

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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## ***The Crimson Scorpion***

***By John Bonthron***

***A novella.***

# The Crimson Scorpion

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## *Harrogate, 2011.*

Like buses or taxis on a wet winter's night, the three deaths came along one after another, throwing her off balance, knocking her sideways, sending her down again to wobble on the edge.

Her troubled marriage to Tristram Fraken had been a slog, sucking her into an endless round of caring and coping, deflecting her from her established trajectory as a career spinster.

On the first anniversary of her wedding day, she had eventually written down in her daily diary cum notebook what she had been denying:

*I was gullible, naïve, lonely, anxious to please and flattered. If only I had. . .*

Although she would never admit it, Vero Fraken (nee Veronique MacGillivray) had longed for the first death. The other deaths were completely unexpected and were to impel her out of her trapped existence.

Now she was free at last, with one part of her mind she accepted it was probably too soon after Tristram's death to make concrete plans but meanwhile she could start to dream, begin again, as they had tried to teach her in therapy, as a teenager.

*'Project yourself into happiness.'*

*'Focus only on the positives in your life.'*

*'Love yourself and try to love those around you.'*

*'Love attracts love.'*

Almost guilt free, she began to look ahead once again, to hope for a new life in which she could find security and friendship with nice people, people who were honest and kind. When both houses were eventually sold, she should have enough to afford a place where people were nice to each other and did not spin her lies.

Never again would she marry. Never. Once was enough.

However, her dreams were held in check by the restraining, frustrating words from her solicitor:

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"Mrs Fraken, there is no rush. Sit tight. The housing market at the upper end is 'soft', both here in Harrogate and in Scarborough. There are many other issues to sort out too so leave it with me and take time to grieve."

Her solicitor was a man she did not fully trust, perhaps because he had been one of Tristram's closest friends. *Mullins & Co* had been the Fraken family's solicitors since Tristram's father had died, years before she and Tristram had married. She had once read a novel involving similar deaths in which, during the subsequent winding up of the estate, a smooth lizard of a solicitor had diddled the middle-aged inheritor out of a major part of her legacy. To Vero, naturally sceptical and suspicious, Henry Mullins seemed to fit the stereotype of a man setting himself up to fleece her.

Also running in her mind was the precedent of Michael Fraken, Tristram's father, a solicitor who had taken on a national estate agency franchise, one of the first solicitors in Scarborough to do so, operating in a lucrative market which his business came to dominate. This information had come in snippets gleaned from Tristram in his more expansive moments. During the four years of their marriage, Vero had learned that his father had formed a dummy company in his wife's name called *Eagle Developments Ltd*, using it as a dubious sideline to buy properties from the estates of deceased clients if the opportunity arose to buy at a low price for redevelopment. His final and largest project was a house for himself, a house which he grandly renamed as *The Eyrle*.

The original Victorian mansion had been built by a Yorkshire coal owner to the highest standards in a commanding location on a high ridge, overlooking the then thriving seaside town of Scarborough. After a succession of owners, in the early 1950s it had been renamed *Seaview* and converted into a successful holiday rooming house. Twenty years on, when packaged holidays abroad became popular, the fashion for seaside holidays evaporated. It sold again to be remodelled into an informal care home. The work was done rather crudely, on a shoe-string budget, creating eight small bedrooms with en-suites over the two upper floors with the ground floor converted to provide kitchen, laundry and dining facilities and two rooms for socialising and watching television.

Michael Fraken had had his eye on the *Seaview* property for many years but his several approaches to the owner, an elderly man of Russian origin, had been rejected. On his death in 1993, the Russian had run up huge debts and his business was declared bankrupt. At Fraken's prompting, *Seaview* was declared 'unsafe' by the local authority and de-classified as a care home. Using *Eagle Developments*, Michael Fraken had bought it for a song, gutted it and began a careful and expensive refurbishment to create a modern, spacious comfortable home for himself, his wife and two children.

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On completion in 1995, *The Eyrie* had become the most valuable residential property in Scarborough, according to Tristram. This grand project would be his swansong: aged fifty-five, Michael Fraken had sold up his legal practice and estate agency franchise, settling to a life of golf and bowls and, free from the pressures of business, proceeded to drink himself to a premature death from cirrhosis of the liver, aged only fifty-nine.

However, unknown to the Fraken family, *The Eyrie* harboured a secret, a stash which had been carefully hidden during the house's final years of decline as a care home. During the Fraken refurbishment, the cache had remained hidden, undisturbed, awaiting discovery.

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## *Castlemilk, Glasgow*

When Veronique (Vero) was born in the Spring of 1965, Frankie and Martha MacGillivray were already established in Castlemilk, a sprawling council housing scheme on the south side of the city. When the infant Vero was added to their dysfunctional family, there was already had four other children ahead of her in the pecking order - Judith, Maureen, and twins, Helen and Dorothy. Martha had also suffered two miscarriages and the trauma of one still-born child, delivered by caesarean section at thirty weeks, a girl who had been named Louise.

Frankie was not a good provider. The MacGillivrays survived on benefits and family allowance payments. Both parents were heavy smokers and, when money was available, fond of a drink. Occasionally, when his brother took him on for a week or two to help with his ad hoc gardening business, Frankie would squander his 'pocket money' in the pub. Frankie's other sideline was as a smash and grab artist, stealing radios from cars in posher areas, radios he sold in pubs in the Gorbals where he was still well-known. However, he was not a clever felon, often nabbed and sent down for another short, sharp sentence, usually to Barlinnie prison. As the years unfolded, his prison spells gradually increased from a few months to a year. After a few run-ins with other prisoners, he learned to keep his head down and never give lip to the warders, earning time off for good behaviour. Inside, he played billiards and darts. Because he seldom won, he was always popular as a competitor. With better food and no alcohol, he would return to Castlemilk, fitter and ready to make another baby.

The MacGillivrays were also very poor tenants. Continually behind with their rent, they were blacklisted by the housing department. Under normal rules they would have qualified for a three or four bedroomed flat, possibly even a terraced house with their own front and back door. Instead, because their offspring were all girls, they were confined to a two-bedroom tenement home. The girls were crammed into one bedroom, sleeping in two double beds which dominated the room, leaving only enough space for a battered old wardrobe from which the doors had been removed because there was insufficient space for them to open. Frankie and Martha slept in the other bedroom, usually with a cot for the current baby. When she started teething, the child would be moved to the other bedroom to be cared for by her older sisters.

These 'modern tenements' had been thrown up during a fifteen-year period from the mid-1950s under Glasgow Corporation's slum clearance project in a drive to rehome families from the slums of the notorious Gorbals on the edge of the River Clyde, five miles away. Like other Glasgow housing schemes from this period, Castlemilk had slowly acquired

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amenities like schools, shops and churches which the planners seemed to have overlooked earlier. There were no trains to Castlemilk; transport to and from the city was by buses which reached only to a terminus at the edge of the scheme. This meant most people had to walk for up to a mile to catch a bus.

On the eve of her sixteenth birthday Judith (Jude), Vero's eldest sister, absconded. In the early morning darkness while the others were asleep, Jude had emptied her mother's purse and her father's pockets, taking nearly twenty pounds in total, leaving the family destitute. This departure had placed Maureen, then aged fourteen, in the firing line for her father's lascivious attentions.

Vero then aged nine, had been too young to grasp what was happening around her, too busy helping her mother cope with her three younger sisters, Angela (Angie, age seven), Bethany (Beth, age 4) and the new baby Nancy. At ten months, this frail, undernourished wee mite had a constant runny nose and intermittent bouts of diarrhoea and vomiting. The ten-year old twins, Helen (Ella) and Dorothy (Dotty) were 'unreliable' when it came to childcare and, truth to tell, neither was very bright.

Martha's children had arrived in gaps created by Frankie MacGillivray's prison absences for stealing lead and copper from roofs, radios from cars and anything else he could lay his hands on. During one of his spells inside, Martha, desperate, had suffered a miscarriage from a self-induced abortion which had caused heavy bleeding, putting her in hospital for a night. On the following morning, afraid of being pushed about and poked by strangers, still in her hospital dressing gown and slippers, had sneaked out and made her way home to her girls.

The hospital authorities were furious and demanded her return stating her treatment was incomplete and urgently required. A poor reader, Martha had burned the unopened envelope in the living room fire as she did with all official looking letters addressed to her or her family.

Within a year of Judith leaving, Maureen gave birth to a baby girl whom she named Fiona, restoring the family of girls to a total of eight. Although it was never openly admitted by either party, Martha knew Frankie was the father of her grandchild. Martha's best kept secret was that Maureen had been the result of a fling with a neighbour's eldest son while Frankie was in prison. The teenager had long since moved on, emigrating to Canada before Frankie was discharged.

Shortly after baby Fiona was born, Martha travelled by bus to visit her sister who lived in comfortable circumstances near Glasgow University. In her cups, Martha often waxed lyrical about this flat. Although the girls had never visited their aunt, they knew that Miss Janine Devlin was rich, maybe even very rich.

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*"Ye see, girls, her place is no' jist ordinary. Oh no, our Janine widnae put up with jist ordinary. Ye see, she lives up a big fancy tiled close, right up on the tap floor. Aye, an the windaes in her close huv colourt glass. Her storm door is paintet a lovely maroon an she he keeps it lockt shut, even when she's inside. It's whit the toffs do, she telt me, to stop travellin salesmen pesterin them. An she huz a wee spyhole to see who is there. When she opens it tae let ye in, her inside door huz colourt glass tae, like a big bunch o' roses. Then ye go in tae a big square hall wi hunners o' doors aff it. The kitchen's like outta a magazine, really fancy, wi a great big double cooker wi two ovens and an eye-level grill. An' she's goat a Bendix washin' machine wi a spin dryer built intae it. In her parlour she's goat a big tele an' a radiogram. She huz a big black piana tae although she duznae act'ally play it nooadays. Ah askt her aboot why no' but she widnae say why no'. Oh aye, an there ur gas-fires in a' the rooms so nae need for humphin' coal oar ashes. She's goat three bedrooms tae, a' wi big fancy double beds. Can ye imagine it? Three big double beds fur only wan woman oan her ane? An hur bathroom's bigger'n oor livin' room and it has a cullurt suite wi a shower ower the bath and a bidet fur washin' yer private bits. Aye, our Janine's done well fur herself. But of course, she got the brains and Ah got the weans, eh? An Ah widnae swap yees fur a' the tea in china. Aye, an' talkin o' tea, any chance o' sumday making a pot? Oan ye go, Vero, hen. An make me a nice wee slice o' toastit cheese wi' brown sauce, while yer et it, eh?"*

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That fateful day, on Martha's return to Castlemilk, Frankie forced her to give him half of the money from her purse which he used to buy drink and cigarettes. That evening, after the girls were sent to their bedroom, both parents got very drunk. A fight broke out, with lots of loud shouting. In his cups, Frankie could be violent and while Martha was often the main recipient of his drunken blows, the children were occasionally slapped across the legs if they tried to defend their mother. At the first explosion of sound, Maureen blocked the girls' bedroom door by dragging one of the beds across it to stop her father getting in.

Eventually, as usually happened, Frankie stormed off to bed to sleep it off. It was then Vero was called through to the living room to sit alone with Martha, the first time ever she could remember being alone with her mother.

