

# On the Beach

---

Janine's mind had been churning since Floss found the 'object', or rather the tip of the object, sticking out of the sand. She took a photograph with her mobile phone. Should she call or email the police, or the coastguard, she wondered. It was probably nothing anyway, but it was always better to speak out, to be safe than sorry.

She was opening the back door to her Victorian stone-built semi-villa in Dornoch when the telephone began ringing on the hall table.

'Well, Floss, who can that be? Now, have a wee seat dear. I'll need to answer it first. Back in two ticks, then we'll get you towelled, get you nice and dry before your breakfast, OK?'

Although Janine had allowed her name to be added to the register as a locum dentist, no one had called on her services since her retirement two months earlier, which suited her fine. If they asked she would make an excuse. She had done her bit for dental health. Now it was time to relax, keep her mobile switched off, play golf, maybe travel a bit more.

The visiting collie looked up, her eyes pleading. The smell of the porridge and poached fish filled the kitchen, torturing her taste buds, making her drool, making her whine.

'Sit nicely now, dear, and stay out here, OK?'

Janine had never had a dog or a pet of any kind, but when Irene from next door had asked if she could take Floss for a few days, Janine had agreed with good grace. And to be fair, the dog had been no real bother, happy to be confined to the kitchen with her own radio turned low beside her bed, tuned to BBC Radio Four. And, Janine would have admitted, she was enjoying the long morning walks along the deserted beach: except today, when at the far end of the curving bay they had been caught in a sudden squall.

Floss yawned and watched her stand-in mistress ease out of her wellies and throw off her hat and anorak as she tripped along the hall to scoop up the telephone.

'Hello, Janine McGill speaking. How can I help?'

'Janine, I have some news. It's about Elaine. Not good. You'll need to sit down.'

It was her brother Timothy McGill QC, calling from Glasgow. Timmy seldom telephoned, so Janine knew it must be important. Their sister Elaine was a 'free spirit', a constant source of embarrassment to her unmarried siblings. Elaine, youngest by fifteen years and most extrovert of the trio, had now been married four times, rising in prominence and gaining wealth with each marriage, becoming a vocal and opinionated Tory MSP.

Currently she was Elaine Flatte, almost a year into her latest marriage. The wedding to Gregori had been at the Norton House Hotel on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Gregori,

# On the Beach

---

ten years her junior, was mega-rich, it seemed, and had a silver Bentley, driven by his 'chauffeur', a fierce looking shaven-headed man. Gregori's wedding present to Elaine had been a soft-top Mercedes sports car. In the toilets, Janine had seen two young 'wives' sniffing lines of cocaine, their tanned bodies barely contained by skimpy, figure-hugging dresses. They had even offered her some, laughing at her indignant muttered reply: "No thank you!". Elaine, tipsy, had revealed (by accident) that Gregori was involved in 'the Balkan business'. Neither Timothy nor Janine had dared to think what this might mean. They had left the celebrations early, happy to escape from the newly-weds dubious looking friends and business associates.

With the cordless phone clamped to her ear, Janine pushed open the door to her tiny hobby room and clicked on the electric radiant heater. Plumped down on the settee she put her feet up on the pouffe and let the heat seep into her toes. Reaching behind, she pushed the door closed, all thought of Floss now forgotten.

The collie waited. Listening to the intermittent voice, the dog moved forward at the crouch as if stalking a sheep, her nose stretched up to her dish on the worktop. Standing on her back legs, Floss reached forward with a paw and swiped the plastic dish onto the floor where it bounced across the tiles, decanting her breakfast. Moving quickly, she slurped every morsel, licking the floor spotless then manoeuvred her food bowl into the corner beside her water dish. Now full, she gave her coat a vigorous shake, spraying the pristine kitchen with droplets of brine and sand. A gust of wind swung the back door closed with a near silent 'click' and the collie curled into her bed and fell fast asleep.

00000

After interrogating her brother, it was agreed Janine would go south at once. Together with Timmy, they would visit Elaine in hospital, speak to the medics and see what the next move should be. This was not the first time they had retrieved their brilliant but wayward sister from the brink.

Floss was the problem. Janine dialled Irene's mobile number.

'Irene, how is your Mum doing?'

'Fine thanks. She's over the worst, on the mend. The wonders of antibiotics. How are you getting on with Floss?'

'Yes, fine. Makes me go out, even when it's Baltic. Look, Irene, I'm sorry, but I have a family emergency. Can I take Floss down to your cousin's place in Inverness? Could she take over dog-sitting duties for now?'

'Oh, Janine, Floss hates traffic, she's a beach dog, more fish than dog, really. Is it your Elaine?'

# On the Beach

---

'Yes. I need to get down to Edinburgh as soon as possible.'

'Don't worry, dear. Good excuse to make my escape. I'll catch the Golden Bus from Perth, should be in Inverness about four o'clock this afternoon, will that do?'

'Yes, that'll be fine. I'll meet you at Fiona's and hand over Floss and leave my car at hers, OK? I can get the Golden Bus to Glasgow and stay with Timmy overnight and we'll go through to visit Elaine tomorrow, first thing.'

'Is it bad, Janine?'

'Well, so Timmy says, but you know what he's like. Everything's a drama. I'll tell you more once I've seen her.'

'Poor Elaine. Just like my uncle, brilliant but unstable, in and out of hospital.'

