infatuation, admiration, exultation—but not love. Not art, either, unfortunately, I’ve realised. Sex and art are means, as you always said, not ends. But they *were* ends for you, weren’t they? It was all just talk. Look at you.’ She swept her hand around the room then stopped abruptly and went closer to a picture hanging in one of the dirtier corners, peering shortsightedly at it. ‘That’s Lucinda!’ She stepped closer. ‘Definitely.’ She turned round. ‘When did you do this?’

‘A few years ago.’

‘So I wasn’t a one-off—I should have known. You always were a damned liar. I imagine she was more amenable than I was.’

‘Actually, we became very close, Patrissia.’

‘Where do you keep the others?’ she asked, sarcastically. ‘In your bedroom?’

‘Do you—?’

‘No, I don’t want to see your fucking bedroom!’

She picked up her bag and brushed it off.

‘You’re not going already?’

‘I’ve said all I need to. What’s there to stay for? I just came to say goodbye.’

‘Wait—’ He grabbed her arm.

‘Get your hands off me!’

‘You bitch. You walk in here and think you can swan about saying and doing what you want without any comeback. Well, you’re wrong.’ He pushed her backwards, pinning her to the wall. The stink of his breath was in her nostrils as she struggled against his weight.

‘You’re destructive, Patrissia, and you encourage destruction in others. Meaning occurs only within a specific context—nothing means anything without a plan. You had no plan and you had no path. And you haven’t changed. You’re too scared to commit yourself to anything. When you found commitment in me you did everything you could to sabotage me. I remember, Patrissia, I remember how angry you were when I told you I wanted to leave my wife for you.’ His breath came faster as he pressed himself against her. She felt the thump of his heart.

‘Don’t give me that shit, Johnny. I’ve been waiting a long time to do this, you bastard.’ Patrissia brought her knee up sharply between his legs. ‘And I’m doing it with love. I know you’ll understand.’

The old man staggered back, his face collapsed, fighting for breath. She watched him, unmoved.

‘You’re a nasty, selfish, shit. So am I, thanks to you. You made me believe that love wasn’t real unless it hurt. But even pain gets

boring when there's nothing else. Yes, *boring*, Johnny, boring. You're boring and sad, and you'll rot in hell for making me waste my life.

'You didn't even think about what you were doing to me, did you? You made me believe in your fantasies, and then in my own. But fantasies aren't real, Johnny, only bodies and what they *do* are real. But fantasies were all you could manage. You're just another bloody hack.' She nodded at the painting. 'This is for Lucinda.'

She slapped him as hard as she could, and he fell back, tripping and hitting the floor with a dull thud. She stood over him as he groaned.

'Piss on you, you poisonous bastard. Take a good look.' Straddling his head, she released the urine and felt it flow out of her, giving herself to it, feeling her muscles contract and relax, contract and relax, squeezing out the last drops. He didn't move, but closed his eyes, his face softening as if he were a dried-up plant welcoming rain.

Putting one foot on his chest, she pressed hard. 'My only satisfaction is that you've wasted *your* life, too. All that crap you just came out with—you're a nobody.'

'I was in love with you—'

'Bollocks! I'd say that you were in love with yourself, but you don't even have a self, just a front. That portrait's not me, and it's certainly not you. How you had the chutzpah to talk about authenticity...and I fed your vanity.'

Taking a tissue from her bag, she wiped herself and threw it on his face, watching. He didn't move.

'You bloody coward, you self-pitying...' she struggled to find an adequate word '...weakling. You deserve much worse than this.'

He turned his eyes to her.

'It's a pity you didn't do this when we were together, Patrissia, you might have learned something about yourself.' He wiped his face on the tissue. 'But you couldn't be honest if you tried. Look at you: you think you're strong, but you were weaker than me, and you still are. You had talent, but never any ideas of your own, so you sought out people you could take it out on. Well, fuck you.' He spat

on the floor. ‘You fancy yourself an iconoclast, but you replace meaning with nothing. You’re just a spoiled child, Patrissia, and you always will be.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Fuck off yourself, and don’t come here and bore me again with this shit.’

She stared at him, remembering how it had felt when he had taken her. Rough, painful, and then apologetic. At the time, she thought it was just raw, that it was his passion—and hers—that required the hurt, that it wasn’t real without pain. But it wasn’t pain she sought, it was love, connection. She had mistaken the intimacy of pain, of obedience, of humiliation, for the intimacy of love. It had always been about *him* and *his* convenience—and she had admired him for it, happy to be part of the grand idea.

Putting her weight on his chest, she pressed hard and then turned to the door. ‘Adios, Johnny. I won’t be back.’

He opened his mouth for a parting curse, but she had gone.

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Sitting in the car, Patrissia stared at the heavy black blade in her hand. Whose heart was it destined for? Obviously not Johnny’s. Perhaps it was hers. But not yet. She put it back in its blue pouch and replaced it carefully in the bottom of her bag.

As she negotiated the muddy track back to the road, she felt oddly at peace. What was it about men that made it OK to think they deserved death? It didn’t even seem outrageous that such thoughts could arise in her. She wasn’t bad, it was just—Yes, women did terrible things, worse than men, if you considered the Machiavellian webs they routinely constructed—but with women, you can see the emotions struggling, tangled up in the thought-webs. You can see how twisted together things are, how nothing is certain, how there is always a possibility that things might change. There was always space for redemption.

But men? Was it their physicality, their tiger breath? Or was it just that they couldn’t hide themselves among the insignificant details of their lives or beg forgiveness the same way women did?

Whatever it was, men were just who they were, unredeemable.

Unsettling

It's always available

The woman paused on reaching the table, and taking her weight on both hands, she swung her hips round and sat down heavily in the rickety chair. Walking was hard work, and she put her hand to her skinny chest feeling it rise and fall. It took several minutes for her to regain her breath and she let her eyes rest, first on the carafe of cool water then on the edge of the verandah, until she felt strong enough to raise them to the clear air of the turquoise sky.

Although she wasn't expecting Roberto that day she squinted through the early evening sun, straining to see a sign of him, but nothing was moving in the stifling air. He knew not to disturb her when she was sleeping, and instead would go onto the parched terraces to water her meagre crop of fruit and beans. Perhaps he was there.

She had needed him more and more as she had become weaker and unable to carry even the smallest bucket of water to the root of the precious vine that shaded her from the heat of the day.

She knew it was difficult for him to visit her, but when he was there she couldn't stop herself complaining that he neglected her, and she knew that one day he would tire of her and wouldn't return. Each day after her siesta she prayed that he would not leave her.

She gazed wearily at the large bowl of cherries he had brought on his last visit. She loved the burst of juice as she bit lightly through their deep burgundy skin and tasted the sweet ruby-flecked flesh within, but she had grown too tired to take pleasure even in that. There were so few pleasures left.

Nodding to herself, she poured a glass of water and leaned back, resting the fingers of her other hand gently on the rosary at her neck, taking comfort from its smooth familiarity.

There was a noise like someone scuffling along the stony path that ran round the tiny house.

‘Roberto? Is that you?’

‘Claudia?’ The voice came from the side of the house. It sounded harsh, not like Roberto’s usual gentle tones.

‘Of course it’s Claudia! Who else would it be?’ The woman put down her glass. ‘What are you doing here at this hour? Never mind, I’m glad you’ve come. I’ve been sitting too long. I’ll get you another glass from the kitchen.’ She cocked her head, but heard nothing except the cicadas.

She called out again. ‘Roberto? Where are you? Come out, you’re scaring me.’ She got to her feet, wincing at the pain in her hip. ‘My leg hurts a lot today. Can you bring me my stick?’

She began the shuffling journey to the kitchen. Her hip was as bad as it had ever been, and the pain made her pause at every resting place.

‘*Roberto!* Why are you hiding? What’s the matter? Where are you?’

She peered in the kitchen window as she passed, but the room was empty. Everything was in its place—she could see her stick leaning against the stove; the small, square table standing where it always had, the chequered cloth held in place with clips; the plain painted cupboards shut against the mice; the lino worn where it had always been worn: but she felt uneasy.

Her eyes rested on the old sink in front of the window, where a plate, a small pan and a fork were neatly arranged. Pulling her shawl tighter, she continued to the open kitchen doorway where she paused, scanning the room again, listening.

She *had* heard a voice, hadn’t she? A man’s voice, not the whispered susurrations that were the background to her life here. She had become used to those. Once, when Secundus still visited her, she had asked him if he could take the voices away, but he had only looked at her sadly, not answering. Who was there now to help her? Roberto, of course, but as a lay-brother he could see her only two or three times a week, and then only if his other duties

permitted it. He didn't normally come in the evening, anyway. There must be something wrong.

She stood in the doorway gathering her breath like an old woman, remembering how Patrissia had offered to come and stay with her.

She closed her eyes. *Patrissia*. The name gnawed at her guts. It was her fault that Claudia had been banished to these barren hills, her fault that Marc had lost his priesthood. And not content with that, she had pursued and killed him. Claudia wished she could blame Patrissia for her own frailty, but she knew that it was just what being a Vecchia woman brought.

Why did Patrissia have to visit her? Claudia hadn't wanted to be reminded of Marc but he had come into every conversation, somehow or other.

She leaned against the door jamb, her heart beating wildly, remembering.

Marc had been fun in the beginning. Claudia remembered pretending to be one of the nuns at her convent school and her beautiful punishments at his hands. When he had wanted to stop she had begged him to go on until she bled, and only then would she let him rest.

Later, when he had begun to hurt her too much, she enjoyed that too, in a way, but then...She shook her head. But who could have predicted the result of what was, as Patrissia had told her during one of the long evenings of her visit, nothing unusual. 'Pain is all around us,' she had said, 'and if nobody is there to inflict it on us, we inflict it on ourselves. It's just another boundary to explore, another escape. It takes no effort, and it's always available.'

It had made Claudia wonder, both about herself and about her little sister. After Patrissia had left, she had begun to compose a letter to her but as the pencilled words flowed out, she realised that it was too late for either of them.

'Claudia!'

She jumped, jerking her head towards the window. The voice was real, then. She felt her heart hammering unevenly in her chest. 'Please, who is it? Mario?'

‘Don’t you know me, Claudia?’ There was the scraping of chair legs. ‘You haven’t offered me a drink. Bring a glass for me, Claudia, and some wine. We need to have a chat, you and me.’

‘Who are you? Where are you?’

‘You know me, Claudia, and I know you very well, very well. Take your time, there’s no hurry.’

‘I *don’t* know you.’ Her hand was trembling as she repeated, ‘Who are you?’

‘Of course you know me, Claudia. You knew Guido, and Roberto too...He won’t be coming again, I’m afraid. He had an accident on the hill, a very bad accident.’

‘What do you mean?’ She wished she had her stick. She could see it leaning against the stove but she was too breathless to reach it. ‘Is he all right?’

‘He’s as well as can be expected.’

‘I don’t want to talk to you. Go away.’

‘Ah, but I’ve come a long way to see you. Come, be hospitable, Claudia.’

His voice had begun to remind her of someone, but she couldn’t quite place it, and she could feel the fog of confusion settling on her again. Unable to think clearly, she took another glass from a cupboard, her hand trembling.

‘I’ve lost my stick. I don’t know where I put it. Will you help me? I’m in pain.’

‘Certainly, Claudia.’

Why did he keep repeating her name? Suddenly she recognised the voice.

‘*Ignatius*? What? But you’re dead.’ She put the glass down. ‘I don’t want to speak to you’. Lifting the rosary from her tight, heaving chest she shouted as loudly as she could, ‘Go away! Please go away. I don’t want to hear you. I don’t want you here. Leave me alone!’

She paused, listening as her words echoed out into the empty air. There was silence.

‘Does Ignatius still speak to you, Claudia?’ The voice came again. ‘What does he say?’

‘He says nothing! Please, go. I’m ill, I’m...’ She sat down. The noise of the cicadas was loud in her head, and the whispering...It was repeating the name of her daughter, *Ciara, Ciara, Ciara...* She put her hands to her ears, her breath coming in short gasps. ‘Stop!’

There were footsteps, and a man appeared at the door.

‘Stop, *cara mia*? But we haven’t started yet. It’s a lovely evening, let me help you outside. But first we must get rid of the whispering.’

He took two steps and slapped her face hard. She screamed as her head bounced sideways. ‘You *are* Ignatius! No! You’re dead! Oh God.’ Frantically, she put her hand to her neck, feeling for the black rosary. ‘*Ave Maria—*’

He slapped her again, and putting his hand over hers, squeezed until she cried out, tears covering her cheeks.

‘It’s time, Claudia.’ Holding tight to her hand he grabbed her hair and dragged her over the rough stone floor onto the verandah. ‘You’re very thin. Is it to please Roberto?’

Hauling her along the cracked tiles to the table, he threw her into the chair. ‘What a shame he can’t be here to appreciate your care for him.’

Whimpering, Claudia grasped her dress closer. ‘You’re hurting me. Please stop.’

In answer, he yanked her necklace, and a shower of beads cascaded over the table, click-clack-clicking as they bounced.

‘*You* hurt *me* far more, Claudia.’

Lifting her eyes, she cried in pleading tones, ‘How? How did I hurt you? I’ve never hurt anybody. I don’t know you. I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.’

‘You gave me no love.’ The man bent over her face, his voice cold and angry now. ‘You gave me to people who *hurt* me. I was beaten and shamed.’ He stared deep into her eyes. His own were black and hard—Ignatius’ eyes. ‘Roberto is dead, Claudia. *Dead*. Now there is no-one to help you. I killed him.’

He suddenly seemed to lose interest in her and stood up, asking conversationally, 'That's a sin, isn't it? He gathered a handful of the black beads from the tablecloth, picking them up one by one and examining them carefully.

'These are prayers, aren't they? How many prayers do you think I'd need to say for killing Roberto? He bled such a lot, Claudia, I thought he'd never stop bleeding. I had to leave him in the sun to dry out.' He held out his hand. 'What do you think? Twenty? Thirty?' He put the handful of beads to his mouth as if they were pills, then stopped. 'What am I doing? The prayers would be much better coming from you.'

With a quick movement, he grabbed her hair, wrenching her head back, and pressed the beads into her mouth, pushing them between her teeth as she struggled. When her mouth was full, he forced her chin up, clamping her teeth together.

'I had to swallow much more than this, Claudia—but I see you are having trouble saying your prayers.' The thin figure writhed and choked under his hands as he bent, watching. 'You have to eat them all up, Claudia. A penance for each sin—and who can count your sins of omission?'

Crying and gagging, Claudia couldn't scream, and she thrashed about under his heavy hand, her jerking arms already bruised. He punched her where some of the beads had lodged in her cheek. There was a sharp crack as a tooth broke, and a thin trickle of blood appeared at the corner of her mouth.

He looked around, releasing her momentarily to pick up a piece of netting that lay in the corner of the verandah. 'I think we should make sure you don't hurt yourself. That would be sad.' He tied her wrists tightly to the arms of the chair while her head lolled and her mouth bubbled and dripped with spit and blood.

'Here,' he said softly, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. 'This will help.' He forced open her bloody lips and stuffed the dirty cloth tight behind her teeth. 'That's better. But I think you have to say more prayers, *cara mia*, many, many more. You must pray in silence, and you must pray that He is listening. Does he listen to your prayers, Claudia?'

He held out the bowl of cherries to her. 'Here is a whole bowl of fat, juicy prayers to offer.' He picked one out and held it over her eyes, squeezing out the red juice. 'Do you think there are enough prayers to expiate our sins?' He squeezed another, watching the play of tendons in her scrawny neck. She was almost lying now, her head bent over the chair back, her legs splayed, her lace collar spotted with blood like an old cracked mirror. 'My sins will take much forgiveness. Perhaps we have not enough prayers for yours.'

Suddenly a thin knife appeared in his hand, and hooking it over the neck of her dress he pulled sharply down, splitting the flimsy material. She was naked underneath. Bending over her, he crushed a handful of cherries over her thin breasts and stomach and with a finger drew the red pool out into the shape of a cross.

'Oh, Claudia, what's this?' He took a nipple between his fingers, twisting and squeezing. 'It's your most fervent prayer. But you mustn't keep it to yourself,' and sucking its plump hardness into his mouth, he closed his lips and teeth around it and pulled back. 'It is your prayer for me, and I need it now, Claudia, God says it is time.' He bit down hard, sawing sideways with his teeth.

The woman's body arched and thrashed against the restraining ropes, her mute screams lost in the thin cool air.

Raising himself up slowly, the blood of the writhing woman glistening on his lips, he lifted his face to the setting sun, chewing and crying in a low moan, 'O Lord, Thy will is done.'

A wet hand

'I'm still not happy about this, Trish. What if Ciara finds out?'

'What if she does? Don't be silly, Jamie, she's an artist. Do you think she's never used models? Never painted a naked man?'

'You know it's not the same. She's already jealous, or suspicious, or on the lookout anyway. It wouldn't be pretty.'

'I know.' Patrissia relented, continuing in a softer voice, 'I won't tell anyone, Jamie.'

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

'What about all that stuff you used to spout in the meetings, about honesty and love, and all that?'

Patrissia sighed. 'The meetings were a long time ago. I suppose I might have meant it then. The trouble with being honest is that it makes people suspicious. You know that's true.'

Jamie put down his glass. 'But you're being honest now,' he said guardedly, 'aren't you?'

Patrissia put her head to one side, listening. Then she laughed. 'You see? Fuck it, Jamie. What's the bloody point? Bad things happen whether you fear they will or not. Good things happen whether you hope they will or not. Everybody gets hurt, honest or not. You might as well forget about all that and just enjoy yourself.' She stopped, a frown of concentration wrinkling her forehead. 'Did you hear that?'

'Hear what?'

'That noise. It came from the kitchen. Didn't you hear it?'

'I didn't hear anything.'

'Go and look, would you?'

'Are you serious? It's probably a curtain or something blowing in the wind.'

'It sounded like a voice.'

‘There’s only us here, Trish. You haven’t let that Sally woman get to you, have you?’

‘No, I haven’t heard from her. Please, Jamie.’

He got to his feet. ‘OK. I’ll get another bottle while I’m there, shall I?’ He looked at her pointedly.

‘Good idea. Thank you.’

‘I was joking.’

‘I wasn’t.’

Jamie shook his head and disappeared through the living room door.

Patrissia sat stiffly on the sofa, waiting. She could hear the house creaking, Jamie’s muffled footfalls down the passageway, then nothing except a faint moaning. She couldn’t work out where it was coming from. It might be the wind, but it might be Johnny.

Why couldn’t he leave her alone? She had hoped that her trip to Cornwall would be decisive, but it seemed that he was a tumour in her breast, a hurt that couldn’t be decided away. It didn’t help that there were reminders of him everywhere: old clothes she had kept, jewellery he had given her, the lighter, the knife...and they were so much part of her she couldn’t bear to be without them.

His voice too. But now that she had found him out, why did she continue to listen to him and his beautiful, mesmerising, meaningless words?

Her heart thumping, she strained harder to listen, staring into the garden. The roses were scratching against the cold glass of the old French windows. She went closer, wanting to see them move, knowing it couldn’t be them. It had sounded like a loud whisper or low moan.

‘Johnny?’ she called softly. ‘Is that you?’

As she glanced away to the door of the room, she saw a movement out of the corner of her eye, and froze, then jumped as she heard the fridge door bang.

‘Jamie!’ she shouted. ‘*Jamie!*’ She listened for his step, but there was nothing. Then the old Victorian toilet flushed, and he reappeared at the door, running a wet hand through his hair.

‘Did you say something?’

‘I think there’s someone here.’

He looked at her curiously. ‘I don’t think so, Trish. Why should anybody be after you?’

‘I didn’t say they were after me, did I? Are you trying to scare me? There’s someone there, I know it.’

‘But who could it be? I suppose that Sally woman—’

Patrissia turned sharply. ‘Why do you say that? She’s nobody, Jamie.’ She tried to remember if she’d shown him the photographs.

‘I know it’s none of my business, but I’d steer clear of her if I were you, Trish. I’ve got a bad feeling about her.’

Patrissia lit a cigarette. ‘Don’t be silly. She’s weird, I know, but she’s harmless.’

‘If you say so. But really, I think you should see a doctor.’

‘Shut up, Jamie, I’m fine.’ She took a long drag of the cigarette, blowing the smoke out in a cloud towards the window.

I don’t want to lose him.

‘You don’t sound fine.’

‘I don’t want your advice.’ She looked away. ‘Actually, I was going to ask you if Lucinda had contacted that model yet, do you know?’

‘What model?’

‘Oh, I thought she might have mentioned him. Some guy I met in Covent Garden. I gave her his card. I thought she might be interested.’

‘Why?’

‘She said she was thinking of doing some painting.’

‘Painting? I wonder what brought that on? She hasn’t done anything since she was pregnant with Zara.’

A look of surprise appeared on Patrissia’s face. ‘I didn’t think she’d done anything since college. She didn’t say anything to me.’

‘Oh. She came back from a business seminar full of it one weekend. It lasted about a year, then she lost interest again. It was a bit odd, actually. She started talking about college, about losing her way—nothing like her usual self. She even went on some painting weekends. She really got into it for a while.’

‘Really?’

‘I know what it sounds like. I thought she was having an affair, too, at first. But she’s just not like that. She wasn’t brought up to have fun,’ he smiled. ‘Anyway, she didn’t need to hide anything from me, did she? I could hardly object considering what I’d been up to.’

‘I wonder why she didn’t say anything to me? You’d have thought she would, wouldn’t you? That *is* odd.’ With a grunt, Patrissia opened the big wooden box of paints. ‘OK, let’s get going. You can change in the bathroom. There’s a robe behind the door.’

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Look, Jamie,’ said Patrissia, nerves and exasperation making her voice sharpen, ‘either you’re doing this or you’re not, it’s up to you. No-one’s forcing you. But please, make up your mind.’

There was a pause while Jamie’s face hinted at a series of expressions while he watched Patrissia busy herself with pouring out a small cup of oil and another of turps. Her hand was trembling. At last he nodded.

‘OK, I agreed, didn’t I? Back in a sec.’

Patrissia put the lids back on the bottles and walked slowly towards the French windows, scanning the garden. Although the light was bright, it looked cold and bleak outside—too cold for an old man. It couldn’t be Johnny. Besides, he was too disorganised, and what would he get out of it? She wasn’t worth his trouble. The thought didn’t make her feel any better.

She pulled the easel further to one side, making small adjustments to the angle. Marc’s empty bookshelves would make an interesting background. Perhaps she would arrange a copy of his blank book somewhere. She recalled seeing one on the bench in his old studio. A book of faith that required no belief. She shook her head admiringly. He had invented a means of escape, of absolution,

that had foxed even her. And it was so beautifully pure: if you have no standards, you can't be accused of not living up to them, can you? It was the answer she should have found herself—an end to guilt and shame and to their infinitude of hiding places.

*

‘OK, Jamie, that’s good. I need you to stay in exactly that position while I sketch in the main forms. Are you sure you’re comfortable?’

‘I’m fine. But is the angle right? Maybe if I turned to the side a little more...?’

‘Shut up, I can see everything I want to see.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘What?’ she said impatiently. ‘You want me to call it *Here Comes the Big Prick*?’

He laughed, embarrassed. ‘OK, you win. Isn’t that your phone?’

They listened to the faint tones coming from the kitchen.

‘It sounds like it. Bugger, will we ever get started? Won’t be a sec. Don’t move, will you?’