*"Aye, our Vero, ma wee darlin, our Janine says if yer a good girl an dinnae wet hur bed, she'll think about adoptin ye, cause yer clever like hur. An' yer growin up noo tae an' so we want tae get ye away frae here afore onything happens tae ye. Wan thing we don't need is any mair weans, dae we, hen?"*



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*"But Mammy, I don't like our Aunt Janine. And she doesn't like uz either, duz she? I mean, whenever she comes and Daddy's here, she starts a fight with him, duzn't she? Please mammy, I don't want tae go away. I want tae stay here, with yoos."*

*"Aye, but ye see, our Vero, our Janine's the one with the brains, no' like me. Did I ever tell ye our Daddy, yer Grampa Devlin wiz a draughtsman, in the shipyerds? Oh, an he was a big, handsome man tae, just like my Frankie. Aye, but yer Grampa Devlin was a **clever** yin tae, no like Frankie. Uch, it wiz a right shame that yer Grampa Devlin waistett his life drinkin' and gamblin'. See gamblin', hen, that's far worse'n the drink. Aye, at least ma Frankie's no' a gambler, eh? Did Ah ever tell ye our Janine was takin' in by the nuns when Ah was born an' so Ah hardly know her massel. Wan time she telt me she was goin' tae be a nun but then she changed hur mind tae become a schoolteacher. Coz she wiz that clever, they made her an infant mistress furst, then a deputy headie at St Al's, a big fancy Catholic school where a' the weans come frae rich folk. But she jumpt ship tae a Proddy school where they made her a full headie teacher. It wuz at some posh place tae but Ah cannae 'member where she said. Noo, Vero, come ower here an' blow yer nose on ma pinnie. Come on, see, it's a' settle. It's fur yer ain good, hen, surely ye can see that? Yer brains are waistett here. Noo away and make us pot o' tea and bring me a slice o' taostit cheese, wi a slather o brown sauce, eh? There's a wee darlin'. And check Frankie's pockuts tae see if he has ony fags left and bring me a couple, eh? But don't let him catch ye, OK? An' here, hen, shove this empty whisky bottle under the bed so he'll think it wuz himsel that finish it, eh?"*

Vero had tried to get her mother to change her mind, promising she would be good and never wet her bed again. But Martha had been resolute:

*"Listen our Vero, greetin' yer face aff'll no' change a thing. It's a' arranged. Jist as soon as we get the letter frae Janine wi a Postal Order wi the rest o' the money she promist uz. Noo, here, take ma Maureen's wee Fiona and change hur nappy and gie her a wee bottle and mind tae make sure it's no' too hot for the wean, eh?"*

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## Sent Away

When Vero wakened to find herself alone in the bedroom she normally shared with the other girls, she immediately checked her knickers and the bedsheet she was lying on, relieved she was dry. She slipped out of bed and groped under it for the potty and peed and peed, almost filling it. She had been 'reliable' for about three months but the memories of years of bed-wetting embarrassment still lingered.

It was a Saturday, the first day of the Easter school holidays. The flat was unnaturally quiet. Directly above her, Vero could hear the Fraser twins Eddie and Ernie thumping and bumping as they played table tennis in their bedroom. Their parents both worked on the buses. Normally the MacGillivray flat would have been noisy too, with the TV blaring from the living room, children arguing and her mother trying to settle disputes, everyone screeching at the top of their voices.

Vero's mind swung back to the previous evening.

*When her father arrived home after the pub closed and started another shouting match with her mother, as they always did, the kids had moved to their bedroom and Maureen had blocked the door with her bed. As the violent storm of words raged along the corridor, Vero shared one of the beds with Ella and Dotty with Angie cuddled into her back. Vero always slept at the edge of the bed facing outwards so she could get up to pee without disturbing the others.*

*In the adjacent bed, Maureen (who was newly fifteen) had her Fiona cuddled under one armpit and Nancy under the other. The infant, who was now was teething, had been banished from her parents' bedroom by her father. At only twelve pounds Nancy was receiving a course of antibiotic injections for a vicious chest infection, these jabs administered daily by the Green Lady<sup>1</sup>.*

*Around midnight, Frankie MacGillivray had staggered off to bed and the shouting was replaced by a loud television programme. Maureen slipped away to the living room to speak to her mother, taking Fiona with her. Left alone, Nancy was girning; Vero took her into her arms, popped a dummy in her mouth, cooed to her and after a while the child slipped over into a restless sleep and Vero tucked her under the blankets on Maureen's bed.*

*After an age, Vero too managed to get over.*

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<sup>1</sup> District Nurse.

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When Vero got up to use the toilet and to empty her potty, she discovered her father was still in bed, sleeping off his hangover and that the house was empty except for Maureen and Fiona, sitting in the living room. The coal fire was dead in the grate and the pair were huddle close to a one-bar electric fire.

Maureen had tears in her eyes as she dressed the stunned Vero in her school clothes, acting as if her younger sister was a baby and could not dress herself:

*"Vero, Mammy's taein the weans to the hospital wi Nancy. Ah went doon tae the telephone box tae ring the Green Lady place and they sent an ambulance and they a' piled in tae keep Mammy comp'ny coz she's feert o' hospitals, right? Ah tell ye, Vero, our Nancy's right no weel an' Ah jist hope she huznae passtitt oantae ma wee Fiona, eh? Noo, here ye ur, hen. C'mon, drink this milk and eat this wee bit of toast an' jam. Noo, hen, as Mammy telt ye a'ready, ye've tae go tae stay wi Aunt Janine in her nice big hoose, so ye huv. Uch, yer lucky yer a wee brainbox, eh? That's whit comes o' bee-inn top o' the class a' the time, eh? Noo, Ah've pit a' yer best claites intae this big shoppin' bag, right? But no yer new shoes that Aunt Janine sent fur yer birthday coz they fit me well enough, OK? Mammy says Aunt Janine'll get ye new wans, so here, stick oan ma auld wellies, right? Christ, Vero, dae ye no' huv giant's feet, eh? Fur fuck's sake, hen, **shut yer greetin**, wull ye? Ye'll set me aff an aw, an' the wean tae, right? An' if ye wake up Daddy, he'll skelp the baith o' us, so he will. Noo, c'mon an' take yer new pencil case and use it like a wee purse, eh? Ah've put a ten bob note in it fur yer fare an' tae get yerself some sweeties, right? It's ootta Daddy's back pocket so he'll think he's loast it doon the pub last night, right? Noo, hurry up, quick, afore he wakes up."*

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Looking through a 'porthole' in the steamed-up window, the wet, wind-blown streets were deserted. There was a thin scattering of works vans and cars, and a handful of old jalopies in poor condition, broken down, steadily rusting away. If you were rich enough to buy a reliable car, you moved away, back to 'civilisation' to live in a traditional tenement, somewhere nearer the city centre, a fantasy longing shared by many who had grown up in the mis-remembered cosy squalor of traditional inner city tenements like the Gorbals.

It was a raw, spring day, squally with a spit in the air. As they scurried towards the bus stop with Fiona in the old pushchair, Maureen was smoking a cigarette she had filched from her father's packet.

*"Noo, Vero, Mammy's says ye've tae take any bus intae toon, right? Then ye've tae get yersel tae St Enoch's Square an' oantae the Subway for Kelvinbridge an' ask how tae get tae Woodlands Road. Hur address is oan a wee bit paper in yer*

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*wee pencil case, right. Noo, make sure ye dinnae lose it. If it blows away, ye'll be well and truly fucked hen, coz ye cannae never come back here, right? Daddy says he's had enough o' ye, always tellin him to stoap smokin and drinkin. Ye shoudnae hae been so cheeky. How many times did Mammy and me tell ye tae button yer lip, eh? Look, Vero, Ah telt ye afore, there's nae fuckin' point greetin about it noo. An' look on the bright side, eh? Ye'll hae a room and a big giant bed a' tae yersel, Mammy says."*

The spits turned to sleety rain and the sky was filled with dark, scudding clouds.

*"Ah'm sorry Vero, hen. Ah'll need tae git hame or the wean'll git anuther chill, OK? An' look, hen, see it, the bus stop? Yer nearly there. Noo, gie me a wee cuddle and stoap greetin yer face aff. It's gonnae be fine, jist you wait an' see. Fuck, Ah wish it was me goin' tae live at Aunt Janine's. Ah'd be singing ma heid aff, no greetin."*

Vero stood in the street, her eyes blurred with tears and watched her sister retrace her steps, now running, her head down against the gusts of sleet. The teenager and her child turned a corner and Vero was on her own. She trudged down the steep slope to the bus terminus.

As Vero neared the bus stop, a crowd of boys from her school charged towards her, calling her names. They grabbed her shopping bag and turned it upside down, spilling the contents onto the road. A big fat boy from P7 grabbed her pencil case and the gang ran away with it, cackling obscenities.

A young man on a bike had seen what had happened and swerved his bike into the path of the fleeing boys and grabbed the pencil case from the fat boy. The gang scattered. The man rode towards Vero.

He was wearing a yellow cycling cape and a yellow hat. He had a small black moustache and bright, smiling blue eyes:

'Here you are, young lady. Safe and sound. Are you waiting for a bus?'

As she always did at school or when speaking to her betters, Vero adopted her poshest accent and best grammar.

'Yes. Thanks. I'm goin' to a place called Woodlands Road, it's somewhere near Kelvinbridge Subway.'

'Yes, indeed it is. I know it well. My father's church is in Woodlands Road. Are you going to visit a relative?'

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'Yes, my aunt, Miss Janine Devlin, do ye know hur?'

'No, sorry. Ah, here is your bus now. This one goes directly to St Enoch's Square. Cheerio and good luck.'

'Bye-bye. Oh, and thanks very much, mister.'

The bus waited at the terminus for ages and when it left for town it was only half full so Vero climbed the stairs and sat at the very front. As the bus sped along, she watched for the man on the bike with his yellow cape and hat but did not see him again. As he had promised, the bus swished into St Enoch's Square and she travelled by Subway to Kelvinbridge. When she saw a sweet shop, she bought a packet of Spangles, her favourite sweets. Over the years, she had learned never to crunch them, sucking and holding them on her tongue until the square dissolved to nothing.

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On arrival at the address on Woodlands Road, Vero was shown to her room where there was a large double bed with neat piles of clothes set out, including two sets of school uniform, three pairs of heavy winter shoes, shiny black wellingtons, white plimsols and a pair of slippers. Vero had never worn slippers before. Her old clothes were removed and put in the refuse bin; everything, even Susie, her battered, one-armed doll which had been her companion for years, a hand-me-down from Judith.

When Vero had started to cry, begging to keep the doll, her aunt had barked:

*"No, Veronique MacGillivray, there will be no more dolls. You'll be eleven on Monday and it's time to grow up. You're a big girl now, not a baby who plays with dolls. Time to act your age. Look, over there; a whole shelf of books for you to read and a full set of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Now, take this handkerchief and blow your nose and go to the bathroom and wash your hands and face. It's time for a plate of lentil soup. QUICK, now. We're going to the pictures this afternoon for the matinee."*

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The smart top-floor flat did not have three bedrooms, only two. The Kitchen was also used as a Living Room with a small four-place table. Eventually, Vero would find her way to the Front Room (her aunt thought the word 'Parlour' was old-fashioned and 'pretentious'). The TV was large, new, the first colour set Vero had ever watched. This Front Room overlooked a church and a bowling green. As Martha had promised it had a modern, tiled bathroom in which the bath had been replaced with a large shower cubicle and a bidet, the first Vero had seen. Although the house was sparsely furnished, it was

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always warm and filled with the aromas of home-cooked food. The streets around were filled with the bustle of students attending nearby Glasgow University.

At every turn, Vero was set new tasks, kept busy, deliberately.

Soon, the memories of living in squalor in Castlemilk began to fade.

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From her first day in her new home, Vero MacGillivray was coached and cajoled to excel. Every error of pronunciation and grammar was ruthlessly corrected. Within a week she was mimicking her aunt's style of delivery and expanding her vocabulary to include her mentor's phrasing. She was treated as an adult and expected to behave like one. This included taking her fair share of cooking, house cleaning, laundry (using the Bendix when appropriate), and ironing all her own clothes.

*"Vero, you are eleven, almost a woman. In other cultures, you would be expected to do even more, including manual labour, such as tilling fields, cropping tea and so on. Here, in your new home, you must learn to take every opportunity to learn. Aim at perfection in everything and, by that means you will learn to excel."*

In Castlemilk she had attended a Roman Catholic school. Now she was enrolled at nearby Willowbank Primary, a non-denominational school. Although her aunt prayed and seemed religious, she never forced this discipline on Vero. At the MacGillivray household there had been no praying and no attendance at chapel except when taken by the school. The visiting priest at the school had learned to avoid the MacGillivray family, considered by all as a lost cause.