'Timmy says Gregori has emptied her bank account and disappeared. He says Elaine has nothing left but her credit card. Timmy's paying for her treatment. She's in the Murrayfield Hospital.'

'So, it's not another breakdown?'

'We've only sketchy details but it seems Elaine and Gregori had an argument. He beat her up first then stormed out. When she checked her online account, and saw she had been robbed, she overdosed with sleeping pills and vodka. Her cleaning lady found her or she might have died.'

'Diabolical. Have the police arrested him?'

'No, not yet. Timmy reported it. It turns out the police were already on to it, chasing Gregori for other crimes. Remember I told you Timmy has a contact in the Serious and Organised Crime squad? He and John McKnight were at Glasgow University together. John says they had been watching Flatte, trying to get tabs on the whole network. It seems Gregori Flatte, of course it's not his real name, was into everything: people smuggling, selling them to brothels, importing drugs, you name it. He was using Elaine as a cover, because of her profile, thinking it would make him untouchable to the police, like in his own country, wherever that is.'

'Dearie me, Janine: poor, poor Elaine, getting mixed up brothels. Oh, Janine, she wasn't . . .'

'No of course not! Anyway, Timmy says the brothel businesses were a sideline. John said Gregori's main role was as a front man for dozens of so-called businesses from Russia and the Balkans, setting up those Scottish Limited Partnerships for them, you know, those stories about money laundering which are in the news all the time. It seems the money is made from selling illegal arms to banned countries and terrorists. Some of them

# On the Beach

---

exchange weapons for people, refugees, and pass them to Gregori and his ilk to smuggle them over to Scotland. Timmy says when they are finished with them, they dispose of them at sea.'

'Utterly diabolical! Thank God we live in Dornoch, Janine. It might be boring as hell but at least nothing ever happens.'

'Oh, I don't know, Irene. Timmy says they bring these poor people over on fishing boats, land them on remote beaches in the dead of night and take them in minibuses to the cities, all over Britain. Have you ever seen anything suspicious on your walks with Floss?'

'Well, there was one time, but wait, look, if I don't go now, dear, I'll miss the Golden Bus. See you at Fiona's this afternoon, bye.'

00000

Janine's journey to Glasgow was uneventful. She took a taxi to Timmy's new flat in Hamilton Park Avenue, built on the site of the old BBC headquarters. Next day they took Timmy's car and set out for the hospital. On the outskirts of Edinburgh, stuck in heavy traffic, the BBC News flash came through:

*"Reports are coming in from our Inverness correspondent. There has been a massive explosion on the beach at Dornoch. The area has been cordoned off and there is a large police presence in addition to the Bomb Disposal team. Our reporter is at the scene, talking to a local dog-walker, a retired head teacher."*

*"Miss Duffy, what can you tell us?"*

*"I was fast asleep when I heard the bang. Floss, my wee collie here, she started howling. I tried to calm her down but she was scratching at the back door so I just got up and got my wellies and raincoat on, and went out to see what had happened."*

*"Did you know it was a bomb?"*

*"No, not really, not at first. To tell you the truth, I thought it might have been a plane crash. They fly awfully low over here. But no, when I got onto the beach I could see the police cars. They were all backed up on the access path, blocked by that fancy Rolls Royce over there. Only when I saw the Bomb Disposal lorry I knew it must have been a bomb."*

*"Was anyone hurt?"*

*"Oh yes! Killed outright! An ambulance did come, but it couldn't get through onto the beach. I could have told them not to try. It looks firm but there are lots of soft spots. The ambulance team got out and raced past me, heading for the flashing lights at the*

# On the Beach

---

scene. Then they came back, empty-handed. The short one was Thomas Gunn, he used to be a bit wild, but he turned out fine. His father Ken sings in our choir. I asked Thomas what was going on but he said they had been warned off, told to forget what they had seen. Anyway, they drove away. I put Floss on her lead and set off to see for myself. A policewoman intercepted me, stopped me going closer. She was one of my former pupils too, from years ago. She's a sergeant now. A nice girl, very steady. Anyway, I won't say her name, but Angela told me people had been blown up while dragging a rubber boat down to the water's edge. They think it was a UXB, she called it, an unexploded bomb from WW2. This area was used for bombing practice back then, you know."

"Were they fishermen?"

"Oh no. Not at that time of night. Angela said, oh dear, I said her name. It just slipped out. Anyway, 'my source' said the 'Big Team' from Glasgow were on to it right away. They had been tracking the men all the way from Edinburgh. It's to do with drugs or people smuggling, she thinks. It's not anyone local involved, foreigners, she thinks."

"People smuggling? Here? In Dornoch?"

"Well, they say they bring them over from Russia in fishing boats. Did I say I heard a helicopter in the distance, heading out to sea? Then Angela got a message on her radio. She was told to watch out for the private ambulance coming to take the bodies parts away to the police morgue. She told me the beach is off-limits to the public until they have retrieved the bits and completed the forensics. She said it was carnage. Three people, as far as they can tell."

"Thanks, Miss Duffy. Now back to the studio."

'What do you think, Timmy? Should you try John McKnight, see what he can add?'

'Good idea. Here's hoping it is 'you know who' who has met his Waterloo.'

The traffic cleared and ahead and the car moved forward, picking up speed.

Janine opened her mobile phone, deleted the picture of the object on the beach.

Poetic justice, she thought as she looked out of the window and smiled.