Jamie watched from the corner of his eye as she almost ran out of the room. Was the call from someone she was sleeping with? Was she running to Sally for comfort? He felt his face tighten, and walked to the open door, listening. All he could hear was the odd ‘*Oh*’ and then the clatter of the handset being replaced, then the splash of running water, then nothing.

Picking up the bathrobe, he took his glass to the sofa, sitting down with the robe in his lap. She was obviously thinking about whoever had called her. *Fuck*. But what was she doing now? Did she ever think of *him*?

He stared around the room in an effort to distract himself. It hadn’t changed much since Marc had been living there. Still shabby and dark in spite of the wide French windows. Still dusty, even. Slightly less cluttered and untidy, but not much, in spite of the empty bookshelves.

He stared at them, wondering if Patrissia was making a point. She had books, he knew, but even if she hadn't, why get rid of Marc's? Knowing him, they were probably valuable. Either that, or they had been fakes, all blank like the one he had brought to the meetings. Marc had certainly taken himself seriously.

As it was, the high, dark shelves loomed with emptiness, reminding him of the day he had first seen Ciara, how he had walked in on the two women and Marc in a—what did the Victorians call it? *Tableau vivant*? Something like that. Three people pinned like butterflies in a triangle of mutual suspicion and incomprehension.

Tableau mordant, more like.

And Jamie had thrown himself into that deathly pool like Lancelot rescuing Morgan-Le-Fay and Guinevere both. He shook his head.

Talk about green knights.

The bookshelves were getting to Jamie now, and he pushed himself to his feet, pulling on the robe and calling out, 'Trish? Are you OK in there?'

He started towards the kitchen. She was sitting at the table, staring at the wall, a glass and another open bottle in front of her.

'Trish? What's the holdup?' he asked, his eyes hot.

She didn't move.

'Trish?' He put his hand on her shoulder, but she roughly pushed it away.

'Jamie, I want you to go.'

'What do you mean? Who was that on the phone?'

'I'm sorry, please don't ask any questions.'

'Is it Sally?'

'I said *go*! Now go!'

'But—'

'For Christ's sake, aren't you listening to me?'

‘OK, OK,’ he said, retreating, ‘I’m going. Let me get dressed at least.’

‘Please be quick.’ Her voice was thin and breathless. ‘I’m sorry, I’ve had some bad news. I need to think.’

‘If I can help—’

‘Jamie, it’s kind of you, but can you please just go? You can’t help me. *Capisce?* Go!’

*

As soon as Jamie left, Patrissia went round the house making sure the windows were closed and locked. Returning to the kitchen, she sat at the table and held out her hand. It was perfectly still. She refilled her glass and threw back the blood-red wine.

Dead. She’s dead.

Her phone beeped. It was Lucinda—Jamie must have called her. Patrissia stared at the little screen. She would be worried and sympathetic, but Patrissia didn’t want sympathy. What she wanted was Marc to be with her, to stare at her with his uncomprehending eyes, to reassure her that there was to be no let-up from the cycle of humiliation and shame that she so needfully endured. To show her where the boundaries lay. To judge her.

‘Marc?’ she called out softly, ‘Are you there? Is this why you stayed? Speak to me.’ The chair creaked under her as she leaned back, listening to the house, thick with sounds on the threshold of hearing.

The phone beeped again. It was Lucinda telling her she was coming round. That was what friends and lovers did, wasn’t it? They showed you care and provided comfort. What care and comfort had Patrissia given Claudia? Or Marc, for that matter? She hadn’t been even a friend to them, and they had known it. But it wasn’t her fault. She lived her life and they lived theirs. Marc had bound up his own defects and hidden them in an unreadable book. Claudia had hidden herself from her. How could she be responsible for them?

Patrissia read the message again, wondering what Jamie had said to make Lucinda so concerned. What had he seen in her?

Picking up her empty glass she refilled it and took a slow sip, then leaned forward onto the table and put her head in her hands.

No responsibility. No gratitude.

The voice was low and barely audible.

Lifting her head, she shouted at the empty room, 'But they all knew what I'm like! How can it be *my* fault?'

*

'Hello, Jamie, fancy meeting you here. What's the matter? Has Patrissia kicked you out? You can't say I didn't warn you.'

Jamie looked up from his phone. Sally had pounced on him as soon as he had sat down, and ignoring his obvious displeasure had brought over her drink to join him. The two men at the next table had given her an appreciative once-over as she passed, and Jamie had been vain enough to forget himself and smile at her, but he wasn't smiling now.

He stared at her sourly. 'Yes, you did.'

She stood waiting until, nodding towards the next table, he continued, 'Do they know you? You seem to spend a lot of time here.'

Sally put her drink on the table and eased herself into the seat. 'So does Patrissia. And no, I don't know them. What bee has she got in her bonnet tonight?'

There was a long silence.

Sally crossed her legs and gave him a quizzical smile. 'You know, I'm surprised, Jamie. I'd never have guessed. There's obviously more to you than meets the eye. You're nothing like her usual type.'

'And what's that?' he said, irritably. 'You? It must have been fun for you to fuck them both.'

'Mmm, it was, actually.' Sally's eyes brightened. 'Are you jealous?'

Jamie looked up and laughed despite himself. 'Men don't turn me on, I'm afraid.'

'Do I turn you on?'

He sat back, still smiling. 'You can't be serious.'

'Why not?'

'Are you going for the full set? You might have trouble with Ciara.'

'Sure about that?' Seeing his expression, Sally giggled and raised her glass. 'To unknown territories.'

'You don't mess about, do you?'

'Neither do you, so I've heard.'

He shook his head. 'I don't do that any more.'

Sally winked. 'Of course not. Patrissia's different, isn't she?'

*

'I can't believe anyone can be so unlucky. You poor darling.'

Lucinda had been sitting at the kitchen table for an hour, mostly waiting for Patrissia to speak.

'What's happening to me, Lu?'

'Don't start talking like that, Trisha. These things happen. I know it's your sister, but she...' Lucinda ran out of words, and squeezed Patrissia's hand. 'You shouldn't be alone. You're very welcome to stay at my house for a while if you want to. The spare room's big and looks over the garden, and the girls won't disturb you.'

'I can't take it in, Lu, really I can't. Why would anyone want to kill a poor, frail, middle-aged woman? They didn't even steal anything—not that she had anything to steal. I can't even think about what they did to her.'

Lucinda shook her head, her eyes wide. 'It's unimaginably horrible, Trisha. What you must be going through—'

'The thing is, Lu, I've been feeling like someone's been watching *me*. And then *this* happens.'

'Do you think the feeling was really an intuition that someone was watching your sister? A premonition?'

‘I don’t know. Maybe. I think Jamie felt something, too, but he won’t admit it.’

‘No, he hasn’t said anything, only that he thinks you’re alone too much. I have to say, I think so too.’ Her face was soft, serious. ‘And this house gives me the shivers. I’m not surprised you feel anxious.’

‘The house doesn’t scare me. In fact it makes me feel safer to think that Marc might still be here.’

‘Still here?’ Lucinda eyed the door. ‘Marc’s dead too, Trisha. He’s not here.’

‘Yes, I know, I haven’t gone mad. I don’t mean it like that.’ Her hands were twisting and turning on the table, fingering and stroking her slim bright lighter. ‘It’s just that I hear him sometimes. I’m sure it’s him.’

‘I’m not surprised you hear things, Trisha, but I wouldn’t worry too much. You’re bound to feel strange.’

‘I’m not hearing *things*, though, Lu, I’m hearing *him*, *his* voice.’

‘A year isn’t a long time to get over someone you loved—and I’m sure you loved Marc, in spite of what you say.’

‘Are you?’ Patrissia grimaced. ‘It didn’t feel like love.’

‘What does he say?’

‘The kinds of things he used to say.’

Lucinda sniffed. ‘He lived here a long time, didn’t he?’

‘Almost thirty years.’

Lucinda peered at the cheerless walls of the kitchen. ‘You don’t get over someone by immersing yourself in them, Trisha. You need to move on. If you’re determined to stay here, you could start by brightening up the place a bit, don’t you think?’

‘I like it like this.’

‘It can’t do much for your mood. Don’t they call that colour Hospital Green?’

Patrissia smiled. ‘Yes, I believe they do.’ She took a sip of tea. ‘I wonder if it’s some kind of vendetta against the family.’

‘A vendetta? You mean Claudia? Do people still go in for those?’

‘It’s only human nature. We’re vengeful creatures.’

‘But who would want to be revenged?’

‘My father must have made enemies. He was powerful and nasty enough.’

‘Even if that’s true, there’s no need to be scared yourself, is there?’ said Lucinda. ‘Claudia—well, you don’t actually *know* that she had no contact with your father, do you? It’s hard to see how she might have been involved in what he did, but I suppose it’s possible. But you—well, apart from anything else you’re a thousand miles away.’

Patrissia tightened her grip. ‘Thank you, Lu. Of course, you’re right. I’ll try to stop being so silly.’ She paused. ‘It helps that Jamie’s here a couple of days a week.’

Lucinda smiled. ‘I must admit, I never saw him as a protector.’

‘Perhaps you didn’t know him as well as you thought.’

Lucinda sighed and took a sip of tea. ‘Are you going to the funeral?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Is that wise in view of what you just said?’

‘I’ve been called a lot of things, but wise isn’t one of them.’

Lucinda hesitated, then squeezed Patrissia’s hand. ‘I could come with you, if you’d like me to. Oh, but Ciara will be going, won’t she?’

‘No. I’m not going to say anything to her.’

‘But it’s her *mother*, Trisha.’ Lucinda’s eyes were wide with disbelief. ‘Surely you’ll let her make up her own mind? You *must*.’

‘I know I should, but—’

‘There really aren’t any buts. I’ll tell her if you like.’

‘I can’t, Lu,’ said Patrissia, sighing. ‘I want to, but how would you feel if you were Ciara? I lie to her about finding Claudia, and I only come clean so I can tell her she’s been beaten up, mutilated and murdered? She’d never speak to me again.’

Lucinda's blue eyes clouded over. 'That's probably true, yes—but I'd still tell her if it were me.'

'I know you would, but you're not like me, Lu, you're honest and you're kind. And you wouldn't be in this position in the first place.' Patrissia withdrew her hand and dabbed her eyes. 'I'm just a mess.'

'No, you're not. It's just a hard time for you, Trisha,' said Lucinda coolly.

'You're very sweet.' Patrissia raised her head. There was a pause before she continued in a different voice, 'I didn't know you'd posed for Johnny.'

'What? How—'

'I visited him a few days ago.' Patrissia brushed something from her lip. 'It was quite a surprise, seeing a picture of you on his wall. Mind you, he had quite a collection.'

Lucinda's eyes flickered. 'It just happened, Trisha.'

'Nothing just happens. How did he manage to seduce you?'

'What makes you think—'

'Oh, come on.'

'It's all such a long time ago.'

'Don't be coy, Lu, tell me. You owe me that.'

'I know...' Lucinda let out a long breath. 'I was finishing something one evening and he just came in and asked me. You know what he was like. I was caught off-guard and I suppose I was flattered. I really didn't expect—'

'How long did you...*pose* for him?'

'On and off about a year. He asked me not to tell anyone.'

'I bet he did! When did it happen?'

Lucinda lowered her eyes. 'The first year. I'm sorry, but, well, *you* were sleeping with just about everybody, so I didn't feel guilty. And we all knew he had an open marriage.'

Patrissia snorted. 'Did Liv know about you?'

'I don't think so. He never mentioned her.'

‘No. She never mentioned *you*.’ Patrissia’s eyes were cloudy. ‘Who’d have guessed? You certainly had me fooled.’

A memory came to her of Lucinda sitting on a bench in the grounds of the college, Johnny standing in a familiar questioning pose in front of her. She was looking up at him, a look of shared amusement on her face.

‘Well, Johnny’s openness about his open marriage didn’t extend to me,’ Patrissia continued quietly. ‘Tell me, did anyone else *pose* for him?’

‘There were one or two others, yes.’

‘He *told* you?’

‘We...posed together.’ Lucinda was blushing now. ‘The others were older—not in our group.’

‘Amazing! You *are* a surprise. Does Jamie know?’

‘Of course not, nobody does except you.’ Lucinda sniffed. ‘It doesn’t matter any more, it was all a long time ago.’

‘Unless someone else gets hold of his paintings, I suppose. How many are there?’

‘Paintings? A dozen or so.’

Johnny had never painted Patrissia. He had dragged her around in search of the foggiest and most wind-and rain driven coast to paint *landscapes*, but—She didn’t want to think about it. And he’d been sleeping with Lucinda all that time.

‘Trisha?’

‘Yes?’

‘I wouldn’t blame you if you were angry.’

‘I’m not angry. Not with you, anyway. Why should I be? As you said, it was a long time ago.’

‘I just thought you still might...you know.’

‘Have feelings for him?’ Patrissia laughed. ‘I do, but not ones he’d appreciate.’ She paused. ‘Lu, I don’t know quite how to say this, but, since you brought it up, how, *generally*, did he treat you?’

‘You mean sex?’

Patrissia sighed. 'I suppose I do, yes.'

'He was surprisingly sweet, very gentle. Why do you ask?'

'No reason, I just wondered.'

'It sounds to me like you're not over him. I thought so when we talked—was it last year? and I still think so. You're hoarding quite a collection, aren't you? Marc, Johnny—is there anyone else? All this stuff—you're poisoning yourself. You have to let it go, Trisha.'

Patrissia was silent. She had forgotten about Claudia, about the murder, she'd forgotten everything except this hideous revelation. Lucinda, of all people!

'Actually, Trisha, there's something else. I've never told anyone, and you have to promise me on your life not to say anything to anyone else. Really, it's important.'

'I'm not trustworthy, Lu, you should know that by now.' *Listen. Respond.* 'Are you sure you want to tell me?'

'I need to tell somebody, and the only other person I really talk to is Jamie, and—'

'What?'

Lucinda took a deep breath. 'Zara is Johnny's. We got together again for a while the year before Zara was born, and, well, I'm sure she's his. Johnny's a high-functioning autistic too, you must know that.'

Patrissia stared at her. 'Is that true?'

'Trisha, I'm trusting you with this. Please don't let me down. If Jamie finds out—'

'Jesus, Lucinda, what do you take me for?' Patrissia laughed, slightly hysterically. 'Well I think you've distracted me pretty successfully.' She pushed back the chair and put one arm over the back. 'I won't let you down.'

'I know it's awful timing, but...I don't know. I'm sorry about Claudia, Trisha, and I'm sorry about Marc. And Johnny—Oh, God! ...I'm clearing the decks, and I'm just really, really sorry.'

'Hmm, yes, tossing out the garbage.' Patrissia forced a smile. 'We all have to do it sooner or later. I don't think the smell of this will

linger too long.’ She crossed her legs, smoothing the hem of her skirt. ‘Were you in love with him?’

‘With Johnny? Good God, no! It was an adventure, breaking a boundary,’ said Lucinda tartly, her eyes shining. She stirred her cold tea in slow motion. ‘Jamie had been sleeping with Antonia for months, and I was jealous—not of Antonia, but of Jamie. I felt like some fun, too, and Johnny didn’t object, of course. It *seemed* safe enough, with him living in Cornwall, but we got careless in a different way. I didn’t tell him Zara was his, although autism is genetic and there’s no history of it in Jamie’s or my families. Jamie just thought—actually, I don’t know what he thought, but I don’t think he ever suspected anything untoward.’

‘No, I don’t think he has the remotest suspicion,’ said Patrissia immediately. ‘I can’t see that anyone would, you’re such a dark horse.’

You thought you had it all your own way, didn’t you, Patrissia? You thought you were the clever one.

‘Talking of horses, have you saddled Sal yet?’

‘Give me a chance!’ Lucinda’s nervous giggle gave way to something more serious. ‘Actually, I’m not sure I want to. He’s rather unsettling, isn’t he? I know Italians are supposed to be spontaneous, but he seems to take it a bit far. It’s probably just me—he’s very sweet about his mother. I don’t know, he was probably just trying to impress me so that I’d help him get work.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve just got a vague feeling...I don’t know. It wasn’t only the trampoline. He seems to know a lot about painting—he told me about a technique that I can’t remember us ever discussing at college. But those black eyes...the whole thing was terribly disconcerting. Exciting too, but—’

‘Marc was like that. We’d be in the middle of something and he’d get up and go, just like that.’ Patrissia snapped her fingers. ‘If I asked him for an explanation he’d get annoyed and start attacking me. Not physically,’ she added when she saw Lucinda’s face, ‘but he’d start on about how I wanted to control him, that it was all part of some plan he was convinced I was hatching.’ She sighed. ‘He was almost as manipulative as I was.’

‘It’s not as though he hid it, Trisha. All that unsmiling brusqueness—people aren’t really like that. Certainly not priests. It *couldn’t* have been real. I thought as much when I spoke to him at our party.’

‘Hmm. Anyway, what are you going to do about Sal?’

‘It would have only been a fling anyway, but—oh, I don’t know. It seemed so straightforward until I began to think about the ramifications. I do have the girls to consider, after all.’

‘Children do complicate things, don’t they?’

‘I certainly wouldn’t want them around when he’s there, which makes me feel guilty already, even before anything’s happened.’ She sighed again. ‘And I wonder how much fun it would be compared to the hassle.’ She paused and looked up. ‘I’m sorry, I’m telling you my problems when—’

‘Don’t worry about it. *Will* you come to the funeral with me, Lu?’ For a moment, there was a hint of panic or something else in her eyes, and Lucinda leaned forward to take her hand.

‘Of course I’ll come, Trisha. I’ll let my mother know. Do you want me to stay here with you tonight?’

For a brief moment, the two women’s eyes locked.

‘No, that’s OK, Lu, I need to think about this by myself. We’ll have to leave tomorrow.’

‘All right, I’ll arrange someone to look after the girls. Don’t worry, things will get clearer.’ Lucinda picked up her jacket from the back of the chair and brushed off some invisible specks with her hand. ‘And if you change your mind about staying with us when you get back—’

‘Thanks, Lu. I’ll call you later when I’ve booked the flights.’ Patrissia touched her arm. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be OK. See you tomorrow.’

High iron gates

‘Our Lady of the Flowers.’ Lucinda stood back to admire the cascades of bougainvillea hanging from the high wall and already partially obscuring the new metal sign. ‘What a pity they have no scent.’ Taking a bloom between her finger and thumb she lifted it to her nose just to make sure. ‘Sometimes I almost think the Fathers have a sense of humour.’

Patrissia didn’t hear her. She had continued along the dusty lane, rapt in memories of her last visit to Rome. As she approached the black gates, she saw herself again running up to the old man, his welcome and the tears in his eyes as he whispered the secret her father had hidden from her for thirty years. She had thought it would change everything.

Taking a deep breath she pressed the button fixed prominently to the door, but nothing happened. She pressed again, impatiently, and then saw a new-looking rope hanging to one side. Pulling it sharply, she heard a bell clanging. She was reminded of the old-fashioned corner shop where she bought her cigarettes.

She had half-expected to come across Guido again walking down this dusty track, even though she knew it was impossible. From being a powerful servant of her father, an instrument of intrigue and a hoarder of secrets, he had been reduced to the impotent sack of ailing flesh that awaited her behind the forbidding gates.

What if he had more secrets to tell? Patrissia wasn’t sure she wanted to hear them. She had succeeded in persuading him to tell her where Claudia had spent her banishment, but her reunion with the frail stranger Claudia had become had made little difference to either of them. Patrissia had gone back to England and continued her obsession with Marc and the aftermath of his death, and Claudia had continued her abandoned life. And now she was dead.

‘Tell me again—who are these people we’re visiting?’ Lucinda asked as she arrived beside her.

Patrissia jerked the rope again. ‘My father’s tame priest, and his secretary. The priest, Secundus, helped my father arrange Claudia’s

disappearance and Marc's sacking. He was the one who gave Ciara Marc's address.'

'And the other one?'

'Guido? He was my father's PA, I suppose you'd call it now. He was kind to us when we were growing up, and it was he who told me where Claudia lived, eventually.'

'I can see why you'd want to see him, but—What was his name? Secundus?'

'Yes.'

'Why him?'

Patrissia dropped her cigarette butt and ground it into the dust. 'He was Marc's confidant—as far as Marc could give anything away.' She took a scarf from her bag and wound her hair into it, leaving a schoolgirlish pony tail. 'He probably won't tell me anything, but I have to try.'

Lucinda watched these preparations with concern. 'That sounds a bit masochistic, Trisha, if you don't mind me saying so. Isn't it about time you let it all go?'

'Can I borrow a tissue?'

Lucinda sighed as Patrissia wiped off her lipstick. 'I understand why you want to know how far Marc's deception went,' she continued as Patrissia jerked the rope again, 'but, really, will it do you any good to find out?'

Patrissia tossed her head. 'Any *good*? What good *is* there?' Her voice was bitter. 'I'm sorry, Lu, I'm not being difficult. You've seen how stuck I am. I can't think, I hear voices, I can't do anything sensible.' She pulled the rope harder. 'It's not Marc's past I'm concerned about, but his presence. Sometimes I feel him sitting with me, or hear him whispering to me. I tried to get rid of him by burning his books, but it didn't work. I have to do *something*.'

'You think the answer is here?'

'I won't know till I ask.'

Lucinda raised her eyes. The black gates were at least eight feet high. 'It must be strange coming back home after all these years.'

'I was born and raised in this house,' Patrissia muttered, staring up with her, 'but it was never a home. At last it's showing itself in its true colours—a hospice for the dying and a tomb for the dead.'

They heard footsteps approaching and a key turned in the lock. The door creaked open, revealing a gentle-faced monk, his head to one side.

'Signora Vecchia?'

'Yes.'

'Welcome. And welcome to you, Signora.' He nodded to Lucinda, and ushering them inside, he closed and locked the heavy doors.

'I must say, I didn't expect anything so grand,' said Lucinda as they followed the black-robed figure down the wide red drive towards the massive façade of the house.

'I don't suppose you would,' Patrissia said dismissively. 'I'm part of the Establishment here, Lu, if you can believe that. The Vecchias have been high-ranking priests and Cardinals for five hundred years. I think my father chose to be a businessman because it gave him more freedom to be a bastard.'

She had kept her voice low, but the monk turned to admonish her. 'This is a house of God, Signora. Please show respect.'

Lucinda put her hand on Patrissia's arm before she could reply. 'I'm sorry. It's all rather emotional for her.'

'I understand. Nevertheless.'

'Of course.'

Patrissia glared at him, then closing her eyes, allowed herself to be led onto the grand terrace.

'We've come all this way, Trisha, and I do think—'

'I know. I'll try to behave myself, Lu. You're a good friend.'

Lucinda blushed. 'Thank you. I'm trying to be a better friend than I have been.'

'It's all in the past, Lu. You're right: one more try and maybe then I'll get some peace.'

The monk led them through the great entrance hall and up the sweeping steps of the main staircase to a balcony. Opening an ornate double-door, he indicated that they should enter.

The room was big, light, and airy. An enormous pair of bay windows looked out over the front lawns and the row of cypresses that hid most of the high yellow walls, the black gate at the end of the long drive stark in their midst.

A thin curtain was stirring in the breeze from an open window and as they hovered by the entrance, the old priest lying in its shade called out Patrissia's name in a weak voice. To Lucinda's surprise, Patrissia approached the bed and knelt down to receive his blessing. As she kissed his ring and they began to talk, Lucinda caught a glimpse of tears in both their eyes.