The only brighter one had been the 'fragrant' Veronique, the highly-strung child who usually smelled of stale urine. This girl, they learned from her sisters, had gone off to live with a spinster aunt.

On the increasingly infrequent occasions when Vero asked about her family in Castlemilk, her Aunt Janine at once changed the subject, usually by embarking on another round a grammar exercises or telling Vero to look up a topic in her encyclopaedia and prepare a short essay to be read aloud for diction practice. Gradually, Vero's memory of her lost family faded.

As the months rolled by, Vero began to dread the possibility someone might force her to return to Castlemilk, a place which, in her mind, was filled with angry people who shouted at each other and smacked children on a whim. The only thing she missed was cuddling into her sisters when it was time for bed.

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As compensation, she used a hot water bottle and was encouraged to read for long as she wished, in habiting the world of Enid Blyton's characters and the delights of *Treasure Island* and *Black Beauty*. On Saturday's, when her aunt was often out, she was 'permitted' to watch TV alone, provided she was safely tucked up in bed by half-past eight.

After six months of piano lessons from Miss Charles, it was agreed by all parties that Veronique was 'not musically inclined'. In Castlemilk, her teacher Miss Walkinshaw had coached her for a poetry reciting competition: Vero had earned first place for a perfect rendering of Wordsworth's *To a Daffodil*.

After her failed piano experience, Vero was enrolled for individual elocution lessons with Mrs Shearer, a woman who had worked as an announcer on BBC Radio Three. These intense one-hour sessions continued relentlessly three times a week for fifteen months until Vero MacGillivray spoke like a girl from the West End of Glasgow and could easily have been taken for the daughter of a University professor.



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## *Educating Vero*

Coached intensively by her aunt, Veronica MacGillivray sat the bursary examinations for five fee-paying schools and was offered three places from which her aunt chose Kelvinside Academy.

In her new school, games were obligatory. Vero was no athlete and played hockey as a second-string goalie, spending most of her time sitting on the bench. She enjoyed swimming but was not fast enough to make the team. Even so, she stuck with the squad, turning up for every practice session but always as a hanger-on, not one of the 'in crowd'.

Academically, she was one of KA's brightest pupils but sadly failed to make any firm friends and so was excluded from the group selected to be Prefects. Because of this, she was passed over for Girl's Dux, even though she had the highest average marks in her year. In Mathematics she scored full marks in every class test from first year onwards.

As her seventeenth birthday approached, she suffered her first nervous breakdown, attributed to the very late onset of puberty and overeating. During her first year of 'the plague' until her hormones eventually settled, she suffered from heavy periods which lasted for almost a week at a time. Depression set in and deepened. She refused to communicate. After an initial spell in hospital she was released as 'cured'. Within a week she was rushed to A&E having taken an overdose of paracetamol in a suicide attempt, desperate to escape from her 'fat ugly body' and 'loneliness'. She was sectioned, put on suicide watch. A further ten months of intensive out-patient psychological counselling followed. Gradually, Vero climbed back from depression to a more stable normality.

After her year out, she resumed her studies at Kelvinside but was now part of a younger cohort. She had always been a loner but now became reclusive, presenting herself as a no-nonsense, independent young woman, a clone of her aunt. This sham was a strategy which worked for her and during her final year she dedicated herself to studying and gained five high-grade A-Levels at a single sitting.

Aged nineteen, she started at Glasgow University, initially enrolling for *Mathematics with Astronomy*. These classes were dominated by male students who openly poked fun at her, a situation which would not have been permitted at Kelvinside Academy. By Christmas, she was skipping classes, spiralling down into another, more severe bout of depression, requiring voluntary admission to Gartnavel Royal Infirmary for a three-month spell.



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On release and after counselling by the university student support service, she switched to *English Literature with French*. However, her pattern of poor mental health continued, disrupting her studies, attending classes intermittently.

Secretly, Vero sought comfort in alcohol.

During these lonely times, her aunt continued to pursue her own life without compromise, attending meetings and rallies organised by the Cooperative and Labour Party and playing Bridge three times a week. Vero was entrusted with keys for the flat and was expected to look after herself. She was given a generous weekly allowance from which she was expected to pay for sweets and comics. From the first week, Vero had started saving, hoarding the money in her pencil case purse until she had enough to buy a proper leather purse like her aunt's. This purchased, she immediately began to save again, this time for a shoulder handbag. When left alone, after her homework was finished, Vero would wander the streets of Glasgow, familiarising herself with the posh streets and grand mansions along Great Western Road as far out as Anniesland. Her favourite areas were Byres Road and Dumbarton Road where she would peer in shop windows of ladies' fashion shops, dreaming of wearing the clothes she saw.

From her first days at Woodlands Road, she had watched from the front room window to try to spot the young man on the bicycle who had retrieved her pencil case from the bullies. Not once did she see him.

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Vero's breakthrough into a social circle where she could cope and contribute came about by accident, not design. One day, she saw a neighbour from downstairs go in through the side door to the church halls carrying a tray of home-made cakes. A poster advertised a 'Bring and Buy' sale. Vero decided to make a visit. Mrs Clancy spotted her and pressed her into service serving tea from a huge teapot.

This set a pattern and, keeping her attendance a strict secret from her aunt, Vero became an intermittent attender at the church, always in the background. At the Sunday worship services, she deliberately arrived late, sat alone at the back then left early.

She now knew the church was 'Methodist' and looked it up in her encyclopaedia to learn of the Wesley brothers and their song writing fame.

It was the singing she liked best and the smiles from the people around her. Mrs Clancy seemed to know without asking that she had a lot of free time on her hands and knew when her aunt would be out. She was an older woman but very active, taking Vero with her when she visited the frail and elderly adherents of the church, encouraging Vero to

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recite her repertoire of poems which now included many by Robert Burns, her aunt's favourite. When encouraged, she would sing Burns' love songs for them and Harry Lauder standards.

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During her fifteen years at Woodlands Road living with Aunt Janine, Vero's parents had died. In each case the news was delivered by a scrawled note from Maureen, who seemed to have assumed the mantle of co-leader of the Castlemilk MacGillivrays.

The first death came when she was in her second year at Kelvinside when Frankie died of lung cancer. A year later, Martha died from cancer of the womb. However, Vero only learned about these events several years after they had happened, on the day she received her five A-levels, at a time when her aunt judged she was strong enough mentally to be told.

By that stage, Vero's Castlemilk family had been re-homed to various foster parents, scattered around Glasgow until they were sixteen years old after which they were expected to make their own way. From time to time one or more would turn up at the Woodlands Road flat only to find the storm door firmly closed against them.

Some, like her eldest sister Judith were scattered elsewhere throughout the UK. Apart from Judith, who kept in touch at Christmas by a short note inserted with a Christmas card, Vero had no addresses for the others.

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## Celebration Binge

On the day of her graduation in July 1990, Vero enjoyed a hearty late lunch at the *University Café* on Byres Road, a place where Vero was a regular customer. Her aunt had wanted to try the up-market *Ubiquitous Chip* restaurant but Vero had insisted. Vero had her usual, an all-day breakfast with a side portion of chips and two extra slices of toast. Her aunt decided on poached egg on toast and had sent it back twice, claiming firstly that the egg was overdone and on the second occasion that the toast was cold and soggy.

Surrounded by the raucous banter of University students and nurses from the nearby hospital, aunt and niece had eaten in silence.

The pair had not been on speaking terms since Vero's results had been announced. When Janine asked if Vero had at last decided what she wanted to do with her First Class degree, now that she had it, at long last, her niece had suggested she might register for a *PhD on Modern Trends in French Cinema*, or an *MSc in Information Technology*.

Janine had exploded:

*"No, Veronique, most definitely not! You are twenty-five and have lived off me high on the hog for fourteen years. There will be no more monthly allowances for you, my girl. No more handouts. Get out there and find yourself a worthwhile job, no more wasting your time working for a pittance in that disgusting music shop selling inane pop music to long-haired idiots. As you keep telling me, teaching is no longer the job it once was, a sentiment with which I must, reluctantly, agree. However, the wages are steady and the longer holidays would enable you to de-stress. Perhaps you could take up the piano again? Or, if you so desperately want another degree, why not try the Open University? Whatever you do get away from Glasgow or you might end up with some of your sisters' brats in your classes and you know what will happen then, don't you? Check in The Guardian; they're always advertising for teachers in England and they'll snap you up, mark my words. **Veronique MacGillivray, put that magazine aside and pay attention.** Why-oh-why do you have to be so awkward about everything? Now, my girl, listen to me and listen well. It's high time you got a grip on your life and started to focus on your future. No more sponging off me; no more 'breakdowns' when things get tough and no more private counselling sessions for 'your nerves'. Get on with your life or you'll end up like Martha. And while you are about it, Veronique, cut down on eating and get yourself back into shape. Remember what you've been told. It's not just me, is it? No, they all said the same: Dr Quinn, Mr Fraser at Garthnavel, your therapists, by everyone?"*

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*"Remember? - A healthy mind needs a healthy body."*

*"And for God's sake tidy up your appearance. You look like a tramp. Look at your hair? Such beautiful hair ruined by these stupid pleats and beads. This is the real deal now, Veronica, the final throw of the dice. I'll put £300 into your bank account at the end of the week but after that, your own your own. I'll expect you to be out of Woodlands Road and in a place of your own by Christmas."*

Leaving the *University Café* in silence, the pair had trudged for half an hour through an unexpected downpour. The day had started bright and sunny, predicted to continue until late evening and they were both in smart summery dresses and formal lightweight jackets, no umbrellas. Even had a taxi had been available, Janine would not have countenanced it. She walked most places, using public transport sparingly, only for longer journeys.

When they reached home, they were soaked through to their underwear. Janine said she was feeling tired and shivery. She showered, dosed herself with an Askit powder in a mug of hot water with a squeeze of lemon juice and a quarter teaspoonful of brown sugar, her standard remedy for most ailments. By six o'clock, she was in bed with a hot water bottle planning to start a new book.

Still peckish, Vero shut the kitchen door to prevent the smell from drifting through to her aunt then made two slices of roasted cheese on thick loaf ends washed down with two mugs of sweet milky tea. From seven o'clock, she hovered outside Janine's bedroom door, listening with growing impatience. Shortly before eight o'clock, she heard loud snores, confirming her aunt was at last asleep, allowing Vero to proceed with her planned celebration two hours sooner than she had expected.

Returning to her bedroom, she completed her final preparations designed to get herself in the mood. This routine was well-established, part of her imperative to 'love herself', a distortion of the advice she had been given in therapy many times over. Copying the image of a beautiful girl from a magazine, she applied make-up carefully. As she did so, in her mind, her reflection slowly morphed into that of the girl. When she was satisfied, she added generous squirts of eau de cologne underarm and down below, creating the atmosphere of a boudoir, she thought. Only now did she change into her special lingerie, a black and red lacy camisole and red frilly knickers edged with black.

She inspected herself in her mirror pouting and blowing kisses to the reflection of the beautiful fantasy who smiled coquettishly back to her.

*Vero, you look stunning. Irresistible.*

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Finally, she shrugged into her fleecy dressing gown, tied the belt and checked the pocket. Ready for her 'date with herself', she moved to the next stage.

Moving slowly, to avoid the creaky floorboards she tiptoed around the edges of the hall to the Front Room, carrying her secret video recorder/player which she placed on the floor beside her favourite armchair arranged face on to the television. Re-tracing her steps, she fetched her heavy-duty red plastic carry box which she stored under her bed, covered with an old blanket. This box was sealed shut with a padlock and held her collection of pornographic video cassettes, a set of long flying leads to connect the video player to the TV and her plug-in headphones so she could listen in full stereo without waking her aunt or disturbing their neighbours.