Lucinda loitered by the walls of the huge, high-ceilinged room, studying the paintings that adorned it, contemplating the wealth of Patrissia's family and of the Church, and listening vaguely to the murmur of their voices. They were speaking in Italian, and she could distinguish only names—Claudia, Roberto, Guido—while all the time, the priest's hands twisted and turned above the covers.

Turning away from a Renaissance Pietà that she didn't recognise, she thought she heard the whispered singsong of standard responses. The old man was talking of forgiveness and mercy. *Miserere*. It didn't sound like mercy.

Patrissia was still kneeling by the side of the bed, head bowed, the long silk scarf making her look like a Sunday-school girl, when Lucinda heard Marc's name mentioned. There was a long silence and when Patrissia raised her head, her face was as white as the old man's dying sheets.

'Lu, could you give us a minute?'

Lucinda nodded. 'Of course. I'll be outside.'

She closed the door quietly and took the few steps to the handrail overlooking the marble-flagged entrance hall. At first she thought she was alone, but leaning over the rail she saw the monk who had opened the door to them sitting below her under a small but bright window, writing. As she watched the barely-moving

figure an enormous sense of peace suffused her, and closing her eyes she let her shoulders relax, feeling tiny currents of air swirl around her face like a cool mist.

Amid the stillness her hands grasped each other and slowly her thoughts turned to murmured prayers, flowing out into the bell-like silence of the great hall like a river of tears. She prayed for her children, for her parents, for Jamie and Patrissia; and then, as tears wet her cheeks, for Marc, that his soul, too, be still.

When she had finished, she remained with her head bowed for several minutes.

There was a faint cough.

‘*Scusi*, Signora, would you like a glass of water?’ The monk had left his writing, and ascending the stair, had appeared silently beside her.

Lucinda lifted her head. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me. I’d love some water, thank you. You’re very kind.’

‘Would you like to see the garden?’

Lucinda glanced towards Secundus’ door. ‘Do you think that would be all right?’

‘I will tell the Signora where you have gone.’

As she followed the monk down the stairs and along a passage at the back of the great hall, passing kitchens and utility rooms where she glimpsed robed figures silently doing the things that had to be done, her thoughts remained with Marc. She could not get Patrissia’s words the previous day out of her head.

‘It makes me feel safer to think that Marc might still be here’.

Lucinda could understand her conviction that Marc had not yet found release, that Johnny’s ‘*unconquerable spirit*’ had not yet deigned to welcome him into the light, but nothing that Patrissia had ever said had hinted that Marc might protect her. Wasn’t it unfinished business that trapped them in the world? Whatever Marc’s business might be and however it might become finished, Lucinda didn’t think it would be to Patrissia’s benefit. She didn’t consider herself particularly religious, but here in this house the thought of an exorcism didn’t seem so strange.

After several minutes they emerged onto a shaded terrace.

‘Thank you, Father. I had no idea that Patrissia’s family was so grand.’

‘*Il Signore Vecchia* was a devout man, a great man.’

‘Did you know him?’

‘Alas, no. But his gift—this house—will give comfort to many in their last days.’

‘Yes, I can see that it would. It’s beautiful.’

‘Thank you. It is but a poor reflection of the beauty of Our Lord.’

Lucinda smiled, remembering the many times Patrissia had described her home in less flattering terms.

‘It was a fucking prison, Lu, and my father was its warden. I loathed him, and so did Claudia. He killed my mother. Weak as she was, she would never stand up to him. He was a tyrant. I should have burned the bloody place to the ground, and him in it.’

Gesturing for her to sit, the monk left.

Lucinda was not easily impressed, but as she stood for a moment by the stone balustrade looking out onto an enormous cedar spreading its shade over the lawns and the sun-dried scrubby bushes, she was reminded of the great houses she had been taken round by her mother. It was hard to believe that Patrissia had abandoned such a magnificent place to live in the dirt and squalor of West London.

She heard the slap of sandals. It was the monk, returning with a carafe of water.

‘Excuse me, but what’s that over there?’ Lucinda asked, pointing to a small colonnaded building visible through the trees. ‘Is it a temple?’

The monk didn’t look up. ‘It is the family tomb, Signora.’

‘Oh. May I see it?’

‘I’m afraid it is locked. It is opened only for burials.’

‘Will Patrissia be buried there?’ she found herself asking.

The monk smiled and turned to leave. 'The Signora has a place prepared for her, yes.'

Lucinda let out a long breath. 'I suppose that's one good reason for running away.'

She realised she'd said it aloud. The monk stopped and nodded, still smiling. 'You are not Catholic yourself, Signora?'

'Actually, yes I am,' Lucinda replied quietly. '*Memento mori* and all that, of course, but it *is* rather sombre-making, don't you think?'

'It is well to contemplate the transitoriness of this world, and to reflect on the world that is to come. Death is a mystery whose secret we all must learn.'

'I suppose so.' Lucinda turned and picked up her glass of water, in which the ice had already melted.

'Excuse me, Father—What do you think happens to unhappy souls?'

'*Scusi?*'

'I mean the souls of unhappy people.'

The monk lifted his head. 'The Church is explicit—'

'Yes I know,' she interrupted. 'But what do *you* think?'

The monk stopped and looked directly into her eyes. 'We are human, *Signora*. We are selfish, we are stupid and we are cruel, to others and to ourselves.'

'And so many people seem to relish their selfishness and cruelty.'

'It is so, yes. But we are taught that suffering is our lot, and that to bear suffering is necessary for true faith.'

'Do you believe that?'

'I have devoted my life to God, *Signora*, how can I not? Even those who have no faith believe that *capacità di ripresa*—I'm sorry, I do not know the English word. It means capacity to survive hardship.'

'Resilience?'

'Yes, resilience, thank you. They are proud of their resilience. But to what end are they resilient? What value is mere survival?'

Ants survive. Cockroaches survive. Survival is nothing. Resilience is nothing if we are not striving to become greater than the stupid, cruel humans that we are.'

'I don't understand. How can we be greater than we are?'

'I am speaking of the spirit, and of that part of the spirit we call the soul, which is coloured by our actions in this life. I am a Catholic so I call my spirit God, but I am not one of those who deny the value of other beliefs. The soul *is* God, and thus God becomes a reflection of our lives. This is my own opinion you understand, *Signora*.'

'Of course.'

'There is no difference between believers. Believers are creators, nourishers of the soul. But unbelievers, the deniers of spirit, are destroyers. Their lives are chaotic and they encourage chaos in others. Yet they live for the glimpses of beauty revealed even as they destroy it. Ultimately, they are envious of spirit because God is the source of the only beauty that exists, and they cannot bear it that they are not His equal in this.'

'You think they want to be as powerful as God?'

'I do. Yet the force of their envy shows only how very human and flawed they are. Their world is small, fragile and transient, and I pity them for they cannot hope for something better.'

'That seems a very black and white view, if you'll forgive me saying so.'

The monk smiled. 'I too am human.'

As he turned to leave, Lucinda asked, 'Are they still talking, do you know?'

'The Signora is with *Signore* Marelli now.'

'Is that Guido?'

'*Signore* Guido, yes.'

'Is he dying too?'

'All here are dying, *Signora*.'

'Where will he be buried?'

'All is prepared, *Signora*.'

Lucinda sat back and stared at the sun, splintered by the black branches of the cedar, thinking about her own preparations, as she had been taught. A powerful current seemed to flow through her, a river of souls pouring towards silence.

Taking a small pad from her bag, she opened it on her knee and began to draw the tree.

*

Lucinda looked up at the sound of footsteps.

‘You look like the cat that got the cream!’

Patrissia smiled thinly. ‘Catholics are easy. You just have to make them feel guilty.’

‘Did you find out what you wanted about Marc?’

‘More than enough.’

‘And?’

Patrissia sat down and lit a cigarette. ‘It’s all true, Lu,’ she sighed, inhaling deeply.

‘I’m so sorry, Trisha. It must be very hard for you.’

‘I already guessed most of it.’

Lucinda waited for Patrissia to continue, but she was staring moodily into the trees.

‘How did you persuade him to talk?’

‘Who?’

‘Secundus, of course.’

‘Oh, him. I made my confession.’ She laughed, untying the scarf and shaking out her long black hair.

‘Trisha! You confessed to a priest so you could get information out of him?’

‘Don’t look so shocked, Lu, we all do it. Confess—certain things—so that someone else opens up. Everybody likes a sympathetic ear. Priests are only people.’

Lucinda shook her head. ‘You’re dreadful, Trisha.’

‘I know. I’m also the daughter of his benefactor and a victim of the man he failed.’ She sighed. ‘And soon he will be judged. It wasn’t difficult.’

Lucinda looked at her. ‘Has it changed anything? Knowing, I mean.’

‘Not really.’

‘Why do you think Marc was like that?’

‘He blamed his illness,’ Patrissia said quietly, ‘but I rather had the impression that Secundus wasn’t convinced. He’d given Marc the benefit of the doubt while he was alive, but he let slip a few things in there...’ She stopped. Lucinda thought she saw tears in her eyes.

‘What’s the matter? What did he tell you?’

‘Nothing unexpected, but Guido said something... I need to think about it.’

‘You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, Trisha.’

Patrissia pushed back her chair and going to the balustrade angrily stubbed out her half-finished cigarette on the cream-coloured stone, flicking the remnant contemptuously onto the path below. ‘I hate this place. I hate these people.’

‘You’re upset,’ said Lucinda, half-rising. ‘Perhaps it wasn’t such a good idea to come back here. Do you want to go?’

‘I’m OK.’ Patrissia took a deep breath. ‘Guido told me that Claudia wrote to me after she disappeared.’

Lucinda waited patiently.

‘Actually, it was addressed to me and Marc. Why would she write to me and Marc?’ she continued after a pause. ‘I was her little sister, he was a priest and her lover. What could she possibly have to say to us both?’

‘I can’t imagine, unless it was to tell you not to worry about her. That’s what people usually do, isn’t it?’

Patrissia stared at her and then burst into laughter. ‘God, Lu, you’re *so* English!’ She peered into the house. ‘Did they say anything about drinks? Bloody hell, it’s hot!’

‘Shh! Not so loud, Trisha! They’re bringing some iced water.’

‘Sorry. Anyway, when Guido went to the convent to take her things to the village after Ciara was born, she gave him the letter to pass on to us.’

‘Sorry, you’ve lost me. What convent?’

Patrissia sniffed loudly and, turning her back on the garden, returned to the table, stopping to light another cigarette on the way. She sat down stiffly, looking directly into Lucinda’s eyes.

‘Claudia had asked Guido to find a doctor who could be trusted to give her an abortion. Everything had been arranged. But my father found out she was pregnant before they could get rid of it, and had her taken to a convent to have the baby.’

‘Guido told you all that?’

‘I knew some of it already, from Claudia,’ Patrissia continued. ‘Secundus, who had a great deal of influence at the time, ensured the nuns’ silence. The official story was that she’d been sent to study in England. That’s what my mother told me.’

‘How awful!’

‘I imagine they convinced themselves they were saving her soul.’ Patrissia’s voice was bitter. ‘Anyway, the day after Ciara was born...’ She trailed off, and leaning forward put her elbows on the table, a hand covering her mouth.

‘What is it?’ Lucinda looked at her anxiously.

Patrissia shook her head. ‘Give me a minute, Lu.’

‘Of course. I remember you saying something about all this when I came to the meeting that time but I’m afraid I wasn’t paying much attention. I’m so sorry. I’m such a poor friend.’

‘I needed to confess and I wouldn’t have let you help, you know that. Anyway,’ said Patrissia, leaning back, ‘let’s talk about something else. What do you think of the old place?’

Lucinda lifted her head obediently and ran her eyes along the terrace. ‘I’m stunned, actually, Trisha. I’d never have guessed from what you told me about it.’ Lucinda took a sip of water just as the monk appeared with a fresh carafe and another glass. Placing them on the table between the two women, he flapped off without disturbing the silence.

'If I'm ever rich enough to afford servants, I'll definitely employ monks,' she smiled. 'Are you *allowed* to smoke, Trisha?'

'I'm *La Signora* here—I can do what I like. Except swear.'

'Oh, I see, yes. It's rather medieval, isn't it?'

'Prehistoric, I think I'd call it. Jamie would be right at home.' Patrissia's eyes followed Lucinda's over the swathes of dusty grass to the tomb, shining golden in the sun. 'Would you like to see my grave?'

'I've already asked,' Lucinda replied, smiling. 'It's locked.'

'Not to me.' Patrissia sniffed. 'Not that there's anything to see. It's just a glorified store-room for family skeletons. Not all of them, of course—not those who died of the pox or were excommunicated or executed, obviously. But my father and mother are there, and soon, Claudia. And then me, the end of the line.'

Lucinda turned to her with a look of puzzlement.

'What about Ciara?'

'She's not family. My father paid her off, effectively.'

'Oh, I see.' Lucinda's face betrayed no emotion.

'Secundus said something else, Lu, but I'm not sure I should tell you.' Patrissia stared at the tomb. 'More secrets, I'm afraid.' She paused, flicking the stub of her cigarette into a large urn.

'You think I'm rather recalcitrant,' she continued, 'but that's how I was brought up. Nobody gives anything away here unless they're made to. We Italians are dedicated schemers, you know.'

'So I understand.'

'I'm a successful product of the Italian Catholic Establishment.' Patrissia almost spat the words. 'Three hundred years ago I might have been married to a De'Medici,' she laughed, 'or some other prince. As it is, if I moved back now—to Rome, I mean—I'd have the pick of the eligible men. Fancy that!' she mocked herself.

'Do you think you might do that, Trisha?' asked Lucinda, stretching out her legs. 'If it were me, I think I might be tempted to try it, if only for a while.' She took a sip of water.

‘It does sound attractive, in a way, I suppose. But I could never come back to Italy.’

The two women gazed out into the garden. There were several monks at work tending small flower beds, and a couple more in the distance treading the dusty paths.

‘Who’s that?’

Patrissia followed her eyes. ‘That thing by the tomb? One of the Fates. Atropos, I think, the one who severs the thread of life.’

‘The sister of that one in your hall? Lachesis is it? This one’s lovely, though—I thought they were meant to be hags?’

‘Why are you dressed like that, Clo? Are you going to a party?’

‘I’m going to be a model, Patrissia. You can watch if you like.’

The little girl pouts and goes to sit on a chair. She watches as two women fuss with her sister’s hair, teasing out strands and settling the bun into which they have put so much effort. They tut and cluck as they hold her still and hang the sweeping folds of the robe around her. One stands back and gives the other terse instructions until at last they each make a slow circuit around her and nod approval.

A bearded man enters the room carrying a curved knife. He smiles at the little girl, who has been very good, sitting quietly with her legs folded beneath her. She asks the man what the knife is for and he comes over to her. He tells her not to be scared, that it’s just for the photographs, and he lets her stroke the blade. She shivers as she feels the coldness and sharpness of it, even though he is careful to keep her small fingers away from the edges. She looks up.

‘Will she be famous?’ she asks.

He laughs. ‘More than that. She’ll be a goddess.’

Another man enters dressed as a priest. He is tall and thin. The little girl thinks he is also a model, but he just stands by the door watching the bearded man set up the camera, his eyes dark. The bearded man and the two women ignore him but Claudia gives him a haughty look out of the corner of her eye. He leaves after a few minutes.

‘Trisha? Are you all right?’

‘Oh. Yes, I’m fine. Away with the fairies.’

‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Are you sure you’re OK?’

Patrissia exhaled slowly. ‘The statue’s of Claudia. My father commissioned it for her eighteenth birthday. I’m surprised he didn’t have it broken up.’

‘He probably kept it for the same reason you kept *Lachesis*, Trisha.’

‘What do you mean? What reason?’ Patrissia looked directly into Lucinda’s blue eyes which to her surprise were filmy with tears.

‘Only you know that,’ said Lucinda, turning her face away. She took a tissue from her bag and dabbed her nose. ‘I think this heat’s getting to me—I promised I’d call the girls today. Zara gets upset when I’m away too long.’ She stood up. ‘Is there a loo somewhere?’

‘Through there.’

‘Thank you. Back in a minute.’

Patrissia listened with relief to Lucinda’s deliberate steps receding along the terrace. Her head felt hot and heavy, and dipping a tissue in her glass of water, she closed her eyes and held the damp pad to the side of her neck gratefully, feeling her temples and jaw relax as the coolness spread.

The wavering afternoon haze penetrated her eyelids and in its light the shaded tomb and its proud guardian seemed to detach themselves from the landscape, the paths and swathes of grass around them fading into a mere blue-black suggestion, as if they were the painted backdrop to a tragic play.

My father kept Atropos. I kept Lachesis. Lucinda kept Zara.

And Marc kept Pan.

As the thought entered her head, a hunched, black-faced creature came into focus, emerging warily from the distant shadows and creeping slowly and awkwardly into the penumbra of the porticoed mausoleum. It dipped suddenly out of sight as it came abreast of the sister-fate at its entrance, and Patrissia saw that the head of the goddess had turned as if listening, a glint of light flashing across its upraised hand.

‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you.’

Patrissia quickly brought the back of her hand to her open mouth as Lucinda's voice floated out of the blue-black depths.

'I must have fallen asleep. Did you call your mother? Is everyone OK?'

'They're all fine.' Lucinda drew her chair farther into the shade before sitting down. She shook her head. 'I can't believe how beautiful it all is, Trisha. What a place to grow up! The monks must have their work cut out to keep the lawn so healthy. It's as green as a cricket pitch.'

Patrissia snorted. 'Guido told me once that there's a massive underground water system feeding it. It would all die, otherwise.'

'But it looks so real and natural.'

'Yes, Italians are good at *trompe l'oeil*. See that tree?' Patrissia pointed to a young Cypress. 'I remember that tree dying when I was quite small. A week later, it was back in the same place, healthier than ever. A miracle, my mother told me, and I believed her. Of course, it was barely a sapling then.'

'Your father had it replaced? Like a dead budgie?'

'That's tradition for you. Nothing can be allowed to die.' She grunted. 'Long live the king.'

Lucinda turned her eyes back to the tomb. 'I wish you hadn't told me that.' She let out an enormous sigh. 'Is nothing real, Trisha?'

Patrissia turned her head. 'What's the matter?'

'Oh, the usual thing I suppose,' answered Lucinda distractedly. 'Funerals bring on these kinds of thoughts, don't they? It's that nothing seems to be as I had always believed. My family is broken up, you're a princess, Marc was a sadist, Jamie only did the things he did because of me...and this lovely garden is fake.' She laughed. 'Perhaps I was imbued with too many certainties by my parents.'

'Of course. Whereas I think I was imbued with too few. My parents made no secret of their conniving—it wasn't just my father, my mother was the same. She might have been ill and weak, but that didn't stop her being as much a control-freak as he was. She

was always ready with an appropriate punishment.' She shook her head. 'What a life it is.'

The two women gazed over this Garden of Eden, a refuge from the incomprehensible world. Eventually, Patrissia broke the silence.

'There's more, Lu.'

Lucinda, tiring of the heat and emotion, listened in silence as Patrissia gave her a dispassionate account of her interviews with the two sick men.

When she had finished, a polite 'Goodness, that's a lot to get in one go,' was all she could manage. 'I'm not surprised you're upset, Trisha. But you haven't said what was in the letter to you and Marc. Was it bad?'

'I honestly don't know.' Patrissia, too, seemed weary of revelation. 'Guido wouldn't say, but—I'll come to that. It's pretty incredible. But when you're told that your estranged father alters his will in your favour out of guilt, and that his servant takes it on himself to hide the fact that your lost sister tried to get in touch with you, you don't have much emotion left for anything else.'

'No, I imagine you don't. I don't know what else to say.'

'I'm sure you'll think of something when I tell you Ciara has a brother.'

Lucinda's eyes widened. 'Claudia had another child? But you said —'

'He's Ciara's *twin* brother. Marc knew about him, too.' Patrissia poured herself a glass of water, taking a long draught. 'Ciara doesn't know, of course.'

'Goodness, Trisha! What happened to him? Was he adopted?'

'No, but Secundus wouldn't say much. Apparently he was a sickly baby and was raised by the Fathers.' Her smile became a grimace. 'Like father, like son. It's curious,' she continued, lighting another cigarette, 'Secundus seemed almost afraid to talk about him—he made the sign of the cross when he mentioned him.'

She looked at Lucinda, her eyes hard. 'This is something we really can't tell Ciara. As I said, the family ends with me. It won't do her any good to try to resurrect it.'

‘Trisha! You *must* tell her!’

Patrissia shook her head. ‘No, I don’t think so. I...’ she hesitated, ‘I had the distinct impression from Secundus that he was—is—a nasty piece of work. Lu?’

‘What?’

‘What do you think of Ciara? Do you find her a bit scary?’

Lucinda’s face was blank. ‘I wouldn’t say that, but she does seem rather too keen on getting her own way sometimes. She doesn’t treat Jamie well.’ Patrissia glanced at her face as a flash of what looked like anger passed across it. ‘I don’t know.’ Lucinda paused. ‘You’re really not going to tell her?’

‘Think about it, Lu. You said earlier that *I* should let go. Don’t you think Ciara needs to let go too? What did finding Marc and I do for her? How could telling her about her brother possibly help her? And then I’d have to tell her about Claudia, too.’ Taking a sip of water, she added decisively, ‘No, it would only make things worse.’

‘I’m sorry, Trisha, but I can’t agree. I gave in about Claudia, but this is too much. Ciara’s my friend, and it *has* to be her choice. Besides, it’s time you faced the music, don’t you think? You can’t go on lying to her. I’m serious. You *must* tell her.’

‘I’ll think about it.’ Patrissia looked at her watch. ‘The funeral’s in a couple of hours. We should go soon.’

Lucinda patted her hand. ‘Everything will turn out all right, you know. Honesty really is best. The alternative is a fairyland where your father is revered, you’re a comfortable heiress and I always do the right thing.’

She indicated the house and grounds. ‘You said you hated it here, and if you want to be different, then *be* different. What’s the point of moving to a foreign country if you take all your baggage with you? Tell her the *truth*, for your own sake, if not for hers.’

Patrissia turned her eyes to the tomb, half-hoping to spot the phantom *Pan* again, but *Atropos* remained alone. ‘We’ll see. Are you ready?’

‘Yes. I think I’d like to see something real now.’

‘The funeral will certainly be that.’ Patrissia hefted her bag. ‘I’m burying the last Vecchia. Let’s hope she stays buried.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing.’ With a last glance at the tomb she turned away and headed for the door back into the house. ‘Let’s go.’

*

The cab dropped them at Claudia’s house. They hadn’t spoken much on the journey, both lost in their own thoughts, Lucinda merely commenting occasionally on the starkness and rugged beauty of the landscape.

‘It looks abandoned,’ Lucinda said as they followed the bare path around the side of the tiny house into the shade of the verandah. ‘Everything’s here,’ she said, twisting a straggling vine tendril around her finger, ‘but it all looks untended already, out of place somehow, if you know what I mean. It doesn’t feel bad though—does it to you?’

‘It doesn’t feel any different from when I was last here, to be honest,’ replied Patrissia, setting her bag on the rusty wrought-iron table.

Lucinda looked along the back of the house. ‘Where did they find her?’

‘Just there.’ Patrissia pointed to the kitchen door. ‘She managed to crawl that far,’ she screwed up her face, ‘before he finished her off.’

Lucinda glanced at her friend. ‘Aren’t you worried he’ll come back?’

‘Why should he? He’s had his jollies and he obviously wasn’t here to steal anything. There’s nothing to steal.’

‘Except Claudia’s life.’