This box also contained her pint tumbler wrapped in a dishtowel, a trophy from *The Aragon* on Byres Road, stolen as a dare on a pub quiz night. Dangling from her wrist was a large plastic shopping bag containing a two-pound box of *Black Magic*, two six-packs of mixed crisps, a full bottle of *Smirnoff Vodka*, a bottle of *Ribena* and a larger size bottle of fizzy lemonade.

To complete her subterfuge, on leaving she locked her bedroom door from the outside. This precaution was to counter the unlikely possibility that her aunt might check on her if she wakened to use the toilet. Vero had established the pattern of locking her bedroom door soon after being discharged from Gartnavel when she invented her first version of her self-loving routine.

Locked in the Front Room, she drew the curtains to shut out the teeming rain. With the gas fire turn fully up, the room was very warm and muggy. The video player was within easy reach on the floor beside her armchair with her flying leads and headphones in place and tested.

Lit only by the glow of the fire and the ever-changing images from the TV, the front room was safe, cosy and, she judged, romantic, just right for an extra-special binge love-in to celebrate her graduation.

While running the early credits for *101 Dalmatians* and *The Great Dane (Uncut)*, Vero settled deeply into her armchair, adjusting cushions, whispering to herself:

*Perfect. Absolutely perfect. So, here we go, darling girl. Take your time now and enjoy it. You deserve it. You've worked hard for this moment. Relax, let go, and take yourself on a whirl.*

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Hiking her heels onto a pouffe, she swivelled to a side table to mix her first pint of vodka and blackcurrant, a half and half mix starter. After a long slow draught, she closed her eyes and waited as the strong, sweet liquor searched down into her tummy to initiate the first part of the buzz.

Comfortable inside and out, she loosened and folded back her dressing gown to reveal her semi-naked self. From the dressing gown pocket, she took her Special Friend, still in his black silk pouch and placed him beside her on the armchair, in the niche between the cushion and the side.

*Relax Juan, later, when we're both ready.*

Draining the rest of the pint, she mixed a second libation, this time in three equal parts, adding lemonade to make it a longer drink. From now on she would sip, not gulp, staying 'up in the zone' like foreplay, not yet reaching for the edge. This would come later when she would change back to a half and half formula.

As the first sequence played out, she half-closed her eyes and turned the sound to a whisper, massaging herself, starting with her favourite right nipple, setting her mind to drift free as she had been encouraged to do in therapy, 'projecting herself into happiness'.

Next up on her watch list was *Back to the Future and the Nymphoids*. This would be followed by *Amadeus meets Cleopatra*. Depending on her mood, she might skip the others and leap ahead to the steamy scenes from *Desperately Seeking Susan Again and Again* or perhaps go straight to the more explicit tape from Amsterdam, a personal reward purchased after her final examination from a sex shop in a seedy part of Glasgow.

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By three o'clock in the morning, all three bottles were empty. To cover her tracks, she turned off the gas fire, opened the curtains and edged the windows to allow the fog to dissipate. The rain had stopped and the sky was clear, stars twinkling brightly. She tidied her paraphernalia into the storage box and, balancing the video player on top with the shopping bag dangling from her wrist, she shuffled unsteadily and not so quietly back to her bedroom. She would dispose of her debris later, when her aunt was out at her project.

In a drunken haze, she lay on her bed, fumbled for Juan, pulled her duvet over her body including her head, spread her thighs again and replayed the explicit love scenes she had just watched, moaning and mewling loudly as she climaxed, mimicking the heroine.



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## *The Morning After*

Vero wakened with a start. She desperately needed to pee. Glancing at her bedside clock she was shocked to see it was nearly eleven. Crouching over her porta-potty, she relieved herself. This item, also a secret, was from a caravan supplies shop on Great Western Road, purchased for just such an occasion. In recent months her aunt had become a light sleeper and would suddenly appear when Vero was sitting on the toilet, interrogating her through the closed door in fierce whispers about as to why she was up in the middle of the night then trailing her back to her bed, leaning close to taste her breath and asking what she had been drinking and how much, launching into a rant about alcohol addiction and wasted lives.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, her head spinning, Vero reached for her pick-me-up bottle of *Irn Bru* and drank half of it, listening for sounds of her aunt moving about. At sixty-six and recently forced to retire, Janine Devlin was beginning to slow down, rising at eight o'clock rather than her usual six. Based on the absence of music from the Kitchen radio (which was permanently tuned to Radio 3), Vero surmised her aunt must be up and out and about. Unable to settle to her new freedom, Janine was the instigator and organiser of an adult literacy outreach with centres in poorer areas of the North of Glasgow. The programme was funded by the Education Sub-Committee of the Cooperative and Labour Movement, voted through as her swansong project.

On her way to the bathroom to empty and rinse her potty, Vero noticed the house keys were still in the lock of the inner door. Smiling wryly, Vero mumbled to herself:

*So, Miss Early Bird, no juicy worms for you today!*

As a peace offering, Vero decided to take her aunt a cup of tea, a thing she had never done before in her life. While the electric kettle was boiling, she leafed through the previous day's *Guardian* and scanned the employment section.

*What is Leeds like as a place to live?*

She knocked at her aunt's bedroom door. There was no reply. She pushed the door open. The curtains were still closed, the scene illuminated by a bedside lamp. Janine Devlin lay on her back, her library book lying open untidily on the floor beside her bed. The bedclothes had been kicked aside, as if she had been in a struggle. Her long floral winceyette nightdress was rucked up revealing stout, hairy thighs and huge calf muscles with bulging varicose veins. The air was filled with the ripe odour of faeces and there was a large dark stain on the bedsheet. Her thick, purple knickers were soaked through.

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During her time in the swimming squad at Kelvinside Academy, Vero had been trained in first aid. She forced herself to move towards the corpse to check. There was no pulse and the skin was icy cold.

Without life, the face was that of a stranger's, its skin grey-blue. Without her teeth it was sunken. The eyes were wide open, the mouth a dark 'O' shape. The right arm hung loosely from the edge of the bed, clenching spectacles which were shattered and had drawn blood, now dried. Vero knew her aunt had been suffering from high-blood pressure for two decades and had only recently agreed, most reluctantly, to take pills for her condition.

With a sob of guilt, Vero realised her aunt had almost certainly died in great pain, probably crying out for help but unheard because she had been wearing headphones.

Janine Devlin would not countenance the expense of a telephone, claiming it would cause an invasion of her privacy. In her world, people discussed matters face to face. If appointments were to be made, these went directly into Janine's diary. For those living further afield, letters worked perfectly well and allowed thoughts to be organised, careless phrases edited to select words honed to ensure ideas and opinions were correctly conveyed with clarity.

Vero ran from the flat on Woodlands Road to Dr Quinn's surgery on Great Western Road. On her way home, she used a call box to initiate the pre-paid funeral package her aunt had bought from the Cooperative Funeral Service.

Back at Woodlands Road but unwilling to re-enter the flat alone, she stood on the landing outside the locked storm door until the arrival of Dr Levy, the junior partner at the practice, who raced up the stairs, two at a time. On his heels, the attendants from the funeral service arrived. Robert Levy checked the scene and the corpse then certified the death as 'natural causes', freeing the undertaker's men to remove the body. Before leaving, he asked for Janine's medications which he placed in a see-through plastic bag and took with him.

The whole business from discovery of the corpse to its removal had taken less than two hours.

With her aunt gone, Vero stripped the bed and placed the soiled bedclothes in the new washing machine and set it to work. The mattress was ruined.

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Now alone in the empty flat, cupping a mug of her aunt's special granulated instant coffee, Vero MacGillivray was revisited by the events of the previous August. Unknown to their other neighbours or to her aunt, Vero had had a set of keys for Myrna Clancy's second floor flat, used to enter whenever she saw Myrna's bedroom curtains were still drawn in daytime, a signal that her friend was poorly and needed help.

When Myrna was still missing three days after her expected return from a two-week Saga bus tour holiday to 'The English Lakes', Vero began to worry. However, the bedroom curtains were drawn back and Vero assumed her neighbour had decided to break her journey home to visit Hilary, her school-teacher daughter who lived somewhere on the Solway Coast. Vero had never met Hilary and did not know mother and daughter had not spoken for over twenty years. Their estrangement dated from the time Hillary set up home with her friend Emily, a partner in a GP practice in Lochmaben, forty miles from their smallholding on the outskirts of Castle Douglas.

A further week on, with a feeling of foreboding, Vero unlocked the storm doors and gathered up an untidy pile of mail and dozens of flyers from the floor of the small foyer.

When Vero had opened the inner door, the stench hit her. There was a suitcase, handbag and collapsing umbrella neatly placed together in the centre of the hall, ready for Myrna's planned trip. The bathroom door was wide open. Myrna was sitting on the toilet, slumped forwards, fully dressed, ready for departure, complete with her felt hat held in place by its odd vintage silver hatpin, always a talking point. This item would mysteriously disappear, to the annoyance of Myrna's daughter. In the end, the funeral people were blamed although, as expected, they denied the theft.

It was later determined by postmortem seventy-three year old Myrna Clancy had died of an aneurysm. It had taken Hilary and her friend Emily many weeks to get the mother's body certified and released for cremation. In the process, Vero had been cross-questioned by the police and required to attend a coroner's inquest.

Vero had also been interrogated at length by her Aunt Janine during which she had been badgered into revealing her friendship with Mrs Clancy. By nagging on after this first admission, Janine had forced her niece to explain her involvement with the Methodist church where she was registered as an 'adherent', which Vero passed off as 'necessary bureaucracy' to allow her to be part of the 'Elderly Care Team' operated by the church with a grant from the local council.

This further admission brought the stinging riposte:

*"Veronique, such long-term deceit does not reflect well on your character. You should have said what you were up to and why. There was no need for such*

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*deception. It makes me wonder what else you have been up to when you could easily have been part of my little team of helpers. Of course, I do admit that Ken Ingles at the Methodists is a fine man. Did you know his wife Dolores is on the Co-op committee with me? But Myrna Clancy, God Rest her soul, was a meddling busybody, always poking her neb in where it was not wanted. I don't suppose she told you she was one of my members of staff at Craigholme? But only briefly. I moved her on after only a year. The trouble that woman caused in the staff room was unbelievable. Take my advice, Veronique, keep yourself to yourself and stop this amateurish care worker nonsense. You of all people with your mental health issues should steer well clear of trying to help people like my sister and her brood. They will only drag you down."*

Vero decided quickly on her strategy. She would advise anyone who might wish to attend the funeral mass of her Aunt Janine and her internment by placing an advertisement in *The Glasgow Herald*. After the event she might place a notice in *The Guardian*, a paper her aunt read avidly on Saturdays, often contributing to its letters pages on matters of educational topicality, building up a group of like-minded corresponding friends in the process. Vero would certainly not put an advert in the *Daily Record* or *Evening Times* where the MacGillivray clan might possibly come across it.

Her aunt had warned her, many times over:

*"Veronique, I've saved hard all my life for my old age. You don't need to worry about me. Get away from Glasgow and the MacGillivrays as soon as you graduate. There's a tidy sum to see me out of this world. I'll tell you more nearer the time. If I go before it's all used up, what's left is for you, not them. Just make sure they don't get their hands on my savings. They'd just smoke and drink it away. Wasters and scroungers, every one of them."*

This declaration or a version of it had been repeated two or three times a year, always in a bitter, scolding tone. When and why Janine Devlin had become a loveless, self-absorbed woman driven by a supercilious sense of duty was not evident to Vero because they had never had a proper discussion about her past life.

Every time she had approached the topic, she had been rebuked:

*"Veronique, please desist from these questions. I have no idea what notions our Martha imparted about me but I can be certain they were a fantasy created by her addictions. Martha, poor thing, did not ever get a proper grip on her life, no matter how many times I tried my very best to help her. After she met Francis MacGillivray, I more or less gave up on her. Had it not been for you and your sisters, I would never have trekked out to that wilderness to visit you all. So*

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*please, no more questions. You are here now, so, as I keep repeating, take your chances and get ready to meet the challenges ahead. Now, you have homework, get on with it. I'm out at a Parent's Evening at school tonight then straight on to Bridge. Bed by half-past eight. And brush your teeth."*

Not once had her aunt cuddled her as her sister Martha had done.

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Sitting alone in the kitchen sipping tea with the radio tuned defiantly to Radio One and the gas fire turned to maximum, she devoured a late breakfast of three bacon rolls slathered with brown sauce.

The recurring thought was:

*Had I not been bingeing, I would have heard her call out. I might have saved her.*

A second, briefer feeling of guilt flitted across her mind:

*She was not given The Last Rites.*

The idea of contacting Father Patrick Alphonso Slavin, her aunt's priest did not appeal. Vero knew that since this parish priest's installation five years earlier, her aunt's attendance at chapel had been increasingly intermittent. According to local rumours, Father Alpie had a reputation for imposing himself on older widows, forcing them to perform unsavoury acts to satisfy his carnal lust.

Thinking of this, her mind leapt back to Castlemilk and what Judith's letter had explained about her family, this in turn causing her to tumble her old chestnuts, questions she knew now she would never get answers to with Aunt Janine gone.

*Did Aunt Janine know Daddy had fathered Maureen's baby Fiona?  
Was this why she took me under her wing, to save me from the risk of incest?  
Or did she 'buy' me from Mummy as another 'project'?  
Why pick me rather than Helen or Dorothy?  
Why did she never adopt me as Mummy said she would?  
Was it because I was a disappointment to her, never good enough?  
Why did she never brush my hair like Mummy, never touch me?  
Why did she never visit me in hospital, only send cards and flowers?  
Was she frightened of hospitals too, like Mummy?  
Why did she hate Mummy, pour scorn on her at every opportunity?  
Jealousy, because Mummy had once been more attractive?*

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*Or did she despise Mummy because she was soft, kind to everyone?*

In her late teens, when Vero had tried more forcefully to find out, she had been scolded:

*"Veronique MacGillivray, will you please desist from these questions. As I have told you many times, what notion Martha imparted about me I dread to think but you can be assured it was a fantasy created by her addictions. 'Martha the Pathetic', as I think of her, threw over one chance after another, no matter how many times I tried my very best to help her it always ended with her begging for more money. The concept of working to make her way in life never took hold. Had it not been for you and your sisters, I would never have trekked out to that wilderness, to that hovel. Do you remember what you smelled like when you arrived here? So, Veronique, please, no more questions. Stop whimpering and whining. And no more muttering under your breath your false prayers for them. God hates that. He expects you to count your blessings, not whine and whimper for your 'poor lost family'. Forget them, they're not worth bothering about. Instead, learn to be thankful you have escaped from poverty. Do you think I don't know what it was like to go to bed hungry, to live in squalor? Fortunately for you I fought my way up and out of the mire. So Veronique, as I keep repeating, take your chances and get ready to meet the challenges ahead. If you want to pray for someone, pray for me and just hope I live long enough to make sure you get a good education. Now, you have homework, get on with it. I'm out at a Co-op update meeting and then straight on to Bridge. Bed by half-past nine and brush your teeth properly or you'll end up like me."*

Over the past fourteen years they had travelled side by side, almost strangers, a journey during which Vero had been cloned to become a lesser version of her mentor, never quite good enough to deserve fulsome and unreserved praise.

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## **Treasure Hunt**

That bright, sunny afternoon, with the windows raised to air her aunt's bedroom and dilute the smell from the ruined mattress which she had dragged down to the backcourt and propped up beside the bin house, Vero sifted through every drawer and checked every handbag, on a quest to find her aunt's wealth, hoping to find a bank book and or a building society passbook.

To her surprise, her aunt's purse contained only £33 in mixed denomination notes plus a few coins. The rent book was paid up to the end of October. Vero knew the Factor would not agree to transfer the tenancy. As had happened with Myrna Clancy's place, this flat would be offered for sale. At least she had nearly four months before she would be ejected. Likewise, the rates were paid in advance to the following March. The gas and electricity bills for June had been paid; it was summer, the next bills due would be low. Withdrawals from the state pension book were up to date. She found a neat pile of advice slips detailing her aunt's occupational pension, also disbursed to June. As a spinster, both pensions would cease with Miss Janine Devlin's death.

Vero placed these items on the kitchen table with her aunt's pile of cheap, enamel brooches. This haul included her aunt's mother's wedding and engagement rings and her father's fob watch which no longer functioned, items which Vero had seen but had never been allowed to touch. There was a Masonic tiepin which Vero had not seen before, suggesting Robert Devlin may have been from a Presbyterian tradition. Vero guessed the value of these items to be around £50 maximum, probably less.

In her own bank account, Vero had £526.73, an amount built up over many years of saving in intermittent bursts and including the recent £300 promised by her aunt. She resumed her hunt, meticulously checking every nook and cranny, emptying and even removing drawers to check for a passbook Sellotaped underneath.

Vero did not expect to find a Will: Janine Devlin had had a very low opinion of lawyers of any kind especially those who turned to politics.

From snippets picked up from Myrna Clancy's daughter during the long delay while she tried to settle her mother's affairs, Vero knew the legal process could take a long time which might leave her in financial limbo. At least I have enough ready cash to last a few months, she thought.

And then she found it. Hidden in a hollowed out book entitled 'The Nun's Book of Daily Prayers'.

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It was for the Clydesdale Bank, Pollokshaws branch.

The balance at May was £1,373-12-9.

Vero made her decision:

*She always said it was to come to me.*

*I'll raid the account, go to a different branch, dress in her clothes, wear fake glasses and one of Myrna's hats. But not her hatpin: that would draw attention. I'll put on heavy make-up, practice a high, querulous wobbly voice. I'll draw down the cash gradually over a few months, pay it into my account.*

*I'll not put an advertisement in The Glasgow Herald. I'll let the Co-op funeral service make the arrangements. If no one attends, I'll make the excuse that I was frozen by grief, fake a mini-breakdown.*

*If the MacGillivrays come begging, I'll pretend I'm not here, keep the storm door locked.*

Vero was sure she would have no difficulty forging the signature, knowing her own handwriting was an exact replica of her aunt's, this style drummed into her during her first months at Woodlands Road when she had been set the task of copying swathes of information from the encyclopaedia to build up her general knowledge. Years later, on student pub quiz nights, these facts and figures had served her well.

Vero resumed her hunt, hoping to find a second passbook, maybe for a building society.

Two hours later she found a thick, manila envelope. It was hidden on top of her aunt's wardrobe, tucked flat into the left-hand corner behind the ornamental moulding, missed on two previous checks, found only when she had taken the trouble to stand on the steps used to change light bulbs and take down curtains.

She took her prize back to the kitchen table to examine it. Inside, she found a cardboard matchbox with a vibrant blue label, with a yellow *fluer-de-lys* design, front and back. The matchbox was scuffed, stained with dark purple marks. Inside, wrapped in what looked like baking paper, she uncovered a pair of earrings she had never seen before.

Apart from her selection of cheap Co-op brooches, her aunt had never worn personal jewellery of any kind:



# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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*"No, Veronica. Frippery! An ostentatious waste of money. Take that necklace back to the shop and get a full refund. At once. And no more pop records either. It's no wonder you failed at the piano, listening to the drivel they transmit out on Radio One. John Reith would spin in his grave. If this spendthrift behaviour continues, I'll stop your allowance for a few months so be warned! The last thing we need is you turning into another Martha."*

The earrings appeared to be of silver and were in the shape of a scorpion, with a tiny body formed by an ovoid-shaped red stone. There were other stones, a green colour, eight in total and a darker red almost black stone at the end of each tail. She fetched Myrna Clancy's tarantula hatpin from its hiding place to compare the colour. The perfectly matched stones in the earrings were brighter, a deeper crimson. Years earlier she remembered something about blood opals from her encyclopaedia Q & A sessions. The larger hatpin stone was circular, more pink than red, lacklustre by comparison with the earrings. Like the scorpions, Myrna's tarantula also had eight legs but these were small, incised, unadorned by stones and not in the least like the long spidery legs of a real tarantula.

Placing an earring against her right ear, Vero looked in a mirror. Because her ears were overlarge, always concealed by her hair, she had never worn earrings. By a trick of sunlight, the tiny red stone appeared to wink at her. Inexplicably, her fingers began to tingle and her ear turned red at the spot where the metal clip had touched it.

*Perhaps it's coated with a chemical? Or am I allergic to this particular metal?*

Shuddering, she at once re-wrapped the earrings in the tissue paper and replaced them in their ornate matchbox.

*Who would want to wear scorpions as earrings? Creepy but probably worth quite a lot. I'll have them valued, maybe at those posh places in the Argyle Arcade. If I get a reasonable offer, I'll sell them, turn them into cash. Or buy a fancier presentation box and enter them in an auction.*

Lifting the stiff envelope, she wiped off the dust into the Kitchen sink. In a tiny scrawl, in pale green ink, it was addressed to her aunt at 84 Greenview Street, Pollokshaws. There was no postage stamp, no franking-mark. It must have been hand-delivered, she surmised.

*When had Aunt Janine lived in Pollokshaws? The Queer Folk frae the 'Shaws!*

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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Despite several attempts, the box refused to go back in the envelope. On inspection, Vero found it was blocked by a folded piece of very thin paper; probably torn from a Bible or hymnal, she thought.

She placed the sheet on the table and peered at it. It was written in French, in the same tiny hand used to address the envelope. Astounded, reading slowly with growing astonishment, enjoying the challenge, she re-phrased the message into English:

*My darling Janine, my dearest ever love,*

*My Purgatory continues.*

*My hope and prayer is that this reaches you, somehow. I don't know who to trust.*

*They are now sending me on again from this desolate, windswept place back to Paris, to work in a hospice, in the slums, among the dregs from the gutters, the no-hopers and the prostitutes, drug-takers and child-molesters. The previous priest died of cholera; God rest his soul. I wonder what crime he committed.*

*The only blessing is that they blamed everything on me and did the right thing by you.*

*Please accept this little gift as a token of my undying love. They belonged to my aunt whose father was a pawnbroker. She said they had been made for a Russian Czar. Don't you agree they are very pretty? When I look at them, I am reminded of you and our lost love.*

*Keep them and pass them to our child in due time.*

*Yours forever,*

*Padre Poyter.*

*(Perhaps, we shall meet again in Heaven? Is there a Heaven?)*

Vero leaned back, sideswiped by this information and what it revealed about her aunt.

*Oh my God Janine Devlin! You? So, you had urges too, just like me. And you did it with a priest! Ha, ha. Padre Poyter, Peter the Priest! Father Peter! Were you a nun, or training to be a nun? Or later? When? Where? No, not here, no. Greenview Street? And a love child into the bargain! Did it survive? A girl? Or a boy?*



## *The Crimson Scorpion*

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Fortified with a cup of hot sweet, milky tea and six chocolate digestive biscuits, Vero redoubled her efforts in her search for the elusive passbook. Late into the evening she found what she had been looking for. The black leather briefcase was on the top shelf of the large walk-in cupboard accessed from the hall. It was neatly wrapped inside an old army blanket, at the bottom of a high stack of similar blankets. The briefcase was an old-fashioned style, with two padlocks, maybe military, she thought. She had never seen her aunt use it. It was in good condition, as if it had not been much used.

Although Vero was prepared to force open the locks with a kitchen knife, this was not in her nature. She placed it on the kitchen table and set about looking for the key or keys. An hour later, Sellotaped under the saucer for the bowl where her aunt placed her false teeth before retiring each evening, she found the single key which worked on both locks.

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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## *A Spinster's Tale*

Vero emptied the contents of the briefcase onto the Kitchen table and sat back, smiling broadly.

The most important item was a roll of cash, tightly bound with three rubber bands, all £20 notes, all issued by the Bank of Scotland. She counted twice and confirmed the amount as £9,840.