‘She’d already had that stolen from her.’ Patrissia grimaced. ‘He just completed the job. He’d already killed Roberto, Claudia’s...’ she paused, wondering exactly what their relationship might have been. ‘...lover,’ she decided. ‘How long have we got?’

‘Forty minutes.’

‘Time enough for a drink. Can I get you something? There’s probably some wine somewhere.’

‘Just a small glass, please.’

*

Inside, the house was exactly as Patrissia had seen it on her last visit. Two plates were washed and stacked on the rack above the sink, knives, forks and teaspoons in their place, an apron hanging from its hook, Claudia’s stick by the stove. She picked it up, swishing it like a sword. It would make a perfect memento sorori.

She wondered why she didn’t feel more distressed, or shocked. Jamie had said she lived in a movie—what kind of movie was she making for herself where the torture and murder of her sister could mean so little to her?

The refrigerator was humming, and opening it, Patrissia took everything out. Rancid milk, cheese, yoghurt, a few yellowed salad leaves, a jug of water.

She found the wine under the sink, standing in a bowl of water. Uncorking it, she sniffed, savouring the fresh acidity, and taking two glasses from a cupboard, returned to the verandah.

Lucinda was sitting in Claudia’s chair, gazing out over the terraced vineyards to the mountains beyond.

‘How absolutely stunning it is here, Trisha. It must have been wonderful living in this house and seeing this,’ she swept her arm all around, ‘every day.’

‘It’s beautiful, yes, Lu, but it’s a hard life. Actually,’ she smiled at her friend, ‘the house belongs to the family—to me—now. You can have it if you like.’

‘You’re *that* rich?’ Lucinda shook her head. ‘It’s certainly another world here, Trisha.’ She emptied her glass. ‘I’m not sure I’ll be able to look at you in the same light after all this.’

‘Richer than that, actually. My father gave away the main house, but there are quite a few others dotted around the place. Guido’s family has one of them. I own a vineyard too, and a few other things.’ She snorted. ‘It’s not real is it? What will I do with it all?’

‘If you feel like that, why not spread it around a bit?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was thinking of Roy, actually. Remember him, from the meetings? He could do with a break, Trisha. Jamie was saying he wants to set up a business. He was thinking of helping him out, but Ciara put the kybosh on that.’

‘Patrissia looked thoughtful. ‘It could be arranged. Thank you, Lu, I’d forgotten about poor Roy. How do you think he’d like it here? Pig in shit?’

‘Trisha!’

‘It’s funny, Marc thought of himself and Roy as fellow victims, I think. I’m not sure what he thought they were victims of, though.’ She drained her glass. ‘Time to go, I think.’

‘Aren’t you nervous?’

‘Why should I be?’

Lucinda looked at her curiously. ‘I’m worried about you, Trisha. You’ve been acting oddly for a while, and to be honest I came with you not just to give you a bit of support, but, well, frankly, to help if you did anything...but you’ve been different since we arrived here, in fact, you seem saner than I’ve seen you for ages, almost back to your old self.’

‘You’re right, I do feel at home, I don’t know why, when I dislike it so. Maybe because the Dreadful Thing has already happened to someone else.’

‘Like a scapegoat, you mean? Claudia was sacrificed?’

‘Something like that.’

Lucinda frowned as her eyes roamed the dilapidated cottage. ‘Don’t you think it strange that *she* was attacked, of all people? I mean, it couldn’t have been chance, could it? I know there are people who kill at random, but you wouldn’t expect them to search out victims in isolated mountain villages. There must have been a reason for her to be singled out.’

‘Maybe he was a religious nut. Maybe he disapproved of her relationship with Roberto. Maybe he was jealous—after all, he did kill them both. Who knows?’

'I just think there must be more to it, that's all. It's not as though you'd find yourself just passing through here one day, would you?'

'What are you saying? That she was on a hit list of some kind? I know I talked about a vendetta, but now I'm here I can see how ridiculous that is. She was a nobody except to me. She was unlucky, that's all. The killer's probably a local who went bananas one day.' She looked around, shaking her head. 'Anyone would, stuck in a place like this, except maybe a saint or an artist. I was more scared back in England—Thanks, Lu, you really helped that night. I was serious about giving you the house, by the way. It's yours if you want it.'

'It's very tempting, thank you, Trisha, but where would I get the time to come here? A month in the summer, perhaps. And what would the people who live here think? They'd hate me for wasting it.'

'I could easily get someone to look after the place for you. They'd be grateful.'

'It's incredibly generous of you, but I can't possibly take it. Thank you, Trisha, but really, if you want to give it away, find someone who needs it.'

Patrissia shrugged. 'Well, the offer stands if you change your mind. We could paint together, like in the old days. I could teach you Italian.'

Something in her tone made Lucinda go still for a second. She looked at her watch. 'We'll be late if we don't go soon.'

*

There weren't many mourners, just the abbot and another monk from the monastery where Roberto had been a lay brother, and some old women. While the priest read the sermon in sad Italian, Patrissia thought of Marc's funeral the year before. Hardly anyone had gone to that, either. She was disturbed to find that she could barely remember anything except standing over his grave and throwing Claudia's rosary on his coffin, but that memory was so intense it made her shudder. Lucinda, seeing it, put her arm through Patrissia's, squeezing it gently.

‘That’s right, Trisha, let yourself go.’ She pulled a tissue from her bag and wiped a tear from her own eye. ‘We can be happy that Claudia has passed beyond and we can cry for ourselves, for the fact that these dreadful things can happen to us. It’s what people mean by misery.’

‘And the misery’s only fear for ourselves, isn’t it?’

Lucinda took a deep breath and looked around at the weeping women. ‘It’s so much more heartfelt here than at home,’ she murmured, squeezing Patrissia’s arm again, this time covering her hand with her own, ‘but there’s the same feeling of resignation and obedience. I don’t know,’ she said, frowning, ‘I was raised a Catholic and I don’t think I’ll ever completely lose my faith, but I can’t really believe anyone benefits from this. Becoming one with Johnny’s *Glorious Spirit* seems much more attractive, if you can’t live without a fantasy. This,’ she indicated the other mourners, ‘just makes me want to scream *Stop it, and don’t be so silly! Get out and enjoy yourself!* Of course, I’d be telling myself, mainly.’

Patrissia smiled, ‘I don’t know, Lu. I keep going on about my father and the way he controlled our lives, but to be honest, if I hadn’t been so awkward maybe I’d have been happier.’ She sniffed, and Lucinda handed her a tissue.

‘Knuckling under doesn’t work out so badly for most people, does it? When these people here go home they’ll have their family waiting, and they know their family will protect them and care for them, because the Church has said families should be like that. They’ll be comforted. What comfort do we have, Lu? What’s waiting for us when we get home? All this fighting for what I *want*... I don’t think I’ve got the energy any more.’

‘You’re just a bit low, Trisha. It’ll pass.’

‘I don’t know. I just feel worn out. Look at the men I’ve been with—it was a fist fight with all of them. I can’t do that any more. The only remotely sympathetic man I know is Jamie, and he’s hardly a paragon.’

‘No,’ Lucinda replied wistfully.

Patrissia looked up. ‘Do you miss him?’

‘I’m not sure. I don’t know why I should.’

‘Hmm. Well, Sal might be a distraction, at least.’

Lucinda frowned. ‘I’m having second thoughts, to be honest. I know I said I wanted a little craziness, but I don’t think I’m cut out for it. We had a sitting a couple of days ago, and I admit there’s something about him, but I couldn’t stop myself wondering what we’d do when we weren’t in bed. I couldn’t see myself with him even in a restaurant, let alone meeting my friends. But there’s something else, too. I get the feeling he’s not genuine, somehow, that he’s putting on some kind of show to get me off-balance.’

Patrissia laughed. ‘But that’s what men do, Lu, especially Italian men. There’s a name for it, *La Figura*. It means something like ‘cutting a dash’ but we take it much more seriously. It’s all show, anyway.’

‘Maybe. Maybe I’m just getting cold feet, but looking at it from here—Anyway, I’ve decided to cancel the rest of the sittings. I’ll let him keep the money, of course.’

The priest had finally reached the end of the service, and the two women watched as he made the sign of the cross and intoned the *Spiritu Sancti*.

‘I’ve brought nothing to put on the coffin, not even flowers.’ Patrissia scabbled through her bag. ‘Not even a cough sweet.’

‘You can have this if you like.’ Lucinda held out a white flower. ‘I picked it from the garden while you were busy with Secundus.’

Patrissia took the pretty bougainvillea and approaching the coffin, laid it gently on the lid. ‘*Ciao*, Claudia. See you back at the house.’

*

They left Rome two days later. Patrissia was as much a tourist as Lucinda—until she’d visited Claudia the year before, she hadn’t been back to her home since she had so impetuously abandoned it twenty years before.

Much of the historic centre had been cleaned up since her childhood. They’d walked to the Vatican, where Patrissia had loudly declared that it looked like a big fish market, much to Lucinda’s

embarrassment. Crossing the river on the way back, they sat for a while on a bench above the water.

‘The Tiber’s rather disappointing after being told how significant it is,’ said Lucinda. ‘It looks like the Manchester ship canal, only smaller and dirtier.’

‘Mmm, yes, it’s not pretty, is it? Well, the flower market’s not too far now.’

When they reached Campo di Fiore, Lucinda bought a bougainvillea to replace the one she’d given Patrissia, then paused to admire the statue of Giordano Bruno.

‘It’s everywhere, here, isn’t it? Culture, I mean. You can’t turn a corner without tripping over something extraordinary.’

‘You get used to it pretty quickly. I grew up here, and we spent most of our time in the park, just like kids anywhere. You’re probably the only one who even bothered to see who the statue was of. Everybody else is looking at each other.’

‘He was an heretic, wasn’t he?’

‘I expect so, most people are.’

Crossing the road to the Piazza Navona, Lucinda was delighted at the skill of the artists in their little enclave, and went so far as to have her portrait done.

‘Fifteen minutes! That’s all it took him!’ she exclaimed, coming over to Patrissia, who was having a coffee and cigarette outside one of the restaurants lining the huge square. ‘Look at this, it would have taken me all day to do—probably longer—and it wouldn’t have been half so good. Perhaps I shouldn’t bother.’

Patrissia took the portrait. It *was* good.

‘You *should* bother, Lu. One day you’ll find someone you really want to paint, you know. You’re not destined to be alone for long I don’t think, and when you paint that portrait it’ll be the most precious thing you’ll ever own. You could practice on me if you like.’

‘Trisha—’ Lucinda stopped, blushing. ‘The thing is, I’ve got a painting you did of Johnny. It seems only right that you have it.’

‘Johnny? The one I did at college? You’ve got that?’

‘Yes, I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t have—’

‘But how—Oh, never mind. Don’t worry, Lu, I’m flattered, but I didn’t want to keep it then and I don’t want it now, thanks all the same.’

‘Sal thinks it’s very good.’

‘Does he? Then he hasn’t much discrimination.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure. I don’t need to be reminded what an idiot I am.’

She sighed and lit a cigarette as Lucinda ordered a fizzy water. ‘I’m just looking forward to getting back to England. There’s nothing here for me. There’s nothing much there, either, but at least I don’t have to look impressed or pretend to think it’s so wonderful. This place just exhausts me. And I feel like a mobile compost heap.’

‘You look lovely, Trisha, and you know it.’

Patrissia, smiling, took her hand. ‘I’m lucky having you for a friend, Lu. I mean it. I haven’t been very nice to you—to anyone—and you’ve stuck with me. Never mind the Johnny business, that was him, not you, and I deserved it anyway.’ She stood up. ‘And now I know about your lurid past—’ She kissed Lucinda on the lips.

‘Trisha—’

‘I’m not making a pass, Lu. I just wanted to thank you.’

Lucinda smiled. ‘I wasn’t going to object, in fact there have been times when I’ve had to stop myself...’

‘Yes?’ Patrissia’s eyes were bright.

‘But I always did stop myself, didn’t I?’ Lucinda giggled. ‘Come on,’ she ordered, taking Patrissia’s arm, ‘it’s our last day. Let’s make the most of it. I want to see the Pantheon and the Capuchin crypt at least.’

‘You’re in charge.’

The lion's den

Jamie's phone beeped as he stopped in the hall, and dropping his briefcase he fumbled in his inside pocket.

The message was short and to the point. He tapped in a brief reply, a quizzical expression on his smooth features. It wasn't yet ten but he already felt hot. He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow.

'Who was that?'

He turned round. 'I didn't hear you get up.' He checked his phone again and put it in his pocket.

'Obviously.'

'It was only Trish inviting us for drinks this evening.'

'What did you say?'

'I accepted, why?'

Ciara opened her arms, inviting inspection. 'Why d'you think I'm in this get up? You know very well it's my exercise day. I've got yoga, swimming—It'll mean missing my Pilates class, Jamie.'

'She said she wanted to discuss something important. I wonder what she meant?'

'Oh? Maybe she has news of Claudia, do you think?'

'I don't know. She sounded a bit hyper, though.'

Ciara sighed. 'That's not unusual, is it?' She paused. 'You're spending a lot of time at her place.'

'You know she asked me to. Maybe *you* could try to see her more often. You spend half your time with your mother—I'm sure she could spare you an hour or two.'

'There's a lot to organise, Jamie.'

'I'm sure there is, but that doesn't mean you can't give a bit of time to Trish. She's your family too.'

'Who else is going?'

'Just Lucinda.'

'It can't be about Claudia then. I suppose we could go. Can you empty the washing machine before you leave? My back's playing me up.'

'OK.'

There was a pause. 'Jamie?'

'Yes?'

'You're right, I should see Patrissia more often. I'll call her this morning.'

'I think it'd help.'

'You're a kind man, Jamie. You let people take advantage of you.'

'I can't help that. I am who I am. So we're going tonight?'

'Yes. I'll call her later and see if I can worm something out of her. What could it be? I suppose if Lucinda's involved it could be business.'

'I hope not. Trish's in no state to deal with sharks.'

'Maybe that's why she's invited the three of us.'

'Could be, I suppose.' He picked up his briefcase. 'See you there.'

*

Marc, please forgive me.

At last she had said it.

Patrissia was sitting at her kitchen table, the cards in front of her: The Magus, The World, The Hanged Man... The crude illustrations looked grim, which was no surprise.

She listened to the wind outside the window. Was that a voice? She shook her head and turned her gaze back to the Hanged Man. He looked like Marc, with his dishevelled hair and expression of terrified resignation. 'I deserve this,' it seemed to be saying—or had she heard it in the wind?

She sat quite still, just as she had the day Ciara had arrived at Marc's house, hearing the same low tones that wouldn't resolve into

actual words, strain her ears as she might. This time, too, she knew that if she could make sense of them the words would tell her something she needed to know.

Stubbing out her half-smoked cigarette, she went to the sink and splashed cold water over her face, holding her cheeks and temples in her wet hands as if comforting herself after too many tears. Slowly letting her fingers drop to cover her mouth she found herself staring at the white-painted old shed Marc had used as his studio, and stark against it, the *Pan* that she had wanted to take when he had died.

It had become familiar over the past few weeks as she got used to her new home, and now, whenever she stood at the window it drew her gaze, the malformed but recognisably greedy and contemptuous smile giving her goosebumps. She wondered again why it had appeared to her in Rome—if it was meant to give her some sort of message. But what could Pan have to say to her?

Marc had told her that he always sketched his pieces from life and she had asked him several times who the model had been but he had been evasive, as always. She had to assume it was the boy in the photographs, and that, like *Lachesis*, *Pan*'s evolution owed more to Marc's state of mind than to any artistic intention.

The doorbell rang, making her jump. She looked at her watch—it must be Lucinda. She had meant to get some snacks and drinks prepared but had been distracted. Oh well. There was another ring. She scraped the cards off the table and threw them in the waste bin on her way to the door.

*

'Thanks for coming, Lu,' said Patrissia, kissing her and ushering her in. 'I'm relieved it's you, I'm going to need someone on my side.'

They went down the long dark passage into the living room. The French doors were wide open, the curtains roughly drawn back and stirring gently in the breeze.

Lucinda took off her coat. 'I think you're being very brave, Trisha. However Ciara takes it, it won't be pleasant.'

'No. Oh well, at least Jamie's been reasonable.'

'Jamie knows?'

'Yes.'

'That's not going to go down well.'

'No, but it can't be helped. I made him promise not to say anything. Anyway,' she continued, 'it's too late for all that.'

Lucinda opened her bag and taking out a small bottle, dropped some brown liquid onto her tongue. Seeing Patrissia's curious glance, she explained, 'I've been feeling a bit run down. Would you like some? It helps.'

'No, I'm fine. I thought as it's such a nice evening we could sit in the garden. They'll probably be late—Why don't you go on out and relax for five minutes? Can I get you a drink? I'll join you in a sec.'

'You'll need more chairs,' said Lucinda, peering out at the weeds and grass that almost obscured the flagstones of the ancient patio.

'There's a couple in the utility room. They'll do.'

'Is it all right if I freshen up? I came straight from work.'

'You know where it is.'

Lucinda wandered back through the house, wondering how Patrissia could live in so much dirt and untidiness, and opening the door to the bathroom, she carefully skirted the heap of clothes on the floor.

So Patrissia and Jamie were *that* close.

As she wiped the round shaving mirror and angled it on the window ledge, a glint of light from the white shed in the garden caught her eye, and for a second she was back on the terrace of Patrissia's house in Rome. There was even a cypress and a god, and the shed might be a temple of sorts. No wonder Patrissia felt at home here.

*

When she came down five minutes later, Jamie and Ciara had arrived. There was no sign of Patrissia.

‘Lu, hi.’ Jamie stood up to kiss her cheek. ‘Any idea what this is all about?’

‘I’ve a suspicion, yes, but perhaps we should let Trisha tell us. Where is she?’

‘Inside, getting another chair.’

Lucinda nodded and sat down. Ciara was busy tapping at her phone and hadn’t spoken.

‘Go on, what have you two been cooking up?’ said Jamie, recrossing his legs. ‘It’s not business, is it?’

‘No, it’s not business.’

Jamie was familiar with Lucinda’s stonewalling, and knew when to give up. ‘How was Rome?’

‘Amazing. Not least Trisha’s house—I had no idea. Have you been there, Ciara?’

‘No.’ Ciara looked up, her face blank. ‘I knew of it, of course, but I was never invited.’

‘It’s palatial, Jamie, quite stunning.’

‘It’s a hospice now, isn’t it?’ declared Ciara, looking up. ‘You would’ve thought the Church owned enough property already.’

‘They have to fork out for the running and maintenance costs, Ciara,’ said Lucinda equably. ‘A place like that must cost them a fortune.’

‘I suppose so,’ she grunted. ‘How was Trisha?’

‘Very much at home.’

‘Was there any particular reason you went? It was a bit of a last-minute decision, wasn’t it?’

‘I think that’s what she might want to talk about.’

‘You’re both being terribly mysterious,’ said Ciara with a frown.

Lucinda’s face was serious. Jamie raised his eyebrows in interrogation, but she didn’t respond.

‘Well!’ Patrissia’s voice was loud behind them. ‘I’m sorry to keep you waiting.’ She arrived at the table carrying an old kitchen chair in one hand and a bottle in the other. ‘Champagne!’

‘What’s the occasion?’ asked Jamie. ‘It’s not your birthday.’

‘No. It’s more of a death-day. But let’s have a drink before we get down to business. Would you mind, Jamie?’ She handed him the bottle. ‘Fill ’em up.’

He took the bottle and began to pour. ‘What’s with the hippy gear?’

Wriggling the chair into the rough grass, Patrissia sat down and smiled a wide smile. ‘Oh, this? I found it in a cupboard when I was clearing my house. D’you like it? It’s my old painting getup.’

Does Lucinda realise I’m doing this for her?

‘You must be wondering why I invited you tonight? I’ll get to that in a sec, but first I’d like to propose a toast to my very good friend, Lucinda. To Lucinda! without whom we wouldn’t be here.’ Downing half her glass, she continued, ‘She’s been my friend for twenty years, and I hope, for many more.’

Jamie and Ciara swivelled their heads towards Lucinda in surprise at the formality, and raised their glasses.

‘Congratulations, you two,’ said Jamie, with a hesitant grin. ‘Firm friends!’ Lucinda was looking as surprised as they had been, and taking a slow sip of champagne, she eyed Patrissia anxiously.

‘Drink up, there’s more in the fridge,’ Patrissia encouraged them, already refreshing her glass.

‘Come on, Trish, don’t keep us in suspense. Why did you invite us?’

‘It’s a *very* special occasion.’ She turned to Ciara. ‘I know you’ve had your doubts about me, Ciara, and this is my attempt to put things right between us. I have a present for you—actually, three presents. I brought them back with me from Rome.’ She scrabbled in her bag, removing a couple of packs of cigarettes to search more closely. ‘Ah, yes.’

Extracting a small envelope, she put it on the table. ‘It’s a letter from Claudia. Perhaps it would be best if you read it aloud.’

‘From my *mother*?’ Ciara stared at her.

‘Yes. Read it.’

Ciara slowly tore open the envelope, still with her eyes fixed on Patrissia.

‘OK. I’ll translate.’ Unfolding the cheap paper, she held it as if it were poisoned.

Ciara, my darling daughter, I know what a shock this will be for you, but you will understand why I am writing now.

You’ll never know what it cost me to give you up, nor will you understand how I could. I hope this will go some way towards helping you forgive me.

I could have come looking for you, but I chose not to. I knew you were loved and cared for, as you deserved. I didn’t forget you. Your mother wrote to Secundus occasionally giving news of you, and he kept me informed.

‘Secundus knew,’ said Ciara, quietly.

‘It would appear so.’

Ciara stared at her. ‘And so did you, Patrissia.’

‘I was told only last year, Ciara. Read on.’

I have a disease I inherited from my mother that means I couldn’t have cared for you as you’ve been cared for, a disease that has made my life very difficult, and that will soon kill me. I couldn’t make you face that.

I won’t ask your forgiveness for this most dreadful of sins, a mother’s abandonment of her child, but Secundus will intercede for me, which is more than I deserve.

You have always been in my heart and in my prayers. Pray for me, Ciara.

Love, Your Mamma

PS Don’t blame Secundus or Patrissia for not telling you where I am. I asked them not to, for all our sakes.

The three of them watched as Ciara re-read the note. When she looked up, she didn't look happy, but said nothing.

'That's the first present. Here's the second.' Apparently unfazed by the letter's reception, Patrissia dipped back into her bag and handed her a photograph. 'It's Marc and Claudia in the Piazza Navona.'

She glanced quickly at Lucinda, who was sitting quite still, her drink halfway to her mouth. 'They look happy, don't they? It's the only picture of them together that exists.'

Ciara took the photograph and gave it a brief glance. 'He doesn't look very happy to me.'

'You look so like Claudia, don't you think?' said Patrissia, sighing, her face grave. 'He was desperately in love with her, Ciara, far more than he was with me. He didn't want to leave her.'

'Then why did he?' Ciara asked, in spite of herself.

'My father hounded him out. Marc wasn't far from ruin when he was forced to comply with my father's wishes. It was my father who made him the fearful, isolated man you met.'

Ciara snorted disbelievingly. 'Did Claudia tell you that?'

'Yes.' Patrissia took another sip of wine. Behind her niece's head, Lucinda was staring at her with a look of incredulous disappointment.

'Christ, I can't wait for the third present.' said Ciara, her eyes blazing. 'What is it? A photo of my mother suckling me?'

'No, the third present is—You have a brother, Ciara.'

'You mean a half-brother?' she spat contemptuously. 'Now that *is* the kind of surprise I'd expect from him.'

'No, Ciara. He's your twin brother,' said Patrissia softly. 'He's called Domenico, but I truly don't know where he is.'

'Hang on. How can I have a twin brother? Don't be ridiculous, it's not possible.'

'I learned a lot in Rome, Ciara. A lot about Claudia and something about myself. I went to see Secundus and Guido. They're both dying. It was Secundus who told me about Domenico.'

He claimed that he'd never said anything to Marc, or to my father. He was ashamed of that, but he did it to protect him.'

'Protect who?'

'I don't think you quite realise what kind of man my father was. His teenaged daughter giving birth to an illegitimate *son*? He would have had them both killed.'

'You're crazy. You're making it all up. D'you think I'm stupid or something?'

'The nuns told Claudia he was stillborn', continued Patrissia, her voice still low. 'He was a weak and sickly baby, and a difficult, defiant, violent, child. Nobody wanted to take him on, so he was institutionalised, abused—he became a thief and probably much worse.'

She paused, waiting for a reaction. Lucinda and Jamie were open-mouthed, their eyes fixed on Ciara, who was sitting quite still, her mouth twitching.

'It's true, Ciara. He ran away from the orphanage when he was seventeen, and Secundus lost track of him.' She raised her eyes. 'I didn't know whether or not to tell you, and Lucinda persuaded me that I should. You should thank her.'

'Thank her for what?' Ciara suddenly exploded. 'If it's true—and I doubt it is—you're telling me I have a brother who probably hates me and who I'll probably never meet. What kind of present is that?' she hissed venomously. 'Are you insane? I suppose you knew about him all along?'

Ciara's face had gone crimson, her mouth an ugly scar. 'You fucking dirty lying bitch!' she finally managed to say. 'I don't believe any of it!'

She stood up. 'Did you really think you could soften me up with cheap champagne? Jesus Christ!' She picked up the bottle and threw it against the wall. The thick glass gave a hollow thump and pieces exploded into the overgrown grass below. Nobody moved.

'If I ever set eyes on you again, I swear to God I'll claw your eyes out, you disgusting, twisted *cunt*!'

Ciara was trembling and choking with rage, her eyes wild. Looking at her, Patrissia was reminded of herself before Johnny tamed her, and standing, she walked up to her, slapping her hard across the face. It had worked for Johnny, sometimes.

‘Control yourself. You’re not an animal.’

Ciara slowly put her hand to her cheek. ‘You want a fight? I’ll give you a fucking fight, you bitch.’ She grabbed a hank of Patrissia’s long black hair and yanked fiercely.

Lucinda and Jamie were both half-out of their seats, shouting at them to stop. Jamie ran to Ciara, pinning her arms. There was a sharp crack as Ciara threw her head backwards and Jamie fell back onto the grass, blood pouring from his nose.

‘Oh fuck! You bitch!’

‘No wonder you and that slag get on so well!’ Ciara’s eyes were shining with hatred. ‘Did you hatch this between you? You knew about all this, too, didn’t you?’ she snarled, turning and looking as if she would hit Jamie again. ‘Don’t bother trying to deny it, I can see it in your face. Right, well, she can have you, we’re finished, you fucking wimp.’

‘Ciara!’

‘Collect your stuff by the end of the week, or you’ll find it in the street.’

‘Listen, I can explain—’

‘I’m not interested in your explanations.’

Lucinda had been watching with open mouth, but collecting herself, she said in a calm voice, ‘Ciara, you’re right to be angry, but you’ve said enough. Come back with me.’ She rose to her feet. ‘You’re unbelievable, Trisha, really you are. That’s all I have to say. Come on, Ciara, let’s leave them to their consciences.’ She picked up her bag and began to walk towards the house. ‘You can stay with me tonight, if you like.’

Ciara stared hard at her, then relaxed. ‘OK.’ She spat on the grass in front of Patrissia. ‘Don’t try to contact me. I don’t ever want to see you again. We’re finished.’ With a final glare she caught

up with Lucinda and roughly pushing past her, disappeared through the side gate.

*

Patrissia took a cigarette from a pack on the table and lit it, gazing at Jamie, who was sat on the grass beside her holding his nose and groaning quietly. She took a sip of champagne.

‘I suppose that didn’t go too badly, considering. Sorry about your nose though, Jamie. How is it?’

‘I think it’s broken.’

‘Let’s have a look.’ Leaning forward, she pushed Jamie’s hands away from his face. His nose was red, swollen and bloody, and both eye-sockets were already turning blue. There were tears on his cheeks. ‘It looks painful. Do you want me to soak a cloth?’

‘That might help.’

‘OK, back in a sec.’

She returned with a wet towel. ‘Sorry, it’s all I could find. Bury your face in it for a couple of minutes. It’ll stop it bruising too much.’

While Jamie complied, Patrissia fiddled with her bag, and when he finally looked up, she was reading the letter.

‘Is that really from Claudia?’

Patrissia puffed a long stream of smoke into the air. ‘It’s what she would have written, had I been able to persuade her.’

‘So it’s a fake? What will you do when Ciara confronts her mother? Surely *she’s* not in on this?’

Patrissia looked at him wryly. ‘Her mother agreed with me that this was best for the family.’ She took a long drag of her cigarette. ‘Don’t look at me like that. We took a chance and it didn’t work, that’s all.’ Seeing his look of amazement, she continued, ‘Ciara’s adoptive father was a friend and associate of my father’s. They’re loyal to the old ways. The feelings are real, Jamie, and they’re all that matter.’

Jamie shook his head. ‘You’re losing your touch, Trish.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’d never have persuaded yourself that farrago would have worked if you were in your right mind. Nobody would be dumb enough to be taken in, let alone Ciara. She’s smart and she’s savvy. I can’t believe you thought you could trick her with that ridiculous guff.’

‘No.’ Patrissia took another puff of her cigarette. ‘I know she’s smart—she was smart enough to get you in tow when it suited her. And to dump you now, when she doesn’t need you any more. Are you going to let her get away with beating you up too?’

He stared at the broken glass of the champagne bottle sparkling in the evening sun. ‘I deserved it as much as you did.’

‘Nobody *deserves* anything, Jamie,’ said Patrissia, massaging her neck. ‘You get what you get, that’s all. If you choose to let Ciara make the rules, as you have, you’re giving her leave to piss all over you. You said it yourself.’

‘I suppose so. But fuck it, Trish,’ he subsided onto his back, examining the bloody towel, ‘why does it always have to be a sodding power game all the sodding time?’ He put a hand through his hair. ‘Jesus, my face really hurts.’

‘It’s called dynamic equilibrium, Jamie,’ Patrissia murmured evenly. ‘Things change, and all you can do is concentrate on making the changes smooth—and *yours*. It’s how things are—all women know that. Light and dark, strong and weak, life and death, we all swing along between them. Only fools imagine they can perch at some comfortable spot and stay there.’

‘So men are fools to rely on women? Is that what you’re saying?’

‘If you want to put it like that. Rhythms rule women’s lives—periods, moods, movement, even fashion and dancing, everything. We *exist* in waves. Men are unreliable too, of course, and they don’t even have that excuse. Anyway, we both know it’s true. Remember how much we talked at the meetings about agreements? They’re an explicit acknowledgement of that will to change, and an attempt to deny it—which is why they rarely work.’

‘That’s what Philip kept saying, wasn’t it, if you read between the lines? That agreements are worth shit without commitment. I guess you’re right. And only crazies commit themselves unreservedly.’

‘If you think that, why did you go along with your marriage to Lucinda? And why were you letting Ciara talk you into another one?’

‘Because that’s what normal people do?’ Jamie grinned, and then winced. ‘How the hell should I know? Agreements, marriages, vows—none of them make any difference in the end. All that stuff about rhythms is beside the point—people are just dishonest. They only make agreements if they think they can break them—and are pretty sure that the other one won’t.’

‘I didn’t realise you were so cynical.’

‘Just because I don’t broadcast my opinions doesn’t mean I don’t have any, Trish. I just don’t like the opinions I have. You want to know why I never said anything in the meetings? It was because I couldn’t believe that adults could still be thinking like kids. For you, it was a game, just another scene in your personal movie, but for people like Roy it was serious—you affected their lives, Trish, and I didn’t want any part of the deception. Because that’s what it was—lies and deceit.’

‘Then why did you keep coming?’

‘Because I fancied the leading lady.’ He shook his head. ‘We try so hard to get what we want but in the end that’s what it all comes down to, doesn’t it? just biology. It’s funny,’ he mused, ‘I think the other reason I kept going was that I wanted to be persuaded that it wasn’t like that. I wanted to hope that it wasn’t.’

‘I know, Jamie. I wish it wasn’t like that, too. But it is.’

Jamie groaned at a sudden stab of pain.

‘What are you going to do about Ciara?’ Patrissia asked softly.

‘Do?’ He gave a long sigh. ‘Go with the flow, I guess. Actually I’m glad it’s over.’ He lay back, gazing blankly at the thin wisps of cloud scudding across the mild blue sky. ‘She’s pregnant, and that’ll complicate things, but if I apologise and we get back together she’ll eat me alive.’ There was a long silence, both lost in thought. ‘It looks like I’m a free man.’ The thought didn’t seem to please him.

Patrissia nodded. 'Well, if you need somewhere to stay, my legs are always open.'

Jamie froze for a second and then laughed, grimacing at the same time. 'Perhaps you haven't lost your touch entirely.' He stood up carefully. 'I suppose I'd better go and get some stuff from the house while she's at Lu's.' He glanced at his watch. 'I'll be back in a couple of hours.' He brushed some of the grass from his trousers. 'Are you sure you'll be OK?'

'Don't you think you should get your nose seen to first?'

'I'll be OK,' he sighed. 'I'm so tired of all this shit. All I want to do is retire to a cave for a while.'

'I can understand that.'

Picking up Lucinda's and Ciara's almost-full glasses, she handed one to him. 'We might as well finish the champagne. To new beginnings,' she said in a quiet voice.

Jamie raised his glass. 'Long live the bloody king.'

Prettiness palls

Ciara was already busy with the coffee machine when Lucinda arrived in the kitchen the next morning.

‘Good morning, Ciara. Did you sleep well?’

Ciara snapped the lid down and studied the flask.

‘Would you like me to show you how it works? It’s quite complicated.’

‘I’ll work it out, thanks.’ Ciara pressed a couple of buttons and the machine whirled into gritty grinding life. She nodded as though she thought it was about time it pulled its socks up.

She held up a ceramic pot. ‘Is this one of yours?’

Lucinda nodded. ‘Yes, I’m getting bored with it, though. People seem to like pretty things, but prettiness palls quite quickly, don’t you find? I think it’s time to introduce some classical backbone into the range. We could go to the Vic for inspiration.’

The coffee machine had stopped whirring and began to click. ‘I hate that clicking—it reminds me of the countdown to a bomb blast.’ Her face twisted with delicate distaste, and taking the open pot from Ciara’s hand, she took a long sniff. ‘The beans are Blue Mountain, I think.’

‘Is it strong?’

‘I don’t know. Six, if I remember correctly.’

Ciara watched the dark liquid begin to trickle out. ‘Hmm. Do you have any yoghurt?’

‘In the fridge. How are you feeling this morning?’

Ciara opened the fridge door and swept her eyes over the shelves of plastic boxes and neat packets. ‘A bit sorry for Jamie, actually. What’s this?’ she asked, turning with a brown-splashed bowl in her hand. ‘Clay?’

‘Daisy must have put it in there,’ Lucinda tutted. ‘It’s much more fun than plasticene, but Zara keeps smearing it everywhere when I’m not looking, and it’s *so* messy. She’s so naughty.’

Ciara smiled and dipped her finger into the cold damp earth.

‘Why are you sorry for Jamie, Ciara?’

‘He’s so weak—It’s probably best that this happened now.’

‘Don’t you think you might be confusing weakness with kindness?’

‘Whatever.’

‘And Trisha? I must say, I think she might have handled it better.’

‘What do you want me to say?’ Ciara said between spoonfuls of yoghurt. ‘She’s always been a devious bitch.’

Lucinda eyed the colour of the coffee in the slowly-filling jug, and poured herself some tea. ‘Espresso?’

‘Please.’

‘So, you and Jamie..?’ she asked, bringing their drinks to the table and drawing out a chair.

‘I can’t see us getting back together, frankly. Ever since I found out about the pregnancy...I mean, he’s a nice bloke and all that, but he doesn’t really *add* anything. D’you know what I mean?’

‘Mmm,’ said Lucinda, thoughtfully. ‘So what you were saying about him and Trisha...?’

‘I was just letting off steam. I can’t really see him colluding in such a stupid rigmarole. And if he did, it’s down to her.’

‘You’re not jealous at all?’

‘Why should I be? As you said before, I doubt if anything’s going on between them. She’d be far too much for him to handle.’

‘Then why did you get so upset?’

‘I don’t like being taken for an idiot.’

Lucinda flinched at her tone. ‘Forgive me for saying so, but aren’t you rather taking Jamie for an idiot?’

‘Well, he is. You lived with him for what, sixteen years? It must have been deadly. Once you get past the fact that he’s a nice bloke, which of course he is, there’s nothing left, is there? I need someone who knows what he wants and who’s doing something about

getting it. I mean, you've built up a great business, you have a lovely house and kids—and how much of that is down to him?’

Lucinda took a sip of tea. ‘He works hard at a job he’s not that keen on. You can’t blame him for leaving the ego competition to those who enjoy that sort of thing.’ She put both hands round her cup and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. ‘There’s a lot to be said for having someone who’s happy to support you, rather than having big plans of their own, Ciara. I could only grow the business in the early days because he took a lot of the household stuff off my hands, including the girls when they arrived. And he gave me some good advice about the business side. He wasn’t so good at the end, but that wasn’t entirely his fault.’

‘You seem to be apologising for him.’

‘Not really. I just think your expectations might be a tad unrealistic.’

‘You don’t get anywhere if you don’t expect a lot from people.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Of course I’m right.’

‘You must often be disappointed.’

‘All the time. But if you have standards, you have to stick to them, or what’s the point?’

‘Hmm. I suppose it depends who sets the standards.’ Lucinda rose and refilled their cups, lingering by the coffee machine, inhaling the sharp burnt smell of the beans. ‘I know it’s a bit cheeky, but I was wondering if you had any plans for today?’

‘I was going to go back and start clearing out Jamie’s stuff.’

‘Oh!’ Lucinda exclaimed involuntarily. ‘So quickly? That’s rather final, isn’t it?’

‘I won’t change my mind, so there’s no point in messing around. I called my mother earlier, and she’s meeting me there. Why?’

Lucinda looked deflated. ‘It’s just that I have to take Zara to the specialist and I need someone to look after Daisy for a few hours. It completely slipped my mind. My mother’s busy today, unfortunately.’

‘No problem, I’ll reschedule my mother. Does Daisy like the zoo? I haven’t been there for a while.’

‘She adores it, although I’m afraid she insists on spending most of the time watching the little capuchins.’

‘Monkeys? Jamie likes them too. That’s fine. I like the lions and elephants but I can see them another time.’

‘That’s very good of you, considering the circumstances. Thank you so much, Ciara. She won’t be any trouble. More coffee?’

‘Please.’

Lucinda poured the thick black liquid into the mug. ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t like a little hot water in that? It looks dreadfully strong.’

‘My parents are Italian, remember. It’s what I’m used to.’

‘Of course, I keep forgetting. Actually, I’ll be seeing a countryman of yours before I take Zara to the Centre. You remember Sal?’

‘Patrissia’s pick-up? The model?’ she grinned. ‘That’s what I mean by get-up-and-go. Here he is, in a foreign country, and he’s learned the language, got the business—I might take his number myself.’ She pouted, giggling. ‘Did you get me my pictures?’

‘I did, actually. They’re on the camera. Here.’

Ciara peered at the little screen. ‘Mmm, he’s rather sexy, isn’t he? I don’t suppose you’d print a few for me?’ She peered closer. ‘What’s that in the background? I like it.’

Lucinda pursed her lips. ‘Sal liked it too. It’s one of Patrissia’s—her art tutor.’

‘It’s very good, isn’t it? Sort of overblown and understated at the same time. Impressive.’ Tipping back her head, she emptied her cup. ‘Well, where’s Daisy? We might as well get going.’

‘She’s in her room. I’ll get her ready. It’s so kind of you. I’ll be able to return the favour soon, won’t I?’

‘Not for a while, and anyway I’ll be getting an au pair.’ Ciara laughed. ‘Maybe I’ll go and convalesce in Italy after the birth and

brush up *my* painting. A little cottage in the hills, and Sal among the vines. Mmm, there's a prospect.'

*

When she had seen Ciara and Daisy safely on their way, Lucinda washed up the cups and tidied the kitchen. Going to the play room—'my *studio*', she corrected herself—she went round picking up the bits of pencil and crayon that the girls had strewn around. She looked at her watch. He would be arriving soon.

She wished Jamie were there. She hated sacking people.

Was she being a coward? The trip to Rome had rather shaken her. For one thing, she couldn't decide what she thought about Patrissia now, and that was unique in her experience.

Lucinda had been thinking about her *place in the world* for some time and had come to a rather unpleasant conclusion. Either people didn't, not *not count*, exactly, it was more that they didn't impinge on her. And when they did, it was in specific ways. The week before she had made a list of the people she knew, and she'd spent a couple of hours assigning each of them to sets—friends, colleagues, close friends—and was dismayed to find that she couldn't imagine them being other than what their set defined them as. They were stereotypes, even her parents. They all had their quirks, but basically each was safely catalogued and fixed in its orbit. It made her think.

All except Patrissia, who was a problem. She didn't seem to fit anywhere, and eventually ended up as the only member of the set of 'significant enigmas', a phrase Lucinda was rather proud of. It didn't help much, though.

Sal was definitely in the non-impinging set. Picking up the camera she flicked through the dozen or so shots of him. It was interesting how *Italian* he looked, now that Rome was so fresh in her mind. She supposed that the English all looked *English* to him.

She hoped he wouldn't take it too badly. She had rather led him to believe that the sessions would end up in bed. Perhaps she'd offer him payment for another ten sessions, she decided, Italian-style.

Glancing in the mirror, it occurred to her that that the jeans and T-shirt she was wearing would give him the wrong message, and running quickly upstairs she changed into her most sober business suit. The last thing she needed was for Zara to witness a scene.

*

‘You should call her,’ said Patrissia, handing Jamie a large mug of steaming coffee. ‘She’ll be expecting you to.’

‘I know, but I don’t know what to say. To be honest, I don’t even know what I want. Last night, it was all so clear, but—’

‘Are you having a change of heart?’

‘Heart?’ Jamie leaned across the table and put his hand in hers. ‘I don’t know what’s in my heart.’

‘But I thought, last night, when we made love—?’

He lowered his eyes. ‘I don’t think I’m strong enough, Trish.’

‘For what?’ Patrissia’s eyes flickered. ‘It’s not a contest—at least, not for me, not any more.’ She squeezed his hand. ‘I know what I said the other night wasn’t exactly—’

‘It’s not that. You were being honest, and I appreciate it.’

‘I was truthful, maybe, but I didn’t give you the whole picture.’ Patrissia released her hand, reaching into her bag for a fresh pack of cigarettes. She took one, lighting it carefully and turning to blow the thick cloud of smoke away from the table. ‘Last night cleared up a few things for me, too—my relationship with Ciara especially.’

Jamie shook his head. ‘What relationship? You two had more than a tiff last night, Trish—bloody hell, I thought she was going to kill you.’

‘That’s what I mean. Since she arrived, when was it, a bit over a year ago? a lot of bad things have happened. I’m not saying it’s her fault, but she *is* a bit of a stormcrow, don’t you think? Look at you: she broke up your marriage.’

Jamie’s brow furrowed. ‘That’s a bit harsh, isn’t it?’

‘You think so?’ said Patrissia, speaking over her shoulder. ‘She’s not stupid. She must have known you were married, or were in a

relationship with someone—I dropped some pretty heavy hints, myself.’

‘Yes, she told me. ‘*Bad news*’ I think was the expression you used, if I remember correctly.’

‘So it was. Sorry, Jamie. You must understand, I was only trying to protect her.’

‘I know, Trish. It looks as if it’s me who needs protecting, though.’

‘Don’t be silly. Anyway, now she’s got you—well, you’ve been complaining ever since you got together. And you heard her last night.’

Jamie leaned back, his face taut. ‘You’re not implying that she deliberately broke me and Lu up, are you? What possible reason could she have?’

‘Not just you and Lu, Jamie—you and *me*.’ She blew a plume of smoke at the ceiling. ‘We both know she’s not the little innocent she pretended to be.’

‘You and me?’

‘You can’t deny that she knew we were attracted to each other—everybody did. Lu and Marc both suspected we were having an affair, and so did Ciara.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’ His phone buzzed, and he looked at the screen before putting it back in his pocket. ‘Lu. Anyway, oh yes. I can’t believe Ciara took me on to get at you, Trish, that’s ridiculous.’

‘Are you sure?’

He stared at her. ‘I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but I don’t like it.’ He stood up and reached for his coat. ‘I’m going out for some air. I’ll be a couple of hours.’

‘Are you going to try to make up with Ciara?’

‘No. I’m going to the zoo.’ He looked embarrassed. ‘I’m going to talk to the tiger.’

‘OK, Jamie, he’ll probably give you sound advice.’ Patrissia smiled. ‘Call me before you do speak to her, won’t you?’

‘OK.’

The front door banged shut, and Patrissia relaxed. Why had she said all that? He was angry with her now, even though it was all probably true.

She closed her eyes, her half-smoked cigarette streaming thin trails into the air. What had Lucinda's message been about?

*

Jamie still hadn't returned three hours later. Patrissia had spent the time working on her portrait of him, but it didn't look quite right. His expression worried her—he looked oppressed and anxious, but something in the eyes and the set of the mouth suggested that given the opportunity, he wouldn't hesitate to kill and maim. It was an arresting combination, but nothing like she had intended, and nothing like him.

You were the object, Patrissia—the subject, as ever, was myself.

That was what Johnny had said about his portrait of her. The artist takes an object and imbues it with his own obsessions.

Ciara's a lot like me, and she's scary.

She picked up a small brush, her favourite, and studied the face. It was true. She would have to hide Mrs Hyde more deeply.

She was about to begin the tricky task of remaking him anew when she heard her phone beep.

He's texting me instead of calling. Lucinda's said something.

She didn't want to read it, and dipping the brush into a blob of grey-white, began to make tiny adjustments to his eyes.

Her hand jerked as the phone emitted another beep. Ignoring the now-smudged line that she had so carefully drawn, she stared at the blank screen for a long moment.

Here comes the explanation and apology.

Placing the palette and brush on the edge of the table, she reluctantly picked up her phone. There were two messages, but not from Jamie, she saw with relief, but from Lucinda. She wasn't in the mood to be lectured and was about to put it back on the table when it began to ring.

This time it *was* Jamie. Letting out a long breath she pressed the button.

‘I need you to go round to Lu’s, Trish,’ he said immediately. ‘I think there’s something wrong.’

‘Sorry, Jamie, what? Is this about Ciara?’

‘I don’t know.’ He was speaking rapidly and sounded as if he’d been running. Patrissia switched the phone to her other hand. ‘Zara just called me on Lu’s phone—God knows how she got hold of it, Lu’s very careful. Anyway, she said something about Lu not letting her in, or something like that. She’s hard to understand sometimes. I’m worried’

‘Can’t you go? Where are you?’