She turned her attention to the most interesting item, a long, purple pouch of thin, silky material tied with a thick red cord, embroidered boldly with the single word, in the style of her aunt's cursive script:

*Poyter*

Guessing what it was by feeling its outline, Vero smiled then grinned. Untying the red cord, she slipped out a life-sized penis. Mahogany, she guessed, smooth and highly polished, the shaft slightly curved, the glans protruding from the foreskin. At the base of the shaft, bulging testicles were contained inside a finely carved, wrinkled scrotum which was flat on the base so that it might stand by itself. Her first thought was that it was intended as an ornament, perhaps even as a work of art.

Vero set the penis on the table and, closing her eyes, stroked it gently, sliding her hand slowly up and down, enjoying the frisson which this action stirred, leading her to think the unthinkable - the possibility her douce aunt might have used it to pleasure herself down through her lonely spinster years while conjuring up images of her lost love.

Although she was not an expert, from her clandestine studies in the university library medical section, the object seemed to be anatomically correct in every detail, reinforcing her first impression that it was a work of art, maybe a collector's item, perhaps valuable.

Then, on the flat base she spotted the inscription, engraved and inked in tiny black letters:

Glasgow University School of Anatomy

Vero held it to her nose and sniffed, detecting a faint trace of lavender oil, reminiscent of the cheap, cloying perfumes favoured by her aunt.

# The Crimson Scorpion

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*Could her aunt's Poyter-Peter have survived? If so, where? Paris? Was this dildo a gift from him? Or had her aunt acquired it and named it after him?*

She now turned her attention to the last item, a brown paper parcel. Inside she found three volumes bound in both directions with a red ribbon and a tie-on cardboard label marked in green ink:

*For Veronica.*

These five-year diaries covered the period from 1965 to 1980. Perhaps now she would at last learn something of her aunt's life. She expected there would be a lot of interesting reading ahead which she wanted to sift and savour slowly. She checked the clock: she wanted to get to the off-licence before it closed.

*I'll dump my empties on the way out and get a fish supper on the way back.*

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With the Kitchen fire again at full, making the room warm and cosy against the steady downpour outside, she devoured a fish supper and an extra portion of chips with lashings of vinegar and brown sauce, two slices of bread with butter and washed it all down with a large bottle of *Irn Bru*. In the front room, the curtains were closed, the gas fire on to pre-heat the room, the video player set up with *101 Dalmatians* ready to play, her supplies replenished, fully set up for another video-watching binge, this time without fear of discovery.

In the Front Room, lying back in her armchair, as she flicked the diary pages, she was at first disappointed. Mostly what she saw were details of appointments, often in a private code which made the entries indecipherable and therefore meaningless. Scanning, she sipped steadily while dipping into a large box of chocolate covered marzipans left-over of her aunt's previous Christmas, a prize won at the Co-op social evening raffle. A few of the chocolates were covered in a thin film of white crystals but they tasted good enough.

This time her tumbler was filled with another favourite tipple, a three-part mix of *Bacardi*, *Ribena* and lemonade.

Vero was grinning defiantly, knowing her aunt would have been appalled at the extravagance of two gas fires lit in July and the blatant consumption of shop-bought food in her home and at her niece swilling alcohol. Already slightly drunk from her first, half and half pint of the liquor, Vero muttered:

*Aye, and up yours too, you parsimonious old bitch!*

# The Crimson Scorpion

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Starting again on the first volume, at early April 1965, she came across a longer entry, this time in open prose:

*Struck a deal with our Martha and her odious husband Francis. He was fresh from Barlinnie and still had the stink of prison on him. Martha, poor thing, has just lost another still-born. She put Veronique to her breast at once and suckled her. Although weak in the head, our Martha does have a heart of gold and her other girls are kind-hearted too. Veronica will be safe with them. In any case, there is no other option which would fit my plan.*

*They'll take my Veronique until she is ten at most, maybe sooner if things are propitious. When I get her back, I'll make it seem like an adoption, a charitable action. After an argument, and on the promise of an extra £20, Francis agreed to register my Veronica as their child, with £10 down and the balance to be due when I have the birth certificate. I will not have my child growing up as a bastard. Hopefully, she'll not be too contaminated by the experience and I can retrieve her, make her into something worthy of her father.*

*After a hagggle, the price was set at £8 per week for the first five years and £12 per week when she starts school and a final pay-off of £150 at the end of the contract. When that day comes, I would expect them to insist on more. It will depend on whether Francis is in or out of jail, I expect. So be it! This beggar cannot be a chooser.*

Two months later a further entry added detail.

*I've discovered they've moved P to a church in Shetland, his punishment. I've been 'forgiven', they say, in lieu of birthing my child and not aborting her as I had threatened. I have signed the necessary forms confirming I have given her to a 'good Catholic family'. God forgive me! However, I have not revealed where I have placed her. Mother Superior A-M made a show of great displeasure at my resistance but that will blow over quickly. The last thing she wants is any ongoing responsibility now she has successfully swept it all under the carpet with the help of her old boyfriend, Bishop M-P.*

Three months further on.

*I confess I did not believe they would re-instate me as a Deputy Head but they kept their word. However, they are sending me from St Aloysius to Possilpark. So be it! "Grin and Bear It" will be my new motto. Of course, I'll start looking around, now I have a springboard to get out of their clutches. Maybe Laurel Bank or Craigholme, or Hutchie? Longer days, more marking and very demanding parents but better pay and pension and longer summer holidays. Maybe I could get up to Shetland soon. Just on the off chance?*

# The Crimson Scorpion

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Vero kept searching, scanning backwards and forwards, gradually tuning in to her aunt's code, eventually unravelling the tortuous path which had led her to Woodlands Road in the summer of 1970 and the details of her upgrading deal struck with the Factor in which her rent would be reduced by half during the first three years of her tenancy to cover the outlay by his tenant.

What Vero did not see in these records was the building owner's daughter was under Janine's personal care at *Craigholme School*, receiving special extra lessons after school four days a week to help her cope with her 'word and number blindness' (dyslexia).

The final entry of relevance was for Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> March 1976:

*I found our Martha standing on my doorstep when I got home this evening. The stairwell was stinking of stale smoke and there were three dog ends stubbed out, right at my very doorstep. I expect Myrna Clancy will have a field day.*

*Our Martha certainly knows how to turn on the waterworks. It started with her claiming she had not received my postal orders for weeks and weeks. At first she claimed I was in arrears by three weeks which then increased to five and then six. Invention! I was able to show her the dated and certified counterfoil stubs but this seemed to mean nothing to her. Unless her odious husband filched the postal orders and somehow managed to get them cashed despite Martha being the named payee. Nothing is too underhand for that man.*

*But then she broke down entirely and I finally got the gist of it. How could he stoop so low? Francis MacGillivray should be castrated! I simply could not trust myself to be in that man's presence ever again in case I am tempted to do the needful myself. I have therefore agreed a final pay-off of £250, by postal order and to be delivered to our Martha personally by registered letter. To see Maureen and her child founded, I eventually gave our Martha £60 cash in hand, money well worth handing over to get rid of her.*

*Under our agreement, Veronique will be sent here to me on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> April. I have insisted she come alone. She is a bright child with a good tongue in her head and I'm sure she will cope. The main objective is to prevent any further visits from the Castlemilk scroungers.*

*After our Martha left I had to virtually fumigate the whole house to rid it of her stench. Would you believe she left defecation skid marks in the toilet pan!*

*One might ask: "How could I ever have left my child with them?"*

# The Crimson Scorpion

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*Of course, it seems outrageous, now I am settled and well-founded here and at Craigholme. But, my dear Veronique, if you ever read this, you must understand first that I am not a mothering type, not in that mould. You must also accept that, had I not followed my career with single-minded vigour and intent, I would not have been able to provide you with a new life here at Woodlands Road and the promise of the best education I can afford to give you.*

Shaking with rage, Vero poured herself another pint, mixed at half and half strength then downed three-quarters in one long draft. Viciously, she ripped out the offending diary pages, shredded them to confetti and dumped them in the rubbish bin with the diaries and its packaging. Staring at the holy picture of the Madonna and Child above the fireplace, tears welled up and she could feel herself on the edge again, staring at the abyss. Sniffing them away, she fought back, drained the remainder of her drink and, slurring, she spat her words at the icon:

*So, Aunt Janine, you didn't want me enough to keep me and sent me to live in squalor with a criminal family. I see it now, having me to look after would have scuppered you, held you back in your career. **Fuck You! You fuckin', fuckin' sanctimonious shite-bag!** You'll never be my mother, not ever! And I have a birth certificate and a passport to prove it! Don't think this money will buy me off. So, here's my revenge: no Chapel funeral for you; no notices in the newspapers. I'll get the Co-op have you cremated after hours in the cheapest coffin they have and get a refund. No Bridge and Co-op Committee friends to weep false tears. You, Janine Devlin can go straight to the Fires of Hell. I hope Peter the priest is already there, waiting for you.*

In a final act of rebuke, Vero stretched up and hauled the print from the wall, threw it into the hearth and stamped on it repeatedly until it was reduced to splinters of wood and shreds of fabric.

The tears returned in deep, heartrending sobs. Her stomach heaved and she ran for the bathroom, fell on her knees, retching into the toilet pan until there was nothing left to come up but thin, sticky bile. Overcome by a sense of loss and afraid of the isolation to come, the old nagging questions returned, never answered during her therapy:

*Why does no one ever want me enough to love me?*

*Will I ever learn to live with loneliness?*

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# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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That night, more or less sober, she cuddled into a hot water bottle and tried to sleep. During the long hours of darkness, she replayed the scenes from her times in hospital, always returning to the counsel given on her final discharge from Gartnavel:

*"Vero, in life some are luckier than others. For them, the Sun shines brightly every day and they sail on through their lives without difficulties. For the rest of us, we have to strive to reach up out of gloom and doom. Like you, many have suffered 'rejection experiences' which have severely damaged their self-esteem. You can choose to carry on with your self-abuse or you can begin to love yourself. In the words of the song - Love is the Answer. On the plus side of your equation you have a clever mind in a strong healthy body. With youth and vigour on your side, we must avoid medication, the substitution of one addiction for others. Here is the key for you: Love attracts love. Love yourself and learn to accept your faults. Learn to forgive the faults you will easily find in others if you look for them. If you strive for perfection in yourself and others you will always be disappointed. We are all presently imperfect, every one of us. To escape from your vale of gloom, you must learn to adopt a positive mind-set. Only you can do this. Try every minute to think positive, happy thoughts. Avoid dark, sad films and TV shows. Watch only happy, joyful shows. You have a good singing voice so join a choir, mix with people. Take charge of your life. Decide to make the most of what you have going for you and never give up. We call it 'stick-ability'. We are sure you can succeed and we hope we never see you here again. We shall send a copy of your file to Dr Quinn, and we will remind him that as you are now an adult, he must respect your wishes that details of your mental health must never be shared with your aunt or any of your family."*

Eventually, she had drifted over into sleep. At six o'clock she was awakened by her aunt's bedside alarm clock sounding insistently.

*Right then Vero. Up and at it. Give it another go.*

During a long shower, she shaved her legs and underarms.

*God, look at your hair. You need to do something about it!*

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With a few wobbles, it took six weeks to get into a settled daily regime: fruit and muesli with yogurt for breakfast, a boiled egg with tuna salad at lunchtime and grilled chicken or fish with a baked potato and coleslaw for her evening meal. She drank her tea black, without sugar limiting herself to three mugs a day.



# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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Once a week, on Fridays, she dressed as a version of her aunt and made trips to different Clydesdale Bank branches and withdrew amounts of £200 until the account was reduced to a few pounds after which she shredded the pass book and flushed it down the WC.

She opened a new bank account with the Bank of Scotland on Byres Road with a first deposit of £5,000 from the cash from the briefcase and a further account with the nearby Halifax Building Society where she deposited the rest of the briefcase money, adding weekly amounts from the money taken from her aunt's Clydesdale Bank passbook.

During her first weeks free of the incessant caustic scrutiny of her aunt, she learned to relax. The nightmares subsided and she began to sleep better. Day by day, the panic attacks became fewer, less intense. No longer did she crave escape through bingeing and self-abuse.