‘Still at the zoo. Sorry, I’ll be as quick as I can, but even if I take a cab, it’ll be a good hour before I can get there in this traffic.’ He paused. ‘I tried calling her back, but there was no answer. Would you mind?’

‘I got a couple of texts from her as well, but I haven’t read them yet. Hang on, I’ll just take a look.’ She brought up the texts. One was blank and the other was just a ‘Z’.

Zennor? Johnny?

‘They’re nonsense, Jamie. Did you try calling Ciara? She might still be there.’

She heard an exasperated sigh. ‘I tried, yes, but she’s not picking up, either.’

‘I can’t go there if Ciara’s still around, you must see that.’

‘There’s something wrong, though, Trish, I’m sure.’ There was a pause. ‘I’ll call Ciara’s mother, she’s bound to know where she is.’

‘Good idea. Call me back.’

He was back on the line within the minute. ‘Ciara left Lu’s half an hour ago. She’s got Daisy with her. That’s all her mother would say. She was rather frosty.’

‘I’m sure. OK. I’ve got to finish something, but I should be there in twenty minutes. Jamie?’

‘Yes?’

‘What about us?’

‘I need more time, Trish.’

Patrissia nodded to herself. ‘OK. I’ll see you at Lu’s. It’ll be nothing, you’ll see.’

‘Thanks. See you in an hour.’

Patrissia hung up and tapped a message to Lucinda. ‘*What’s up? You’ve got me worried,*’ then laid the phone on the table. Going to the kitchen to wash her brushes, it came to her that her one night with Jamie would be all there was. Her eyes filled with tears.

*

Lucinda still hadn’t replied by the time Patrissia crunched over the gravel and parked behind the blue Polo. She quickly tapped in ‘*I’m outside your house*’ before lifting the heavy knocker and rapping sharply three times. She was wondering if Jamie still had a key when the door shook slightly as if something had knocked against it.

‘Lu?’ She listened, but all she could hear was a faint scratching. ‘Lu? Is that you? Zara?’ She put her head against the door. ‘Can you get mummy for me?’

The scratching stopped.

‘Zara? Is that you? Have you got mummy’s phone? Can you give it back to her?’ She pressed her ear against the door, waiting, but there were no more sounds.

She pressed Jamie’s number again. ‘Where are you? I think Zara’s at the door, but she won’t speak and she won’t open it.’

‘She can’t, Trish. I’ll explain later.’

‘Lucinda doesn’t seem to be home, Jamie.’

‘That’s impossible. I’ll be as quick as I can. Ten minutes or so. Wait for me.’

She knocked again, perfunctorily, and then started round the back. Passing a bay window, all she could see was Lucinda’s easel and an open box of paints.

Johnny?

Some sort of animal

Patrissia was lying on the grass in the garden when Jamie came back out. She sat up as he approached, smoothing down her dress, watching his face.

‘Where’s Zara?’

‘They took her with them. I don’t have any rights as an ex-husband,’ he added bitterly.

‘It’s lucky she hid. God knows what he would have done to her.’

Jamie scowled. ‘It makes me feel sick to think of it.’

He had found Zara as soon as he’d arrived. She had been hiding in the cupboard under the stairs, one of her favourite places. She thought it was a game.

Patrissia had patiently teased her out while Jamie had searched the rest of the house. When she had tried to hug her, the little girl had been stiff and alien in her arms, and Patrissia had sniffed back tears as she remembered how often she had felt the same barrenness with Johnny—now that she knew, she recognised the same resistance, the same otherness, the same blank wall. And the few times she had tried to get closer he had dismissed her with the same trite formula.

‘We live alone and we die alone, Patrissia.’

Patrissia had tightened her hold on Zara, who wriggled and squirmed in her arms, crying to get away.

And then Jamie had found Lucinda. After calling an ambulance, he had spent ten minutes calming and cajoling the secretive little girl, glancing quizzically aside at Patrissia who Zara would not allow near her.

Little by little, circuitously, he had pieced together the story. Zara had found Lucinda’s phone on the hall floor and had been playing with it. Because it was Lucinda’s she’d thought she’d been talking to her, and it was only by chance that her fingers had pressed the buttons that had alerted Jamie and Patrissia.

‘There was shouting and bashes and crashes,’ she’d explained to him equably. ‘Lots and lots of crashes. I closed my door because it wasn’t right.’

‘She means it wasn’t in its proper place,’ Jamie had explained. ‘Doors and windows are supposed to be shut, and if you open them, you have to shut them again as soon as possible.’

‘You mean she’s scared of open doors?’

‘No, not scared. She just doesn’t like things when they’re not in their proper place.’

‘That must be difficult for you?’

‘You get used to it.’

The ambulance had arrived quickly, and then the police. Patrissia and Jamie had been told to wait in the garden while they searched the house. A constable kept an eye on them from the terrace.

‘The blokes from the ambulance said to call the hospital in a couple of hours—no point in going with her now, they’re taking her into intensive care—no visitors. I don’t think they’d let me go anyway.’

‘That sounds serious. How badly was she hurt?’

‘Some nasty knife wounds, broken arm, bruises, but it’s shock, mainly. They’re keeping her sedated until they’ve examined her properly. She must have put up quite a fight.’

He was sweet and gentle, Trisha. He wouldn’t hurt me.

‘What’s it like up there?’

‘Smashed to pieces. If I ever find the bastard who did this, I’ll rip his head off.’ Jamie paced back and forth in front of her, his hands clenching and unclenching. Stopping abruptly facing her, his eyes stared into hers, dark and hard. ‘You don’t know anything, do you?’

Patrissia tensed, her throat dry. ‘How could I, Jamie?’

‘You talk to her.’

‘So do you.’

He grunted, his eyes boring into hers. ‘You’re not telling me everything. What do you know?’

‘I don’t know any more than you. Look, Jamie, you’re angry and upset, and that won’t help anybody. Why don’t you sit down for a moment?’

‘Don’t patronise me, Trish.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m only trying to help.’

‘Like you helped Marc?’ His voice was unforgiving.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. You have no idea about my relationship with Marc.’

‘No, but I have an idea about you, and I saw how angry you made him.’

‘I didn’t *make* him angry, he—’

‘OK, Trish, you’re right.’ Jamie held up his hands. ‘It’s true, I don’t know what went on between you, and that was uncalled for. I’m sorry.’ He turned towards the house. ‘He didn’t beat you up, anyway. What could Lu have done to provoke something like this? He must be some sort of animal, Jesus!’

Patrissia got to her feet, her heart racing. ‘It was no animal, Jamie. I texted Ciara and she said that Sal, the model, was supposed to be coming round this morning. Lu was going to tell him she didn’t want his services.’ She moved closer and took Jamie’s arm. ‘I didn’t say anything because it’s only a—’

His head jerked up. ‘You think *he* did it? For being sacked? Why didn’t he come for you?’ he asked suspiciously. ‘You’d already rejected him.’

An odd inflection in his voice made Patrissia hesitate slightly as she answered, ‘Not just for being sacked. Lu and he were...getting friendly, shall we say.’

Jamie shook off her hand and stared at her. ‘What’s the matter with you? This is no time for jokes.’

‘Sorry, Jamie, I’m not joking. I don’t know whether they’ve actually slept together, but she was certainly thinking about it.’

He looked at her in stunned silence. ‘I can’t believe it. Lu’s not like that. And definitely not with Zara in the house. It’s impossible.’

We posed together.

‘She’s changed, Jamie.’

‘Not that much.’

‘Maybe.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘How well do you think you know her?’

‘Don’t be stupid, we were married for...’ He trailed off, and when he spoke again the sadness in his voice made Patrissia pause, the slow wave of self-righteousness that had been building up inside her dissipating as suddenly as it had come as he continued, ‘I guess you’re right. She doesn’t give much away. Not to me, anyway. I probably know more about you than I do her.’

‘It’s not your fault, Jamie. Lucinda’s no different from the rest of us. We’re all frightened children in our hearts, and we all have secrets, it’s our nature. Nobody’s immune.’ She shook her head. ‘And the stupidest thing is that even though we know that’s true, we forget in an instant. You say you know *me*, but you know hardly anything.’

‘What about all the stuff you’ve been telling me lately?’

‘Oh, Jamie, how naïve you are! It’s not even scratching the surface. Have you ever wondered why women tell each other every detail of their shopping trip, or their neighbour’s son’s birthday or what they do in bed? It’s the way they say it, and the little comments—*that’s* how you get to know someone deeply. And men don’t listen. Of course we don’t give everything away—’

‘But those things aren’t important!’

‘Yes, they are! It’s the everyday things that are the *most* important, Jamie. You know as well I do that people can put on a nice face in public, but in private—you can’t hide how you like your toast done or what you’re like when the boiler packs up, and that tells people something about you. It’s why living together is so hard. You always give yourself away eventually.’

‘Come on, what’s there to know?’

Patrissia’s face had taken on a soft reflective look. ‘I thought I knew my father, I thought I knew Johnny, I thought I knew Marc—and you and I both thought we knew Lu. But there are always

surprises. You just have to trust that they'll be pleasant ones.' Her eyes darkened. 'But how many people do you know who hide their *good* qualities?'

'Sorry, you're talking to the wrong person. I don't do that stuff. I just try to get on with people.'

'You're a nice man, Jamie. I envy you.'

He shrugged. 'I don't see the point in looking for problems, that's all. Do *you* think he did it?'

'I hope not.'

'Why?'

'I think he followed me home that time. He knows where I live.'

Jamie went quiet, and Patrissia wondered what he was thinking. She turned her head towards the house. 'How long will the police be hanging around?'

'A few hours.'

'Good.'

'They said they'll want a statement from you.'

'What can *I* tell them?'

'It's just procedure, I suppose. Until she's up to telling them who it was, I guess I'm one of the prime suspects—and you're my corroboration.' He stared at her with a worried look on his face. 'They'll want the whole story. Neither of us is going to look good—Imagine what they'll think when they hear about my affairs. I can't bear to think about it. When what you've done is written down in black and white...'

Patrissia sniffed. 'You can say that again. They're not going to believe a word either of us say, Jamie, you realise that?'

'They don't anyway. But you're right, our personal lives don't bear much examination, do they? I'm sure you'll be able to brazen it out, but me—I'm not good at plans.'

Marc's voice rang in her head. '*It's always about you. Your ends. Your plans.*' He had certainly known her.

‘But I don’t understand how it could have happened.’ Jamie was still speaking. ‘Lu doesn’t do things on a whim. Her life’s all planned, prepared-for—’

‘I told you, Jamie, you don’t know everything.’ Patrissia hesitated. ‘Would you believe *her*? Her diaries were scattered over the office floor—’

‘You read her diary?’

‘It was open on the floor. I couldn’t help it.’

‘Why?’

‘I...I wanted to know about Johnny.’

‘What about him?’

‘I can’t say any more, you’ll have to ask her.’

‘Fucking hell, Trish!’ Jamie was really angry now. ‘What are you trying to say?’

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. It needs to come from her.’

‘I don’t like this at all.’ He pushed her arm away. ‘First you imply that Ciara’s been playing with me all along, and now you’re telling me that Lucinda’s got a secret life? Well,’ he said harshly, ‘one thing’s cleared up—we’re finished. I don’t care what your agenda is, but I can’t be with someone like you.’

‘What agenda? I’m being perfectly straight. Please, Jamie, you have to trust me.’

‘Straight, possibly, but not honest. You’re manipulating me, Trish, and I don’t like it.’

‘Don’t be silly, Jamie, why would I do that?’

Turning, he stared at the bedroom window. The afternoon sun made it hard to see inside, but he caught glimpses of movement.

‘Are you going to try to get back together with Ciara?’ she asked quietly.

He didn’t respond, but she saw the tension in his neck.

‘Jamie?’

‘I thought it would be different with you, Trish.’ His head dropped, and he turned to her, his eyes dull, his expression bruised and hurt. ‘But I have to get myself sorted.’ Patrissia thought she saw a glint of tears in his eye. ‘Being with you won’t help me do that, not as long as you’re as you are.’

‘What do you mean, Jamie? I may not be perfect, but who is?’

He looked into her eyes. ‘You’re an extraordinary woman, Trish, but it’s not enough. I have to be with someone I can trust. Look at the mess I’m in.’

‘Jamie—’

‘I know how corny and ordinary that sounds,’ he continued, interrupting her, ‘but most of life is ordinary, and sharing the ordinary is important. You said it yourself. I want a *companion*, Trish, someone I can talk to and share things with, not just a bloody goddess. I want her to think...you know...’

‘No, I don’t. I don’t mean to be unkind, but do you think it would have been a bed of roses with Lucinda if you’d been faithful? Or even if you’d been honest?’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘I know it’s a nice thought, but really—’

‘I’m not *that* naïve, Trish. But it *is* possible, despite what you think.’ He let out a deep sigh. ‘My mother once told me something I’ll never forget. She said, “Your father used to repeat these words to me sometimes. It was a sort of a ritual. He used to say, “*Imagine, just for ten seconds, you’re not on your way to work, you’re saying goodbye to your lover. You lean over and stroke his face softly, you look into his eyes, you kiss his lips. You place your hand on his heart and you press lightly, feeling his warmth. Then you turn and go, leaving the bedroom door open. He doesn’t want to be cut off from you, from the sounds you make. He wants to listen to your movements through the house. He wants to listen to your busy-ness and haste and impatience. He wants to know how you are when you’re alone.*”’

Patrissia’s face softened and she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. ‘You utter romantic. I’d never have believed it. Damn, I think I’ve got a lash in my eye.’

‘It’s not romance, Trish.’ Jamie’s cool eyes looked directly into hers. ‘It’s just what it’s like when you really care for someone. You just don’t *care*.’

‘A goddess and trusty companion in one?’ Patrissia sniffed, her face still obscured. ‘That might be asking a bit much, don’t you think?’ Taking his hand, she drew him close and kissed his cheek. ‘But I can try, Jamie.’

Jamie started to speak, but she put a hand over his mouth. ‘We *can* be true lovers, you know. I’m as close to you as I’ve managed to be to anyone.’

He gently pushed her hand away. ‘It’s too late, Trish, I’m sorry.’

The silence ebbed out into the air.

‘Well,’ Patrissia said after a long moment, ‘I might as well be on my way, then.’ She gathered up her bag and cigarettes. ‘Tell Lu I’ll come and visit her as soon as they’ll let me.’ She kissed him again, his cheek cool to her lips. ‘Bye, Jamie.’

*

Patrissia stared through the windscreen of her car, unseeing.

So that was that.

She lit a cigarette and, blowing a ragged cloud of smoke, turned on the radio and sat immobile until the cigarette burned away. Then, with a deep sigh, she threw it out of the open window and fired up the engine.

There was nobody left.

Zara's tune

As soon as she got home Patrissia went upstairs, and ripping off her clothes threw them on top of the mess on the bed, tipping out her bag over the lot. She picked up the slim notebook from among the cigarettes and lighters and other debris. Lucinda would miss it, of course, and Jamie would tell her that Patrissia had read it, but what did that matter now? Taking her old kaftan from the wardrobe, she pulled it roughly over her head, ignoring the tear when her finger snagged on a long-hardened gob of paint and went through the old, thin cotton.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor amid what felt like the accumulated debris of her life, Patrissia opened the little book. Lucinda had only flirted with keeping a diary, and it covered many years. It was easy for Patrissia to find what she was looking for—turning a page, the words ART COLLEGE in triple-underlined capitals leapt out at her.

The affair covered two pages of Lucinda's big round handwriting, but apart from a few hints of conscience at the start Patrissia wasn't mentioned.

How was it possible? That first year...it was as clear in her mind as if she were watching a movie. They had been so in love! or that's how she remembered it—not very accurately, apparently. The days, nights, weekends when she thought she had been punishing him for some minor misdemeanour by staying away, he had been with Lucinda—and the others.

And Lucinda had the portrait she had given to Johnny. She had poured her heart into it, and he had given it away.

She remembered every detail.

He hadn't wanted to sit for her at all, and she'd had to settle for painting his head. It had seemed natural to paint him as John the Baptist, and she'd scoured the Portobello Road for an appropriate salver. In the end, she'd chosen a crude wooden platter, and had spent hours working out how his head would sit on his beard and hair, which was normally scruffy and tangled, but which eventually she decided should be neat enough to suggest a mermaid's nest—still straggly, but artful.

The head itself she had spent many days getting right, the intricate detail as highly worked as a Fabergé egg. Johnny had been scathing—as always—asking if she was illustrating a vegetarian cookbook. She knew he was flattered, but she had pretended to take offence and that time she had stayed away for a week. She had thought it was all part of the game.

She flipped through the pages of the diary. The last entry read simply *‘Zara was confirmed as autistic today. I should have been sensible and had an abortion, but I couldn’t do it. I deserve her.’*

Patrissia felt her insides go dead. Lucinda had stolen Johnny, had borne him a child—the only things she had ever really wanted: things she would have died for, killed for. And Lucinda had stolen them so completely that they could never have been. And he meant nothing to her.

She felt sick to her heart. In spite of what she had said to Johnny, in her mind she *had* always thought her journey would take her back to him. Now there was nothing to go back to. Johnny had been just another casual fornicator. The one thing in her life she thought could never be taken away from her, was gone.

Patrissia could feel her heart beating against her ribs, but she had run out of tears.

*

When she awoke, she was lying on the bed. Something hard was pressing into her side and, shifting, she pulled the long velvet pouch from under her, holding it above her for a second before dropping it carelessly into the open bag lying on the floor.

Her head was icily calm. She had struggled and she had planned, and her efforts and plans had come to nothing. It seemed that all that was left to her was to tidy up the mess.

Going downstairs, she went to where the easel still stood in the light from the French windows.

She knew now what was missing from Jamie’s expression—it was the look he’d had when they’d found Lucinda on the floor, the look he had given her as he had stroked her hair and comforted her, his voice filled with concern and care.

Standing back, she filled herself with the evening light, soft and warm. Perfect.

Taking a scraper, she carefully removed the mouth and eyes from the face, and began again. As she worked, she realised how closely she had watched him, how vivid was that expression, and how deeply she envied what it symbolised: concern for another, unthinking love, springing from the source of all things.

Patrissia had experienced the devotion and tenderness of a lover, but that deep-rooted, uncomplicated desire to comfort—she had never felt that in anyone, not even as a child. Her mother had put on displays of affection but they made Patrissia feel condescended-to rather than cherished, and she hadn't been able to fake a reciprocal affection. There was always a hint of wariness, of suspicion, in her mother's eyes, as if she expected hurt, even from her child's hug. Claudia—and even one or two of the men—had been more generous, but it wasn't generosity that Patrissia needed, it was love, connection. It was if she were divorced from that unconscious world in which these deep connections lived, and the core from which they sprang.

The phone rang, and she paused, waiting for the answer machine to kick in. It was Sally, asking if she could come round. The woman had left messages every day since the evening she had picked Patrissia up.

'Not tonight, Sally,' Patrissia muttered under her breath.

She deleted the message and turning back to the portrait, made a tiny change, feeling ineffable sadness at every stroke.

At last she stepped back. This time it was good. In front of her wasn't just a sentimental symbol of care, it was the revelation of love. She had achieved her masterwork, and the subject was envy.

Patrissia took the brushes and cleaned them, wrapping them carefully before putting them back in their place in the big wooden paintbox, which clunked solidly as she closed it.

What next? Her mind was transparently clear. Pouring herself a large glass of wine, she went to the bookshelves in the living room and took down Marc's blank book from its lonely niche.

A wry smile ghosted her lips as she flipped through the virgin pages, and opening wide the French windows she took the book and the wine down the steps to the old garden table on the patio, carefully avoiding the shiny slivers of glass, all that remained of Ciara's anger.

Moving the table out of the shade, she sat down. The evening was still warm and she felt comfortable as she gazed neutrally over the neglected garden, which hadn't been tended since long before Marc's death. It was like a meadow, taken over by wild flowers and weeds.

After a while she leaned her elbows on the table and opened the blank book. Even more than the house, it had come to symbolise for her Marc's inability to deal with either his life or, it seemed, his death, and, selfishly, she wanted to help him rest: she wanted him to *go away*.

With the calmness and clarity she had been afforded by the events of the day, she began to write.

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....'

When she was finished, she drew a perfect pencilled heart and inside it wrote *'With love, Patrissia'* and closed the book softly. Now it was engraved on his soul.

Leaning back in the chair, her eyes shut against the lowering sun, Patrissia felt an emptiness that gradually suffused her entire body. She felt soft as a rag doll, her body transparently light. The horrible necessity of negotiating her desires, of poking and conniving and manipulating—it was all finished.

She rose and went to refill her glass, replacing Marc's book gently on its shelf on her way to the kitchen. Lingered there, she listened for his voice until she knew that she would never hear it again. Everything was ended.

While she stood at the kitchen table waiting, she contemplated the obsidian knife lying by her bag on its velvet pouch. Her hand inched forward and as she felt her fingers slide along the deathly cold blade, she shivered at its massive efficiency.

'Push harder, Patrissia.'

Johnny's skin broke, bright blood welling out in a slow but persistent trickle.

'Doesn't it hurt?'

'Not yet. You have to push harder. Don't be afraid.'

But she had been afraid, and when it came to her turn and she had felt the searing weight of it she had cried for him to stop. He had looked at her without expression and laid it aside. It wasn't mentioned again.

Turning her back, Patrissia looked out of the kitchen window to where *Pan* stood in the midst of the darkening sky, wondering if she was still too afraid.

With a sigh, she picked up the bottle and filling her glass almost to the brim, tipped the remains into her mouth and made her way back through the twilight house. Stepping down onto the patio, she hesitated for a moment and then continued into the long grass, feeling tough stems wrap round her ankles and the sting of nettles on her legs. Coming to a standstill after a few yards, she almost lost her balance but somehow stayed upright enough to tread down a patch and lift the glass to her lips.

Staring into the violet darkness, she sipped the wine slowly, savouring its tartness, and when the glass was almost empty, she tossed it aside.

*Am I a weed? I've grown where no flower should, but I have no seed and I will wither to nothing. My petals—*she bent and grasped the hem of the kaftan—*will fade and die.*

She slowly ripped the flimsy cotton into long strips, tearing them off one by one, reciting the names of all the lovers she could remember. She had forgotten many of them, and when half the petals were scattered around her she dropped what was left of the kaftan on the grass and stood naked in the cooling air, shivering. There was no magic left.

'Oh Lord,' she whispered, *'here am I, and I am yours. No-one else will have me,'* and sinking, she lay herself face down in the long grass, breathing in the earth.

*

Sal watched her through the dirty window of Marc's old studio until he thought she was asleep. He was hungry and thirsty, but that didn't matter, she would be his soon.

He picked up the heavy mallet, hefting it appreciatively before putting it on the small pile of sacking and coils of rope and wire he'd found on a shelf. He would have liked to sharpen his knife—Marc had installed the best and most expensive Italian-made electric sharpener on one of the benches—but the noise might wake her. She mustn't wake yet.

He stroked his knife, feeling the edge. It was sharp enough. Now was the time.

Now's the time

Patrissia woke and tried to stretch, but couldn't move. There were sharp pains in her legs, in her back, everywhere, and a dull bruised ache between her legs and in her belly. But the worst was the headache that made her screw up her face and groan aloud. She tried moving again, but the pain in her wrists forced her to be still. She wanted to feel where the headache was, press her head, move her legs and back, but any attempt to move made the pain worse. She daredn't even open her eyes.

The last thing she remembered was the feel of an insect crawling over her, and the prickle of grass. She must have fallen asleep, but why couldn't she move? Was she still dreaming?