In the second week, without the need to rise to urinate, Vero began sleeping soundly from ten until six when the alarm sounded. Free to come and go without having to explain herself to anyone, she spent most days walking, exploring beyond her familiar West End trails. She discovered she liked rainy days best, when there were less people around, allowing her to become almost invisible. Her favourite discovery was Balloch Park on the shores of Loch Lomond, accessed by taking a direct train from Charing Cross. Over these weeks, inside her bubble of anonymity, she began to enjoy people watching, inventing fantasy stories in which they would smile at her and strike up a conversation.

Alone, on a damp, overcast August evening, she had carried her aunt's ashes in a simple cardboard box to a spot near the Stewart Memorial fountain in Kelvingrove Park. Making sure that no one was watching, she scattered the contents into a bed of flowers. Over a three-week period, she had sold the house contents including her video player, raising a total of £431. She had packed her aunt's clothes in black plastic bin bags, placing these outside various charity shops, always doing this late in the evening when the streets were empty.

In response to an advertisement in *The Guardian* calling for teachers in the Yorkshire area, Vero had telephoned the education department who sent her an application form by first class post including a 'priority' SAE.

In Scotland she would have been required to gain a post-graduate teaching diploma but this was not at that time a requirement in Yorkshire.

By return post, she was offered a job as a probationary teacher with a start date of the first Monday in September. The school where she would serve would be advised when she arrived in Leeds to complete the formal paperwork.



# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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## **A Fresh Start**

During the last week in August 1990, Vero MacGillivray arrived in Leeds by train. Armed with a street map, hefting a large rucksack and carrying two large suitcases, she walked to a small hotel in Saxton Gardens recommended by the helpful lady in the City Education Department. She had booked a single bedroom with en suite for a week until she got her bearings.

On her application form, she had requested a primary class but was sent to a secondary modern school in a deprived housing scheme and set the task of teaching English and Geography to large raucous classes of reluctant teenagers. From the outset, she was struggling. What she should have done, she realised later, was to have rejected the posting offered and negotiated a primary teaching post. Had she done so, her life may have taken a happier, less stressful path.

Although she hoped for romance, she was realistic. Without admitting it to herself, she was already setting out to live the life of a spinster, following the pattern set by her 'aunt'. She thought her best features were her thick, shiny red hair and shining, emerald green eyes but her face was too long and narrow ending in a weak receding chin. Her nose was long and thin and she wore her hair shoulder-length to hide her large ears. With small evenly spaced teeth and a slightly underslung jaw she was reminiscent of an angry terrier. This forbidding face was coupled with an odd-shaped body comprising a squat torso, size thirty-two-inch breasts enhanced by the purchase of a specially padded bra. Standing five-foot-two on feet that required size eight shoes, her strong, muscular legs supported a fat bum, testament to her on-going addiction to cakes and chocolate biscuits swished down with sweet, milky tea and a resurgence of weekend bingeing.

Starting out in Leeds as a junior teacher in one of the worst schools in the area, she soon learned she was not likely ever to become a good classroom teacher. Had she undertaken the teaching diploma in Glasgow, she would have discovered she hated being in front of a class. By the end of her first year in Leeds she had decided her escape route was to aim herself at a management level post, taking extra courses with the Open University in *Computing and Corporate Communications* and *Organisational Systems for Schools*. What she wanted most of all was to be out of the firing line, to escape from the hurtful names her students called her behind her back: 'the wee Jock', 'the ugly dumpling', and 'tweety-pie', this from her high soprano trill.

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# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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Five years on, by sheer hard grind, Vero eventually landed the post of Deputy Head of English and Modern Studies at a failing school in Pudsey to the west of Leeds where she settled and set herself the task of organising the department, lifting it out of its previous chaos, making it the best run in the school, gaining special mention by name in the Ofsted report.

The journey by public transport from her flat in Harehills to the north and west of Leeds was fraught, often taking over an hour and she set herself the task of learning to drive and get a small car. This in turn led to a loose friendship with Fenella Jones, a large busty motherly girl who like Vero had failed to attract a suitor. Both enjoyed walking and gradually their car sharing led to occasional meals and outings to walk in the countryside to the north of Leeds.

A few years later she was ready to move on and applied for a post at what had previously been *Beeston Comprehensive School*. Using money ring-fenced by the Department of Education, the crumbling underperforming school had been re-modelled into a sixth form college campus run by a Board of Governors. Located in a sprawling council estate on the southern perimeter of Leeds, the move was widely publicised as providing a fresh start for the area and was grandly renamed *The City Academy for Higher Achievement*, (soon short-handed to *The City Academy*).

In August 2003, aged thirty-eight, Vero moved to *The City Academy* as Deputy Head of Modern Studies. Her new boss was an older man called Tristram Fraken. Tall, slim, debonair and very well spoken, he drove a vintage Jaguar car of the same type and colour used by Morse in the TV series. From the way he dressed and carried himself, it was plain he was from a wealthy background. Facts about him were sparse. It was rumoured he had been privately educated which seemed to fit with his polished accent and self-assured manner. The Staff Room found it hard to understand why he had never married. In the absence of information, it was widely rumoured he must be a closet gay. The main conundrum however was why he was even at *The Academy* when he might have been more at home teaching in a fee-paying school.

Using her school laptop and access codes, Vero illegally visited the confidential staff section of the school records and noted Fraken's home address. There was no spouse. The emergency contact was a man called Ralph Gettingsby, listed as resident in Kettlewell which she knew from her rambles with Fenella was in the North Dales Country Park.

One day during the following summer recess, she made a trip by train to Harrogate and set out on foot to discover Fraken's grand villa was on one of the poshest streets in the town. Everything about the house looked neat and tidy. There was only the Jaguar in the driveway although there could have been a further vehicle in the double garage to the rear of the property. Over the course of the summer, she visited Harrogate on three

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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further occasions, deciding she liked it far better than Leeds. Each time she walked past the Fraken villa, only the Jaguar was on show. On one occasion there was a landscape gardening service in attendance. There was no evidence of anyone other than Tristram was in residence.

In her second year working closely with Tristram Fraken, Vero noticed he was making what might be construed as 'advances'. She was flattered. He was a good-looking man. As his right hand woman, she had worked diligently, always traipsing the extra mile for him as he dithered over hard choices, doing the research he should have done for himself, offering it up on a plate, pleased when he thanked her, thrilled when he leaned down to plant a wet peck on her cheek or squeeze and hold her hand in his for longer than necessary.

*He's just over-friendly, it's in his nature. He's a soft man but trainable. He'd make a good catch for some lucky woman. And still in good shape if a bit unkempt some days.*

Checking herself in her long bedroom mirror, she saw a girl who had lost her bloom, greys among the red. Soon after leaving Glasgow, she had given up on make-up and noticed for the first time her eyebrows had grown thick and bushy and her teeth were brown from drinking strong black coffee, a displacement addiction since giving up alcohol. Taking a positive approach, these faults were corrected by having an expensive make-over hairdo and facial and teeth-shining session at a dental practice specialising in cosmetic surgery.

When Tristram had first started his pecking and hand squeezes, she had dared to dream of sex but had never envisaged marriage. She certainly did not want children.

In her night-time fantasies, she considered going on the pill again as she had done during her university years, twenty-odd years earlier. In those days, the pills she had used had made her nipples tender to the touch and she had always worried about other more sinister side effects.

These thoughts brought back memories.

*Janine must have been about forty when I was born in 1965. In those days the pill wasn't widely available and in any case contraception was forbidden for Catholics. They must have been using the rhythm method. Or maybe it was a one-off, a night of passion.*

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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## *Whirlwind*

During the final term of her second year at *The City Academy* Tristram made his move.

Vero was exhausted by over-work, marking papers, tidying up reports, filling in for absentee teachers off with 'stress' although some had been spotted on TV at cricket matches. When her boss called her into his cubby hole office at the end of a long, fraught day in May 2005, she was on the edge of not coping and she thought he was about to scold her.

*Fuck it. If he starts in on me, I'll resign, tell him to stick it. This place is a disaster and he's a useless shit, the lazy bastard. There must be better schools who could fit me in. Someplace like Pickering or Wrelton or Thorton Dale, somewhere where people are nice to each other. Maybe I should try for a post as a Special Advisor.*

Fraken's cubby hole office doubled as the departmental bookstore and there was only one chair which he kindly offered her. Tristram smiled, stooped to one knee and took her hands in his, squeezing hard, lifting her fingers to his lips.

'Vero, dear girl, would you do me the honour of accepting me as your husband? I know there is an age gap, but I'm sure we can make a good team?'

Vero had been frazzled, dazzled.

'Oh Tristram, are you sure?'

'Very sure, dear girl. What do say?'

'Yes. Yes, please.'

'Excellent! We shall do the deed in the summer recess, shall we?'

He was at once on his feet, towering above her. With her head spinning with disbelief, she had strained on her tiptoes to offer her lips but he had turned away, holding her off by her shoulders while he stooped to kiss her forehead before saying, gravely:

'Vero, dear girl, you do understand there must be no children, don't you? We both have good careers and we don't want to spoil them, do we?'

Walking home to her new inner city flat near Leeds University, she mumbled under her breath:

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*God Vero. Sex without weans! SEX, Vero, real sex, with a man's prick inside of you in place of your dildos and vibrators. Oh, God, yes please!*

Now she could have romance and a career. And no babies! On impulse she caught a bus heading out to find an anonymous supermarket pharmacy where she purchased a six-month supply of contraceptive pills.

Their courtship, if that was what it had been, was an emotional and physical frustration. Apart from her porno video encounters with a succession of well-endowed men, her two previous sexual experiences had come in quick succession during the first term of her second year at *Glasgow University*.

*Both encounters had occurred a few months after her first spell in the closed ward at Gartnavel Royal Hospital after her second suicide attempt. These one-night stands had both taken place in the same damp and windy back close after a pub quiz night which her team had won to earn celebratory Vodka Cokes. With her tights, knickers and slacks at her ankles, standing on her tiptoes with her feet wide apart, wiggling, trying to help her suitor insert his wayward penis, her thighs and pubis had been sprayed with semen but she had never been penetrated. In the ensuing embarrassment, her Lotharios had quickly departed the scene of failure in silence, leaving her frustrated and feeling dirty, used. Neither boy had ever acknowledged her again, passing her in the corridors between lectures, their heads turned away as she had glanced hopefully towards them. Seen in the cold light of day, she realised that like her, they too were unattractive, one tall, painfully thin, his long, sad faced pock-marked with acne, the other short and very overweight with thin hair and piggy eyes and a ripe body odour.*

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During the short six weeks until they were to wed, Vero had done all the wedding planning. Formal invitations were sent to Mrs Sally Fraken (Tristram's mother) and to his sister Miss Lorna Fraken at *The Eyrie* in Scarborough and to a handful of other friends from Tristram's side. The only two who responded was Henry Mullins, the Fraken's family solicitor and Dr Ralph Gettingsby, a former school friend and golfing partner of old. Both apologised claiming prior commitments. None of the others replied, not even Mrs Fraken or her daughter, which Vero found hurtful. When she asked Tristram why, he shrugged his shoulders and said it was 'complicated'.

*So, Tristram, your family is fucked up too, is it? Welcome to the party, son.*

Repeatedly she had tried to engage him in the details for her big day but he claimed he was too busy with marking and planning for the new term to come. He had also proved

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coy, evading her bold suggestions of a pre-marital romp by reciting a litany of excuses until eventually blurting in an exasperated tone:

'No, Vero dear, we must keep our love special, for our honeymoon night. Please. Surely that's what every decent girl wants?'

During the final countdown to their wedding day, the mere idea of being in bed with Tristram caused her to thud and leap down below, releasing an unfamiliar flood of wetness. The image of what it would be like on her wedding night proved stupendously thrilling. For days before the big event, she had been continuously randy, wandering around her one-bedroomed flat, curtains closed, dressed in sexy underwear, stripping slowly to the crooning of Andy William's dulcet tones streamed from her music centre, enveloped in a cloud of heady perfume, studying her naked self in the long mirror, touching herself intimately, combing her fingers slowly through her heavy bush of dark, wiry pubic hair, convincing herself she was sexy, desirable, watching her reflection as she fingered herself lightly, holding off the climax until it was almost unbearable before reaching for her trusty Juan to finish the task.