She tried not to panic. She seemed to be sitting upright in a chair, but in an uncomfortable, posed, position. The chair itself felt like Marc's old high-backed carver, smooth and hard on her thighs and arms.

The buzz and throb in her head was lessening. She thought she could hear the rustle of paper, and a scratching noise—it reminded her of Zara behind Lucinda's door, but it couldn't be. She had a clear memory of the afternoon, and Jamie, and finishing the painting—she *had* to be at home.

'You're awake. Good.'

Her eyes snapped open, and she screamed.

*

She felt the taste of blood in her mouth.

'I didn't want to do that, said a voice,' but I don't think you'll scream again, will you? It's a shame, you're not so pretty now. You look tired, like Claudia did.'

Patrissia raised her head slowly, letting her face and mouth droop. Her eyes slowly focussing, she made out a figure sitting in a chair, and another, a man, standing behind it.

The man's voice came softly. 'I don't know why she was so tired—she never did anything, just sat and shuffled around.' He sounded only mildly interested.

Patrissia struggled to bring recognition to the shape, but she was disoriented by the large mirror reflecting the light from the French windows into her eyes. There seemed to be no end to the emptiness facing her, but just as she gave up trying to understand what she was seeing, it snapped into focus. She was wired and bound into a living copy of *Lachesis*, Marc's ugly Fate, and staring at herself, she saw into the fleshly form, saw what Marc had seen, saw that it was truly her.

She took a deep breath. The man's back was to the light, but his silhouette seemed familiar. She emptied her mind for a moment.

I called to warn you Patrissia.

Sally? Warn me of what?

She gathered herself, wondering why she didn't feel scared.

'We're not like that, are we Patrissia?' she heard the man continue, thoughtfully. 'I wonder why God made *her* so different? Maybe it was so she couldn't struggle when I came for her,' he grinned.

'Who's Claudia?'

'Your *sister*, Patrissia, your poor, dead, sister.'

He was speaking in Italian, and for a moment Patrissia saw her father's look in his eyes. Her head had been shaken by the blow, and her bottom lip was swollen, cut by a tooth. She let a mouthful of blood dribble down her chin.

'Who are *you*?' she murmured, hoping to deflect him.

'I am the one who waits, Patrissia. The forgotten one, the despised one, the abandoned one—' He scowled. 'The one who was thrown away like a crippled dog. Don't pretend you don't know who I am!' Putting his face close to hers, he held up a photograph.

She stared at the small black and white print in his hand. It showed a teenager, hard-faced and angry—the boy she had seen with the pictures of Sally and Claudia.

'I've never seen this before.' Her mouth and head ached ferociously, and her words were thick and strained. 'It must be one of Marc's.' She shook her head, but it only made her temples pound.

The man pursed his lips and put his head to one side as if speaking to himself. 'Why would she lie? She's hurt and afraid.' Then his eyes opened wide. They had the same deep blackness as Marc's. 'They always lie, though, don't they? Even the truth becomes a lie in their mouths.' He slapped her again.

'Look at me! Do I remind you of anyone?' Grabbing a handful of hair, he forced her head back. 'You're supposed to be an artist. Then *look*! Who do you see in my eyes?'

She could hardly focus, but something in his voice made her say, 'Marc?'

'Ah.' The man smiled. '*Now* you're looking. And?'

He forced his hand between her legs, and she felt him roughly push a finger inside her. 'Mmm, still so wet? You like it, don't you, Patrissia? Smell!' He lifted the finger to his face and sniffed appreciatively before using it to stroke her upper lip. 'That's *your* smell, Patrissia. I'm sure you're familiar with it—but who else might smell like you? What other *cunt*? He spat the word out with distaste. 'What other fucking whores do you and I know?'

She tried to speak, feeling tears running down her cheeks, and then she passed out.

*

When she came to, she was lying on the kitchen table. The wires and ropes had gone, but her body throbbed with more pain than ever. Slowly opening her eyes, she lifted her head and saw fresh stripes on her stomach and breasts, and bright red weals on her thighs and legs. He had beaten her while she was unconscious. Hardly daring to look, she watched as his head dipped to fork a piece of meat into his mouth. He was sitting at her feet, and as her head dropped back he paused his chewing.

'Back again, Patrissia? Good.' He licked his lips appreciatively. 'You eat well!' His grin widened as she tried to sit up, drawing her

legs together. His arm flew out and she felt his warm hand on her calf. 'Not yet. It's rude before I've finished.'

She groaned, 'Sal, why—?'

There was a sharp pain in her leg and looking down she saw a thin-bladed knife sticking out of her calf. She moaned in agony as he rocked the handle of the knife with a finger, as if distracted by something more important.

'Don't call me that!' he said evenly as he twisted the blade, pulling it out. She screamed again, but instead of hitting her, he sprang up and stood rigidly over her, the tip of the knife resting on her belly. 'My name is *Domenico*.'

'I don't understand,' she said, struggling to speak clearly amid the avalanche of pain threatening to engulf her.

He put his head on one side. 'That's right, you don't, because you never gave a thought to me. Just like Claudia.'

A wave of nausea and revulsion overtook her. Her head was filled with splinters of thought and conflicting emotions, but below that was a vast feeling of relief at knowing that at last it was happening. 'You're Ciara's brother, aren't you?'

'So you do know me. Yes, I'm Domenico, Ciara's worthless brother.' His face distorted into a grimace of hate. 'Her twisted *twin* brother,' he sneered. 'They locked me up, Patrissia, they beat me, they—' His face creased almost tearfully, '*hurt* me. They kept me from my family.'

He spat on the floor. 'What kind of family would pay to have this done to a child, to a son, to a grandson? *Vecchia*!' He spat again. 'Your family gave me thirty years of humiliation and pain, and now God is bringing me revenge.' He nodded, making the sign of the cross, then trailing the knife down her body, he let it fall lightly towards her foot, resting it on the web between her toes. She flinched involuntarily, feeling a sharp stinging bite like a razor cut.

'*Vecchia*...' He seemed to be savouring the word, as if listening for its nuances. 'An old and respected family, a *devout* family, benefactors to the Holy Church, guardians of the Faith,' he sneered. 'Whores, devils and murderers!'

Paralysed with pain, Patrissia could only watch as he flourished the knife.

‘What have *I* done to you, Sa...’ She caught herself in time. ‘*Domenico*? I got you a job.’

He began to strop the thin-bladed knife on the shaft of a fork, very gently, checking its edge after every few strokes. Just behind him she could see Claudia’s stick lying on the floor, broken in two. She flicked her eyes to his. They were staring at her with deep hatred.

‘You’re family,’ he said simply.

‘Yes, I’m a Vecchia,’ she paused for a second, trying to clear her head, ‘but I’m not *their* family. I’m an outcast like you, *Domenico*. My father disowned me and sent *me* away. I was shamed and abandoned by them. Marc,’ she hesitated, ‘beat me. He hurt *me*. He didn’t tell me about you—’

‘Liar!’ The voice was almost a scream. ‘Shut up!’ His hands were over his ears, and he was shaking his head. Then with a quiet ‘Ha!’ his face resumed the grin and he looked at her from beneath his thick eyebrows like a naughty but tolerated child.

‘I like you, Patrissia. I like you very much. He sniffed. ‘You smell good. *Acqua di Parma*?’

‘*Domenico*—’

‘Call me Nico,’ he said lightly.

‘Nico, I know I deserve this, but if you let me get up I won’t run away.’

‘No, you won’t run away.’ He was staring at her, his face and body rigid, his breath coming in spurts, then with a visible effort, he closed his eyes, his breath slowing. At last he indicated the sink.

‘Clean yourself up.’

Patrissia rolled to the edge of the table, her face and leg throbbing with excruciating pain. She dropped her still-bleeding calf over the edge of the table and groaned loudly, trembling and crying. Risking a glance at his face, she saw that he wasn’t paying attention to her, but was wiping the blade of the knife with a soft cloth he had taken out of his pocket.

She dropped her other leg and sat, head bowed, her long black hair hanging limply to her stomach, her hands supporting her. Her head felt as if it had been crushed, and she waited for it to grow lighter before sliding forwards and putting the tips of her toes on the floor. She rested a moment, and then tested her weight. The pain was fierce but she thought she could take it, and pushing herself forward she tried to stand up, and screamed.

He slapped her again.

‘Sit, eat.’ His eyes glinted as he filled the plate. ‘There.’ He pointed to the other side of the table, and, wincing and stumbling at each step, she sat down. ‘Spread your legs. I want to see your pussy.’ He leaned back to get a better view. ‘Now, eat.’

She broke off a piece of hard cheese and bit into it. She realised that she’d had nothing since the day before, and greedily stuffed the rest of the hunk into her mouth. When it was finished, she looked up at him, trying to stay calm. She had to make him think she was sympathetic. She had to *listen*.

‘What did they do to you?’

His face creased into a hard scowl, and picking up his knife he ran his finger down the blade, grimacing at its sharpness.

‘Nico, I know they hurt you. What did they do? They hurt me too, I’ll understand.’

‘You? *Understand?*’ He laughed viciously. ‘Look at you, *Signora*. You have everything, and I have nothing. I was destined to take your father’s place, to be a God-fearing man, powerful, just, strong—and instead, it’s all *yours*.’ He spat. ‘*You!*’

For a second Patrissia thought he was about to hit her again, and she tensed, waiting, but he reached over and took her hand, squeezing it tightly. She relaxed, feeling her bones grind as he kneaded her fingers like dough. The pain was bad, but she could welcome it, thanks to Johnny. She had learned to take herself away. She was already back at the little cottage in Cornwall, the night she had lost her child, watching the swirl of water take her baby away.

He began to talk, and Patrissia made her mind a blank, opening herself to him, feeling his abandonment and resentment as he told his story in fits and starts. She let him talk, not interrupting,

agreeing with his grievances, wincing at his beatings and abuse, admiring him when he spoke of his vengeance, accepting him.

It was a strange feeling to smile as he described how he had killed Claudia, but the smile was not forced—she could feel the appalling bitterness and hatred that fuelled him. She listened closely, allowing his words to soak into her as he spoke, wiping tears from her eyes.

Claudia was a bitch. As Patrissia listened, forgotten memories arose of her sister tormenting her, taunting her, humiliating her. Claudia had never been her friend, but had been selfish and cruel. It was true, Claudia had not deserved pity. She had asked for Guido's help to kill her own children, and when she was thwarted she had abandoned them.

And then Nico's voice faded and Patrissia heard Marc, hard and remorseless, obscene with self-pity, judging her, accusing her.

'You played me, Patrissia, you humiliated and shamed me, just to get what you wanted. You value nothing, you care for nothing. I didn't count. All that counted were your ambitions and plans. All that counted was you.'

The voice in her head died amidst a huge billowing silence, and her eyes unfocussed, the blurred figure opposite flowed from Marc, to Ciara, to Claudia, to Nico as she struggled to stay conscious.

Nico. Peas in a pod. Through half-closed eyes, she watched him in the chair as he restlessly played with the knife, staring around at her, at the garden, at the table, his features sharp, soft, hard, gluttonous, knowing, anxious. And it came to her that he *was* Pan. She was *Lachesis* and Nico was *Pan*. Marc's work.

'I'll help you get back at them, Nico. You know I can,' she murmured sincerely through her stinging lips.

He stopped stroking the knife and fixed his eyes on her. They were full of mistrust. 'And how will you do that, *Signora Vecchia*?'

'That's exactly why I can, Nico. I am *La Signora Vecchia*, a rich woman whose family wields influence in many places. I can get you what you want.' She paused. 'What do you want?'

'A priest. I want to be a priest.'

For an instant, the voice became Marc's again, but now pleading and frightened. *A priest, I want to be a priest.*

'Of course.' Patrissia thought quickly. 'Have you heard the Call?'

'What are you talking about?' Nico stabbed the table angrily. 'God Himself brought Claudia to me, brought *you* to me, will bring Ciara to me! God loves me.'

Patrissia automatically crossed her legs, flinching as a sharp pain convulsed her ribs. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think,' she said evenly, keeping her voice level and low, absorbing the pain. 'What then? Do you need somewhere to live?'

'Yes! A house fit for a priest who has been chosen by God Himself.'

'I know of one, Nico. It's a beautiful house. My father bought it for Secundus, but he's very ill and won't need it much longer. You can have that.'

'Secundus' house?' He nodded. 'Yes, that would be appropriate, I will have that. And Claudia's too.' His black eyes stared into hers. 'And yours.' His eyes swept her body. 'And I will have you.'

Patrissia kept her face composed as she said, 'I'm yours, Nico. I'll be your lover. I'll look after your great house, I'll make you the finest food, I'll buy you the smartest clothes. Everyone will know who you are and they'll all envy you.' She leaned forward and, kissing his hand, exclaimed, 'I feel it, Nico, I feel the presence of God Himself in you.' She raised her head. 'You can do what you like to me, Nico. We'll make love whenever you want. Lucinda stole you from me, but I have you back, and I won't give you up again. I'll do anything you want.'

She lowered her eyes. 'Do you want to go to bed now? You look tired. It's been a long, hard day for you.' She waited for a few seconds, her heart beating wildly.

There was a faraway look in his eyes as he eventually replied, 'Yes, I think I'd like to sleep now, I'm weary. Take me to our bed.' His voice was low and drowsy.

She stood, stumbling at the sharp pain in her calf. 'Come, Nico, let's go to bed.'

His eyes opened wide for a second as she slowly moved round the table to him, and suddenly he jerked up. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to bed, Nico.' She held out her hand. 'Come with me. It's warm and soft there and we can sleep.' Her eyes searched the kitchen for a weapon, but there was only a battered thin aluminium pan. Useless.

'Come.' She took his hand, which he gripped tightly as she led him through the house. She could feel her own eyes closing. As they passed the *Lachesis* on their way to the stairs, he stumbled on an uneven board and slapped his hand out to save himself.

'Bitch!'

Patrissia froze, but he was swearing at the statue, and going closer to it, he examined a bloody splash on the smooth breast. He nodded and stepped back. 'It is a sign. It is my fate to be here with you, and you with me.' He held up his hand where the wire had caught him, and sighed. 'You're very beautiful, Patrissia.' Then wiping it across Patrissia's breasts, he made a vertical line with his finger. '*Ego te absolvo.*'

She felt the taut ball of fear inside her dissolve. *Lachesis* couldn't die.

'How can you say I'm beautiful? Look at me. I'm ugly.'

'What is beauty in a woman?' Nico's voice had changed, becoming light and musical. 'Clarity, transparency, symmetry, modesty, warmth. She speaks calmly, she moves quietly. You are beautiful because you are broken and you have lost your fear, Patrissia. You are no longer struggling. Look.' He turned her face to the hall mirror.

She stared at herself. It was true, she was no longer afraid.

'You are free.'

*

Patrissia jerked awake, already straining her ears for his presence, but there was nothing. Gradually she took stock. She was in her own bed. Her body was rigid, her neck solid, her stomach clenched.

Keeping her eyes shut, she slowly worked her way up from her feet, feeling each muscle as she allowed it to relax, allowing the pain until she had it under control. At last she felt the constriction of her neck and breathing drain away, and she settled into the warmth of the duvet, letting out a long and heartfelt sigh as the sweet smell of her sweat and fluids wafted up.

She moved her hand sideways, and it started to feel warmer. He was with her. She turned her head away from him and opened her eyes. Her sketchbook was propped open on the low table next to the bed.

‘Are you awake?’ His voice was soft, almost tender. ‘I closed the curtains so you would sleep.’ She felt him move closer. ‘Do you like my picture?’

Two stick men were holding hands facing a burning pyre, their faces two dots and a half-moon smile. Two more figures were just recognisable, lying twisted together in the flames. A beaded string hung from the neck of one.

Patrissia took a deep breath. ‘What time is it?’

‘Late afternoon. You slept all day.’

His hand touched Patrissia’s waist and moved gently over her belly, where it stayed. Its warmth flowed into her and her thighs widened and opened. The hand slipped softly down and between her legs, and she shifted them, easing them apart for him, following the lightness of his fingers.

‘You’re still wet. You’re always wet, Patrissia, even when you’re asleep.’

‘Only for you, Nico.’ It was almost true. She wanted him. Putting her hand over his, she guided it over her, sharing the silky wetness, pressing his fingers lightly where the flesh gave way until she felt them both enter her. His weight shifted, and then she felt the heaviness of his bones and muscle as he rolled gently onto her.

Patrissia’s mind emptied as they stroked and pleased each other. They knew each other, they knew what each wanted, they knew what each needed. It was like no other feeling she had ever experienced and she gave herself completely. She felt loved and comforted and free.

When it was over, they slept again, her head in his neck, their legs entwined, her hand resting lightly on his beating heart.

*

Patrissia was in the shower when she heard the bedroom door open. Turning at the sound of his footsteps, she crossed her arms over her belly and breasts, the weals on her legs glistening.

She had left the bathroom door slightly ajar, and as it swung slowly open she saw him standing in the doorway, his head tilted suspiciously.

‘You didn’t run away.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

Holding his knife in one hand he suddenly stepped sideways and slammed the door back against the wall.

‘There’s no-one here but us, Nico,’ Patrissia reassured him. She felt her racing heart begin to slow. ‘You were fantastic, Nico, fantastic. I’ve never come so hard in my life. I thought I’d die with pleasure.’

‘You’re a great fuck, I’ll say that.’ He approached her, the knife weaving back and forth. ‘Let me see you.’

She dropped her arms and stood shaking under the warm water, her long hair snaking over her face and shoulders. He lifted a coil from her shoulder with the point of the knife and took the end in his other hand, pulling her head.

‘Is hair alive, I wonder? Does it scream when it’s hurt?’ He pulled the wet strands tight across her face so that fat cushioned lines stood out on her cheeks. He tilted his head and pressed the flat blade of the knife against her yielding flesh and began to saw lightly across the hank of hair, strands springing out like the end of an overstressed bow.

‘No, please, Nico.’

Slapping her face with a wet smack, he pulled her head down and close to him, at the same time jerking the knife backwards. She fell back, just managing to keep her balance, the threads of cut hair

sticking to her face and breasts before being washed away onto the floor.

‘Please, Nico, no more. I’ll do anything you want.’

‘Yup, you sure will,’ he grunted. Touching her cheek where the knife had left a thin line of blood like an open vein, he lifted her face to the spray.

‘Get dressed. We have plans to make. Let me help you.’ He held out his hand. ‘Be careful of your leg.’

She put her arms around his neck, and he leaned back, taking her weight. She looked into the deep blackness of his eyes. ‘I won’t let them hurt you any more, Nico. We’re together now.’ She kissed his neck. ‘Let’s go downstairs. I’ll make us some coffee and we can talk.’

*

Just as they reached the foot of the stairs, Patrissia saw a shadow through the coloured glass panes of the front door, but before she could think to shout, the doorbell rang.

Nico froze beside her, gripping her hand so tightly she almost screamed.

‘Who is it? Did you call someone?’

‘How could I? You broke my phone, remember?’

‘Then who is it?’

They heard the scratch of a key turning in the lock, and he pulled her through a doorway into the unused dining room.

Oh God! It must be Jamie. Don’t come in, run!

They heard the door open, and the click of heels on the wooden floor, and then silence. Whoever it was, they were evidently listening for signs of occupation. Nico pulled out his knife and held it to Patrissia’s face, a warning finger to his lips.

‘Trisha?’ It was a woman’s voice.

A smile appeared on his face. He gestured at Patrissia to answer.

‘Is that you, Sally?’

‘Trisha? Why haven’t you got the lights on? Is there someone with you?’

Nico went past Patrissia in one athletic movement, and punched Sally in the face before she could react. She fell onto *Lachesis* and slid to the floor, blood dripping from a deep wound in her cheek.

Nico pulled Patrissia into the hall. ‘Tie her wrists.’

She looked around. ‘What with?’

Nico bent and lifted Sally’s loose skirt. With a jerk he slit the waistband and ripped the skirt off, then he tore off two strips and handed them to her.

‘Wrists, gag. Gag first.’

Patrissia limped towards the crumpled figure, who was staring at her, wide-eyed. Kneeling painfully by her head, she whispered ‘I know, Sally, it’s him. Don’t say a word.’

‘What’s she doing here?’ Nico was watching her intently.

‘We’re friends, Nico. She’s just come to say hello.’

He stared over Patrissia’s shoulder into Sally’s face. ‘Does anyone know you’re here?’

She shook her head.

‘Good. Bring her into the back room.’ He paused, his head on one side. ‘I’m glad you and Patrissia are friends. I won’t need to buy you now.’

The two women exchanged glances as Sally said, ‘Nico, no, you can’t. You don’t understand.’

‘I understand that you’re a whore and that you refused me.’ He slapped her hard on her wounded cheek and then turned to Patrissia. ‘I said gag her. She won’t refuse me again.’

Patrissia folded the thin cotton strips and tied them as loosely as she dared, knowing he would check them. Then, almost fainting with the pain in her calf, she helped Sally to her feet and they stumbled together towards the dark living room. He waited until they had entered, then followed, turning on the centre light.

‘Sofa.’

They obeyed. He wasn't looking at them, but was staring at the empty bookshelves.

'Where are the books, Patrissia?'

'I burned them.'

'All of them?' He shook his head, and turned suddenly. 'You, Sally, take off your pants.'

'Do it, Sally,' whispered Patrissia. 'Do what he says.'

Taking her bound hands from her cheek, which had stopped bleeding and was beginning to go blue, Sally wriggled out of her knickers.

'Open your legs so I can see you. You too,' he said to Patrissia. He stood in front of them, grinning. 'You have nice friends, Patrissia. I'll have you both later.' He sighed. 'It would be nice if Ciara could join us, wouldn't it? *Then* we could have some fun.'

'Ciara won't come here, Nico. She hates me.'

'I want to see her, Patrissia, I really want to, very much. You'll have to find a way to persuade her.'

'I can't, Nico. I want to, you know I do, but she won't talk to me. It's the truth. We had a fight. She didn't believe me when I told her about you. She called me a liar.'

He grunted and nodded to himself, then walked over to the mirror above the fireplace, standing before it as Patrissia had a few days before. Taking out an impeccably white handkerchief, he wiped his forehead and mouth, and smiling widely, ran his fingers through his hair, his white teeth shining in the harsh light.

The pain in Patrissia's calf was almost unbearable now, and keeping her head clear was almost impossible. She wanted to move her legs. Next to her, Sally was shaking.

Nico was still staring at himself in the mirror. What did he see? she wondered. An abandoned child? A resentful son? A frustrated victim? A divine messenger? He wanted to be a priest, didn't he? He'd said he'd been chosen by God.

No boundaries, thought Patrissia, really no boundaries. Everything is possible.

Still admiring himself in the mirror, Nico said mildly, 'When will Secundus die?'

'Soon,' Patrissia answered quickly. 'He's an old man and he's very ill. He'll be dead soon.'

'How soon? I don't want to wait.'

'Just a few days.' Patrissia glanced sideways as she felt Sally's leg jerk against her own. Nico was still preoccupied with the mirror. Patrissia rested a finger on Sally's thigh, and slowly leaned towards her, whispering, 'Don't worry, Sally, we'll be OK. But stay alert.'

Sally nodded.

'Why did you burn the books, Patrissia?' Nico's voice was interested, curious.

'They were old, Nico. They were broken and torn. Marc told me to burn them before he died.'

'You kept this one. Why?' He picked up the blank book, then looked puzzled. 'There's no title.' He flicked the pages. 'Is it a joke? Are you making a fool of me?'

'No, it's not a joke. Marc made it for himself. It contains everything he believed in.'

'It's blank.'

'Yes.'

'But he was a priest!'

'Only briefly, and he wasn't a good priest.' She paused. 'Did you kill him?'

Nico laughed. 'I followed you to Cornwall. I even stopped for petrol when you did, but you didn't see me.' He grinned. 'Your cottage was very nice, very quaint. I followed him to the chemist and the pub. I talked to him. He was very serious, a serious man, like Grandfather, like me. He wanted to get back to the cottage, but I knew that wouldn't help him. Only God could help him. So I gave him to God to be healed.'

Patrissia could feel panic reaching into her. 'You have to be good to be a priest, Nico. Priests don't hurt people.'

'I *am* good, Patrissia, I only do what God tells me to do. When we're in Rome, I'll be a good priest, I'll be the best. If God tells me to forgive someone, I'll forgive them. If He tells me to punish them, I'll do His will. I'll do just as He tells me.'

'What does He want you to do with me?'

There was a long pause. 'He wants me to forgive you, Patrissia.'

Her eyes closed involuntarily. 'Forgive me for what?'

'For being a Vecchia.'

She nodded gratefully. 'Thank you, Nico. You're a forgiving man.'

'Don't thank me, Patrissia,' he said seriously. 'It's His will. I'm only His servant.'

Patrissia indicated Sally. 'She's not a Vecchia, Nico, and she's frightened and hurt. Please, untie her. She won't run away, I promise she won't.'

He waved a hand dismissively, still staring into the mirror. 'She's just a whore. She'll do what she's told. You can take off her gag now.' He glanced sideways. 'You won't make a noise, will you Sally? I know you won't, otherwise I'll slit you like the cheap cunt you are.'

Patrissia removed Sally's gag, whispering, 'Do whatever he asks, Sally, or he'll hurt us. He might kill us.'

Sally nodded as Patrissia started to untie her wrists. 'I know all about him,' she said under her breath.

Patrissia stared at her. 'What do you know?'

Sally raised her eyebrows, and lifted her eyes to the bookcase. Patrissia followed her gaze to the empty shelves. Sally jerked her eyes higher, then nodded towards the mirror. Patrissia searched the reflection of the bookcase until finally she remembered the papers hidden on its top. She had pushed them further back in her efforts to get them down the day before, and there was only the faintest white scrap visible in the shadows.

'What is it?' she mouthed.

'Reports, photos, other stuff.'

‘Reports?’

‘Psychiatric—’

‘What’s that?’ Nico was pointing into the mirror.

‘What’s what?’

‘Up there.’

‘Just some old bills, I expect. Marc was careless about things like that.’

‘I want to see. Get them.’

‘I’m not tall enough, I can’t reach them, I tried.’

Nico pointed at Sally. ‘You’re tall enough.’ He stood a chair against the bookcase. ‘Get them!’

Sally nodded and shrank off the sofa, mounting the chair clumsily. He stood beside her, watching her in the mirror as she strained upwards. Her fingers touched the white roll, but she only made it slide further back.

‘I can’t get it.’ She was on tiptoe, her fingers hooked over the top of the bookcase.

‘Get the fucking papers!’ Nico punched her calf and, losing her balance, Sally grabbed wildly at a shelf, but continued falling backwards as the old dry plaster of the walls gave up their fixing screws and the heavy bookcase toppled on her. A short scream was followed by the splintering crash of wood and a cloud of choking dust.

*

‘Do you think we should warn Trisha?’

Jamie raised his eyebrows. ‘Lu, you’re in hospital with some nasty injuries and you’re suffering from shock. It’s not your problem. Anyway, he’ll be lying low somewhere, won’t he? He wouldn’t risk it.’

‘We can’t take that chance, Jamie. Please.’

Reluctantly, Jamie gave her his phone.

Pressing Patrissia's number, Lucinda listened for a moment. 'Answerphone.' She waited a second, her anxious eyes on Jamie. 'It's Lu, Trisha. Can you call me? Nobody seems to be able to get hold of you. I just want to know you're all right.'

She put the phone down and lay back on the heap of pillows, her face drawn. 'It was horrible, Jamie. I've never been so frightened in my life.'

'I can imagine.' Jamie shook his head and exhaled loudly. 'Actually, I can't. It's too unbelievable.'

'I hope Trisha's all right. I think we should warn Ciara too.'

'I suppose so.'

'Why haven't you spoken to her already?'

'She wouldn't believe me. Anyway, she won't pick up.'

'I'll text her.' Lucinda tapped in a message. A few seconds later her phone beeped. She looked at the screen and began a long reply. 'She's at her mother's.'

'Good. She'll be safe there.'

Lucinda paused and looked up. 'Jamie?'

'Yes?'

'Are you and Ciara...?'

He sighed. 'We're finished, Lu. It's a relief, frankly.'

'Will you stay with Trisha?'

'No. She'll have to get a lodger.' He smiled awkwardly. 'I'm through with crazy women.'

'I was wondering, if you've got nowhere to go...Do you want to stay with us till you sort yourself out?'

Relief flooded Jamie's face. 'Would that be OK? I'd be grateful.'

'Of course. We can't have you on the streets.' Lucinda smiled and then resumed her message to Ciara. A few seconds later her phone beeped again. She scanned the message with a frown.

'What's the matter?'

Lucinda shook her head, re-reading the message. 'Really, she *is* a bit odd. She wants me to send her a picture of Sal. I suppose I might as well humour her.'

She had hardly finished when the reply came.

'Good grief! She says her mother recognised him.' Lucinda looked up. 'Trisha *was* telling the truth, then.'

Jamie was staring at the floor. 'She must have been.'

'Do you know something?'

'No. She didn't say anything to me.'

'Please, don't lie to me any more, Jamie. You don't need to.' Her voice was soft.

'I'm not lying, Lu, it's just...complicated, and I don't know what to make of it all.'

'What do you mean?'

Jamie sighed. 'I met that woman, Sally, in the Elgin a few days ago. She told me things.'

'Who's Sally?'

'Trisha didn't mention her? She knew Marc.'

'Oh, *that* Sally.' Lucinda gave him a sharp look.

'Don't worry, it's nothing like that. You'll understand in a minute.' Jamie hesitated. 'Marc used her as a model, but there's quite a bit more to it than that. It sounds stupid, I know, but she said that Patrissia's sister—'

'Claudia?'

'Yes. She said that Claudia sent Marc a letter—'

'Oh!' Lucinda interrupted. 'Patrissia said she found an empty envelope addressed to her and Marc in one of Marc's drawers. Was that the one?'

'I guess. Sally said it was a curse on them.' He looked up. 'I told you it was stupid.'

'A curse? What, like a witch? What did it say?'

‘No, not like a witch. It was a religious curse, very nasty—and Marc took it seriously. She said he blamed it—and Claudia—for the mess he made of his life.’

‘And Trisha believed that he was still in love with her.’ Lucinda shook her head. ‘How wrong can you be?’

‘Yes. But the thing is, he tried to pass the curse on. You know that statue in Patrissia’s garden, *Pan* I think it is? Anyway, Sally says that he did something to transfer the curse to that.’ Jamie made a mock-scary face. ‘It all sounds like ju-ju to me, but Marc wasn’t normal, was he?’

‘Hmm, he certainly wasn’t. He said something like that to me once, about that piece of his in Trisha’s hallway. But what’s all this got to do with Sal?’

‘Hang on, I’m getting to that. Sal was the model for *Pan*—Marc knew about him all along. Secundus sent him photos—’

‘He cursed his own son to protect himself?’ Lucinda’s eyes were wide.

‘That’s what Sally says.’

‘Do you believe her?’

‘I didn’t at first. After all she’s sleeping with Patrissia—’

‘*What?*’

‘I know. As I said, crazy women.’ Jamie was surprised at Lucinda’s reaction and gave her a look. ‘And there’s more. Sally says she’s Marc’s daughter.’

‘His daughter? but I thought you said she was his model? And Trisha said he was sleeping with her!’

Jamie ran a hand through his hair. ‘Well, so is she. As I said, it’s complicated, and I’ve got to say it’s beyond me. But I don’t see why she’d make up such a convoluted story. What’s she got to gain? It’s not as though it makes her look good. Anyway, Sally’s the reason we found you the other day. She tried to warn Trish about Sal, but Trish wasn’t answering so she texted me. That’s when I tried to call you.’

‘My God, Jamie, what a story!’

‘I know. You can see why I didn’t say anything.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter now. Trisha’s not answering her phone again, so Ciara’s going round there. She’s convinced Trisha knows more than she’s saying, and it seems she might be right. She’s on the warpath.’

‘Oh, God. Just don’t ask me to go and referee.’

‘But, Jamie—’

‘No way. It’s none of my business any more. I’m up to here with all of them, to be honest, really I am. Sorry, Lu, but they can sort it out themselves.’

Lucinda was about to speak, but stopped herself. ‘You’re right. I dare say they’ll kiss and make up.’ She didn’t look convinced. ‘Anyway Jamie, about the house—it must be in rather a mess. You might have to—’

‘Don’t worry, I booked a cleaning service. They’re coming this morning.’ He checked his watch. ‘Actually, I’d better go home, they’ll be there soon.’

Home.

Lucinda smiled. ‘I’m sure they’ll do a good job. Thank you.’

He looked at her and took her hand. ‘No problem. I’ll come and pick you up later.’

‘Yes.’

Weird

‘Sally?’ Patrissia coughed and wiped her face on her sleeve. ‘Sally?’ She heaved herself stiffly off the sofa. Nico was busy picking up the papers that had drifted from the bookcase as it fell. He dumped a handful on the desk and began to leaf through them.

‘Sally, are you OK?’ Patrissia crawled painfully the few feet to the fallen bookcase, and, kneeling, tried to lift it, but it was heavy and barely budged.

Panicky and nauseous as she felt, she managed to say, ‘Nico, Sally needs your help. Please. She might be hurt.’

He didn’t look up. ‘Secundus told them I was sick. I’m not sick!’ He threw the papers on the desk. ‘They’re the ones who are sick!’ His face was contorted with anger. ‘What are you doing? Get back on the sofa!’

Seeing Sally’s legs sticking out the side of the bookcase he kicked them back as if they were sticks broken in the gutter. There was a faint gasp.

‘What’s this?’ A small sketchbook had fallen against the wall. He picked it up and opened it. Some photographs fell out.

Patrissia wasn’t prepared for the cry he uttered. It pierced her as deeply as the knife had as, picking up a lamp, he threw it wildly at the mirror. Patrissia drew herself into a ball, her hands clamped to her head. There was a huge crash as the mirror’s heavy frame hit the floor and splinters of glass rained over her.

‘The bastard!’ Nico was stamping over the floor, smashing what remained of the mirror into shards. ‘The bastard, the fucking bastard!’ He lifted the computer off the desk and beat it against the wall, all the time screeching with rage, and then, holding Marc’s heavy old-fashioned chair in front of him he ran at the french windows and smashed them open, stumbling out into the garden and almost falling. With another savage cry he ran towards the shed.

*

Ciara paused in front of the house, shivering under the overcast sky. She checked her watch: seven o'clock. Patrissia wouldn't be in the Elgin at this hour, surely? She felt a prickling on her neck. She'd always found the house creepy, but it seemed almost sinister now in the grey half-light. Only someone as odd as Patrissia could like the place.

Maybe she should just go home. After all, even if Patrissia gave up some of her secrets, what difference would it make? Ciara shook her head. Patrissia was definitely weird.

She had almost decided to turn round and go back when she heard a thump from the back of the house. Jamie had told her that it wasn't unusual for Patrissia to leave rubbish all over the place when she was drunk, and the last thing Ciara wanted was an encounter with her if she was in the middle of trashing her house. But perhaps it was her last chance to discover the truth.

It had sounded like she was in the back garden. Suddenly wishing Jamie was with her, Ciara headed warily towards the side gate.

*

'This was meant for you, Patrissia.' Nico was standing in the broken doorway, sweating and grinning and holding out his hand, bloody with cuts. On his palm lay a tightly-rolled piece of paper like a small scroll.

Moving forwards, he bowed his head like an altar-boy in procession as he picked his way through the remains of the windows, glass crunching under his feet, and then, picking up the fallen sketchbook and skirting the bookcase, he stopped a few feet from the sofa. Patrissia stared at him, uncomprehending.

'It's fate, Patrissia. All your life you have been free and I have been cursed. You have been able to do what you want and I have not. Now God wants us to swap lives. It's my turn to be free.' His voice had become quieter as he spoke, as if he couldn't believe his luck.

There was a noise from the floor and Sally's head appeared from under the side of the bookcase. Nico glanced behind him briefly and then moved closer to the sofa where Patrissia sat numbly holding her calf. It was swollen and yellow, and pus was already leaking from the edges of the wound.

She lifted her head, murmuring vaguely, 'You said I was forgiven.'

He laughed. 'This isn't God's work, it's Claudia's. She meant it for Marc and for you.' He laid the scroll carefully on the side table in front of her.

'What is it?'

He tossed the sketchbook at her, and fumbling it onto her lap Patrissia tried to focus on the roughly drawn figures, but everything was dull and cloudy. She dimly recognised several versions of *Pan's* head, each image more grotesque than the last. At the bottom of the page were scribbled a few lines in Marc's hand.

She gave up, her eyes wet with pain and exhaustion. 'I'm sorry, Nico, my head hurts too much, I can't read it.'

'I'll read it to you.'

Reaching out, he turned the sketchbook around in her lap almost reverently and squatted in front of her, his black eyes level with hers.

'It says:

'I know I will be damned for this, but there's no other way. How could she do such a thing? She is a demon. I pray for us all that this is the end of it.'

Nico's face lit up with a wide smile. 'The style is poor but the mixture of righteousness and self-pity is to be expected.'

'I don't understand. What's he talking about?' Patrissia's voice was faint and weak as she slumped back, her eyes closing. 'I need a doctor.'

'I don't think a doctor can help you now. Marc was talking about *this*,' he laughed, waving the scroll like a trophy or favour. 'He tried to *curse* me, Patrissia! He made *Pan* in my image and hid it inside.'

But as you see, I survived.’ His smile grew wider. ‘He hid it in *Pan*’s head and now I’m going to hide it in you.’

He put his head to one side and sighed. ‘It’s a shame Ciara didn’t come because really I think she should have it. Twins ought to share things. But it *was* meant for you.’

He leaned closer, studying her, then almost as an afterthought he slapped her cheek lightly. ‘Don’t go to sleep, I want to read it to you, just so you know how much Claudia loved Marc, how much she loved *you*.’ He felt behind him, not taking his eyes off her face, and unrolling the scroll, rested his hands on her open thighs.

She didn’t move. Nico slapped her again, making her eyes flicker open briefly, and with a grunt of pleasure he began to read in a slow, resonant and severe tone, his voice flowing and hypnotic, while behind him, Sally, forgotten, crawled silently towards the garden door.

Epilogue

Perfectly normal

‘Red, Trish?’

‘Please.’

‘Sally?’

‘That’d be lovely.’

Jamie moved around the table. ‘A toast then: happy families!’

They raised their glasses.

‘And short memories!’

‘Are you talking about our last party?’ asked Lucinda, smiling. ‘I’ll drink to that!’ She drained her glass.

‘It sounds like it was fun,’ said Sally.

‘There weren’t too many casualties, and I don’t think anyone was actually killed.’

‘Jamie!’

‘Oh, come on, Lu. We’ve all grown up a bit since then, haven’t we? Not out of choice, obviously.’

Patrissia laughed. ‘Happy days, eh, Jamie? What’s it feel like, being a responsible adult?’

‘It suits me down to the ground.’ He smiled, turning to Lucinda. ‘What d’you think? Too dull?’

‘Nothing will ever be too dull for me any more.’

‘Amen to that.’

‘How’s the arm?’ Sally asked.

‘The plaster’s coming off next week. I’ve grown quite fond of it—very handy for appointments and shopping lists. Everyone should have one.’

‘I suppose we’re lucky that we don’t,’ said Patrissia, smiling.

‘You can say that again.’ Sally put her hand on Patrissia’s. ‘And it’s thanks to you that we don’t. I thought I was going to die under that dreadful bookcase. If you hadn’t kept him talking—’

‘That’s enough of that, I think,’ smiled Patrissia. Let’s just be grateful he’s gone.’

‘I don’t know how you did it, Trish,’ said Jamie in a serious voice. ‘Keeping your cool like that. You really are an extraordinary woman.’

‘God must have been on my side, Jamie.’

‘Well, here’s to you and God. I hope you’ll both be very happy.’ He downed half his glass.

‘So, Ciara, how’s the baby?’ asked Lucinda.

‘She’s fine, thank you, Lu. I’m going to call her Claudia. I know some people would raise an eyebrow or two, but I’m not superstitious.’

‘It’s a beautiful name.’

‘I think so.’

‘And you said all the tests were negative?’

‘Yes, thank God, she’s perfectly normal.’ Ciara sniffed. ‘She’s officially not a Vecchia.’

There was an awkward silence, then Patrissia raised her glass. ‘I’ll drink to *that*’, she smiled. ‘Actually, neither am I—well, I won’t be in a couple of days. Out with the old and in with the new, as they say.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m changing my name. Sally and I are moving to Cornwall.’

They all looked at Sally, who was wearing a satisfied smirk.

‘I think congratulations are in order,’ grinned Jamie. ‘What will you do? Apart from the obvious, of course...?’ He puffed his lips

and wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. 'Tying up and pruning, and so on, I mean.'

Patrissia burst out laughing. 'Oh, there'll be enough of that to keep us busy, won't there, Sally?' Her smile was full, warm, open.

'God, I should say,' Sally agreed. 'I love Cornwall. Trisha's buying a little farm. We'll hire locals to help with the big stuff of course, but the plan is to do most of the graft ourselves, with help when needed.' She sighed. 'I can't wait to get my hands dirty.'

'Yes, and I'm going to paint—abstracts I think. I'm not cut out for the real thing.'

Lucinda leaned over and took Patrissia's arm. 'I think we've all had a little too much reality recently.' She raised her glass in a toast. 'Here's to fantasy, wherever it may lead us. For a while at least.' A fleeting frown creased her forehead. 'I'm sorry, I'm still a bit unnerved by it all.'

'Come and see us any time you like, Lu, you know you'll always be welcome. It'll be permanent open house—you're all welcome whenever you need a break. A day, a week, a year—there'll be plenty of room when we've completed the renovation, and Sally's a demon cook.'

*

'What a nice evening—and what a good idea of yours to suggest it, Jamie. I think everyone enjoyed themselves, although Ciara's still quite subdued, isn't she?'

'It's not surprising, is it? Bloody hell, finding Sally and Trish like that. Jesus! And then the cops arriving and all that and... Can you imagine? And all the questioning and—'

'No, I can't,' Lucinda interrupted, 'and I don't want to. Trisha seems to have taken it in her stride, though. She seems very happy with Sally.'

'Do you think she's back to normal?'

'Why?'

'She said some quite odd things about Nico and her. Has she mentioned the curse to you lately? You know, Claudia's letter?'

‘No, now you come to mention it. I’d say that was a hopeful sign, wouldn’t you?’

‘I suppose.’ Jamie looked thoughtful. ‘Anyway, I’m glad Ciara’s moved back with her parents. She might appreciate her mother’s fussing, for a while at least.’

‘They knew about her brother all along, didn’t they? No wonder her mother was so protective.’

‘Lu?’

‘Yes?’

‘Thanks for being so understanding about, you know, the baby and all that.’ He put his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek.

Lucinda paused in her washing-up. ‘What goes around, comes around. I should have told you about Zara, and I’m sorry I didn’t. I don’t really think of it as tit-for-tat, but I suppose there’s an element of that. I’m just glad it’s all out in the open. I think part of what made me the way I was, was the horrible guilt I felt. I know it must have been hard for you—’

‘Forget it, Lu. We’re different people now.’

‘Hmm.’

*

Patrissia stared at the back of the cab driver’s head, then at his chubby hands, loose on the steering wheel. He was wearing a large gold wedding ring. She had a vague memory of seeing it before, which coalesced into a certainty that it was the same driver who had collected her and Marc from the National Gallery the first time they’d met.

Her phone beeped.

Sally looked at her enquiringly.

‘He’s fallen for it.’

‘Good.’

She read the message again.

'Of course you and Sally can stay here for a few days. She sounds enchanting. Jx'

Patrissia tapped 'OK. We'll be there late Friday' and then, gripping the phone tightly, put her hands in her lap.

Examine the object with your spiritual eye, and the subject will appear. The last look, the last touch, the last whisper...

As she had lain back delirious on the sofa and had felt Nico's tiger breath on her face as he panted above her, Patrissia's spiritual eye had *truly* opened and she had seen at last what God wanted her to do.

You were right, Johnny, our dreams are magnificent. But how much more magnificent is faith, which is not a dream but is the greatest feat of the imagination: and imagination is the wonder of God.

She fingered the long velvet pouch in the bag on her lap.

And it's rituals that count, you were right about that too. But no boundaries this time, Johnny, really no boundaries.

She moved her hand into Sally's and kissed her lightly.

'From now on, Sally, we're going to have fun. Just fun.'

The End.

The curse (page 255)

*May your soul go from the face of God until you
forebear your sins and rise from this terrible cursing and
make satisfaction and penance.*

I curse you in the day. I curse you in the night.

I curse you in the morning. I curse you in the evening.

I curse your hair. I curse your ears.

I curse your face. I curse your eyes.

I curse your mouth. I curse your lips.

I curse your teeth. I curse your tongue.

I curse your throat. I curse your breast.

I curse your heart. I curse your lungs.

I curse your liver. I curse your guts.

I curse your belly. I curse your sex.

I curse your nerves. I curse your veins.

I curse your blood. I curse your bones.

I curse your arms. I curse your legs.

I curse your hands. I curse your feet.

I curse your fingers. I curse your toes.

I curse your back. I curse your front.

I curse you up and down.

*I curse every part of you, within and without, above and
below.*

I curse you in eating. I curse you in drinking.

I curse you in shitting. I curse you in pissing.

I curse you in breathing.

I curse you in coming. I curse you in going.

I curse you in walking. I curse you in sitting.

*I curse you in working. I curse you in resting.
I curse you in standing. I curse you in lying.
I curse you in moving. I curse you in staying.
I curse you in speaking. I curse you in listening.
I curse you in silence.*

*I curse your house. I curse your rooms.
I curse your walls. I curse your floors.
I curse your bed. I curse your chair.
I curse your window. I curse your door.
I curse your pen. I curse your brush.*

*I curse you on waking. I curse you awake. I curse your
thoughts.*

*I curse you on sleeping. I curse you asleep. I curse your
dreams.*

*I curse you here. I curse you there. I curse you
everywhere.*

*I curse you then and I curse you now and I curse you for
ever.*

This is my prayer.

May the wild fire burn and consume you daily.

*May the fire and the sword stop you from the glory of
Heaven until you forbear and make amends.*

A novel by Vonny Thenasten

Vonny Thenasten is a poet and part-time odd-job man

3 July, 2026

The first and third books in the series, *Less Understanding* and *The Wrong Now*, are available on Lulu.

<https://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Pensive>

Novels

I think (2009)

Less Understanding (2015)

Beyond Understanding (2016)

The Wrong Now (2019)

Alexandra's Palace (2019)

Poetry

Love and Stuff (2010)

If Not Us (2013)

Other

Yet more words about silence (2019)

What is, is Tao (2022)

Don't do this (2026)