After a shower, she would start again, repeating the process, this time lying naked on top of her duvet.

Later, drifting off to sleep, she told herself:

*He's a romantic. Could he even be a virgin, like me?*

*Vero, you must learn to trust him more.*

*He's clever and sensitive. After all, he got an Upper Second from Oxford University.*

During her morning Yoga workouts, her doubts returned. In the past she had reasoned that any man who might want her, would almost certainly be deeply flawed and therefore unacceptable. To counter this, she told herself:

*Vero, this is a partnership for life. You must learn to trust him more.*

But repeatedly the pangs of uncertainty welled up:

*Why would he want me? There are dating sites where he could easily find someone much better looking, more suited, someone from his own class. Why, out of the blue, did he make his offer of marriage? Does he not realise I would have happily settle for a sex buddy arrangement? Or is that what scares him, the potential insecurity, the gossip if we got caught out?*

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As their big day raced nearer she came down on the side of positivity and embarked on an internal monologue trying to convince herself she was doing the right thing.

*Tristram needs me. He needs my strength, my energy. He's shy, reserved. Romance in the workplace happens all the time. You deserve him. I hope he wants me physically, not just romantically. I hope he's a virgin and that he's hoping I'm one too. I hope he doesn't expect me to be 'accomplished'. I hope he will take the lead, make it happen for both of us. In bed with a real man, in his big house. A rich man with a smart car. It's like a fairy tale. And Christ, Vero, he's a right stoater. Wait till Judith sees him. Her eyes'll pop!*

Contrary to her entire life trajectory, she had what had seemed impossible, she was soon to become a happily married woman enjoying real sex at last.



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## *A Perfect Match?*

As neither Mullins nor Gettingsby attended, there had been just four of them at the registry office wedding ceremony. The witness forms were signed by Vero's eldest 'sister', Judith, now a forty-eight-year old Goth who called herself Juden. With her was Josh, a twenty-four-year-old PhD student, her latest fling. Juden, unlike Vero, was tall and curvy with huge breasts. She had never married and worked as an administrator in Student Services at Birmingham University. Juden's wedding day rig was a skin-tight outfit comprising a black leather shirt and trousers and clumpy boots. Her ears, nose, eyebrows, lips and tongue were pierced, her face and neck tattooed.

'Pleest ta meet ya. Josh Jackson. I'm a Gween Goff,' he lisped, staring at them with a defiant squint in his left eye.

Josh was exceptionally tall, skin and bone, wearing green skin-tight leathers, the prominent bulge at his groin emphasised by his slightly bandy legs. He wore a dyed green ponytail and beard, both pleated and trailing to waist level. His face was also decorated and pierced. He stood in knee-length suede boots which had once been green but were now scuffed and stained to a dull khaki.

Immediately after the formalities, this other perfect couple made their escape, Judith whispering in Vero's ear.

'Just off to the Travel Lodge tae shag the arse off Josh. He's got a cock on him like a Cobra. Good luck wi' Tristram. He's no' gay, is he?'

Vero knew since Juden did not keep touch with any of the MacGillivray clan, news of her marriage to a man nearly twelve years her senior would never reach Glasgow.

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Direct from the ceremony, they celebrated their simple wedding feast for two in a mediocre Italian restaurant which was part of a national chain. Tristram had requested this venue, a place he had visited many times, he said. It was crowded with tourists, attracted by the daily special which Tristram had enthused over:

*"They do amazing deep pan pizzas in the deal. If you order two 12" pizzas, fully loaded, they include a litre-sized carafe of cheeky Sicilian red and a bowl of olives, the black spicy ones."*

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Since her 'reformation' after her 'aunt's' death, Vero normally drank only mineral water or black tea or strong coffee. On the few occasions she had tried red wine, she had not enjoyed it, too harsh, not sweet enough for her palate. She sipped the wine warily then moved it to the side. The olives were soaked in a garlic chilli oil which she regurgitated into a napkin.

'So, not a red wine drinker then? Shall I finish yours?'

She smiled, nodding her assent.

*One glass of wine and he's slurring his words. Thank God he's not a drinker.*

The service was slow. When their pizzas arrived, he ordered a bottle of *Amarone* which he drank more slowly while talking drivel, recounting long ago holidays with both of his parents and sister, mainly to Spain, Portugal and once to The Maldives. He kept his focus on his glass, twirling it irritatingly and would not meet her eyes. She saw his behaviour for what it was, procrastination:

*God, he's as nervous as a kitten. I bet he's never done it before either.*

While he was at the toilet for the second time, to drain the bottle, she poured two glasses of wine which she downed in quick succession then moved to the till and paid with her credit card, declining the offer to include a tip.

'How was your meal?', their waiter chirruped, offering a fake smile.

'Fine, thanks,' she said quietly while in her head she said:

*Your house red is acidic and the Amarone did not impress. Your olives were inedible and our pizzas were cold and soggy. As you might have guessed, I shall not be rushing back. Do you have a comment form I might have? Thanks. No pen, thanks, I plan to mail it to your head office and claim a full refund.*

Rain was threatening. Tristram swept aside her suggestion they walk and after a wait, they took a mini cab to his house in Valley Road. It was just after five o'clock. Tristram poured himself a large Scotch and settled to watch cricket on TV.

Full of curiosity, Vero raced around her new home to get a feel for what it was like. She found the packages which she had ordered for delivery from John Lewis's and remade their wedding bed with fresh bedclothes, her wedding gift to herself. As she stripped the original bedclothes, she was surprised by how grubby and worn they were:

*God, these are disgusting. Straight for the bin.*

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She had bought king-sized items but the bed was a standard double. The result was untidy, spoiling the effect. From her weekend trolley case she unpacked her new sexy underwear. In a final act of romantic preparation, she closed the curtains against the dull overcast sky, lit a scented taper and switched on the bedside lamp. Pleased with the effect, she took her bundle of soiled bedclothes and headed for the utility room to dispose of it.

*He's not a house-proud type.*

*This place needs a good deep clean and redecorated, top to bottom.*

Just short of seven o'clock, rain stopped play. He reached for the changer:

'Tristram, what do you say, dearest, shall we have an early night?'

'There's a film coming on in a bit, I thought we could. ...'

'No, Tristram, I want to go up to bed. **Come on!**'

'Of course, my dear one. Yes, of course, so do I.'

The room was warm, scented, perfect. Still slightly tipsy from her glasses of *Amarone*, Vero waited, her body vibrating with anticipation while Tristram completed his ablutions. To encourage him, she arranged her sexy underwear decorously on top of the duvet to indicate she was naked. He seemed to take an age to piddle and brush his teeth. Fully aroused, she was squeezing and tugging at her nipples while stroking herself below, her eyes fixed on the door of the en suite bathroom, willing him to come to her, hoping he would appear naked with a large erection on display, an image she had dreamed of down through her lonely years of self-pleasuring to pornographic videos. To get a good view of this longed-for moment, she had deliberately switched the overhead light back on again, after he had closed the bathroom door.

After what seemed like an endless wait, the bathroom door cracked open a little. After a slight pause, Tristram's hand reached out and switched off the overhead light. Her heart sank. She saw he was wearing crumpled light blue pyjamas, stained around the crotch. He slipped out and scuttled over to switch off the bedside light, plunging them into the dim eeriness provided by the dull grey which edged the curtains.

Under the duvet, she snuggled up to him, pressing her breasts against him, sliding her hand down, finding the gap in his pyjama bottoms, her mind whirling with years of pent up expectation and desire. To her horror, he was limp, shrivelled and sticky with spent semen. Unable to repress her dismay she let her guard slip, hearing herself mimic Martha's Glasgow twang:

'Aw fur fuck's sake, naw! Ye've no gone and wanked yersel aff, huv ye?'

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Tristram winced, tensed rigid, shoving her hand violently to one side, sobbed and rolled to face away, curled in a foetal position, putting her on the apologetic defensive.

After much persuasion, and many 'Sorry, honey bun' whispers and kisses to his nape and shoulder, she managed to get him turn again onto his back. Another disappointment was his body odour and the taste of whisky and garlic bread from his breath.

When he 'failed to rise' under her inexperienced hand, at first gentle then more vigorous, she blamed herself. She had goosed him. In the end, after a deal of mumbling and fumbling and now desperate, Vero reached a compromise with herself and took hold of his hand and guided it between her thighs. With firm control and coaching, she managed to achieve a near orgasm, an event which she bigged up with loud fake groans and effusive thanks designed to encourage him for the next time. Maybe after a sleep, his testosterone levels would rise and with them his libido, she thought.

A little later, pretending to be asleep, her eyes wet with tears, she had suffered the indignity of witnessing him masturbating to a noisy conclusion, her heart stabbed by his final whisper:

*Thank you, dear, dear Carol. That was wonderful, as always.*

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Over the nights which followed their wedding night experience, frustrated and demeaned, she lay beside him faking sleep as he relieved himself again to the memory of his 'dear, dear Carol'.

As the weeks went by, she noted he often gave up on his attempted self-pleasuring and turned away to sleep soundly, creating an opportunity for her to roll onto her back, spread her thighs, retrieve Juan from his hiding place and bring herself to completion slowly and gently.

This achieved, she would then sit up, switch on her reading light and delve into her book, re-assuring herself:

*Listen, Vero, nothing's perfect. It is what it is, right? It's probably the same story in dozens of other marriages. Who knows what goes on behind closed doors, eh? And you've still got this nice big house and he lets you drive his fancy car. He hasn't even asked about your flat in Leeds and it's a good wee earner, paying for the mortgage and upkeep. You buy the food shopping and he pays everything else. Really and truly, it's not that bad, is it?*

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For the remainder of the summer recess she set her mind to cleaning and tidying the house. Tristram did not seem interested, absenting himself to play Bridge at any opportunity. He was a member of several clubs, he advised.

During a deep spring-cleaning session, she found an album of wedding photographs. From this she learned 'Carol' had been his previous wife, a marriage he had failed to reveal. When challenged about the find, he dismissed her enquiry:

*"All in the distant past, my dear, dear Vero, from a very painful past life I cannot bear to discuss. Please, let me have that and I will dispose of it as I should have done years ago."*

Two days later she rediscovered the album wrapped in his favourite dressing gown, concealed by a small pile of old vinyl LPs by Dusty Springfield, his favourite singer.

She studied the album again, more closely. Carol was a bottle-blond with dark roots quite evident with a hard face but a stunning page three body. In another shot taken outside the registry office, Carol stood by the side of a much younger Tristram. She was clad in a white silk mini-skirt sheath which showed off her long, slim legs and large breasts. The whole effect was spoiled by the cigarette held cupped in her right hand. Seen together, Carol looked older by about five years, perhaps more.

Faced with this evidence and under great pressure from Vero, Tristram explained, very reluctantly, that Carol had divorced him after six months.

*"Carol always wanted children even though she knew I wasn't all that keen. Lots of other reasons, really. Anyway, I suppose it was because she was such a very loving person, very loving. We had been trying for ages, even before we married. When it didn't happen, I had tests. It turns out I have a low sperm count. 'Low and slow' was how they described it. Carol demanded a divorce and well, that was that, really. All in the past. Look, I'm sorry. I was planning to get rid of those photos but well, you know how it is with old memories. They are so very hard to relinquish, don't you agree?"*

This news of his low sperm count came as a relief. Since she had stopped her contraceptive pills, she had been worried about becoming pregnant by 'contamination' sharing a bed with him.

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Working her way back along the timeline of her marriage, she eventually admitted to herself that she had been duped. She saw now from her first weeks at *The City Academy*,

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she, Vero MacGillivray, had been carrying Tristram Fraken, accepting every little extra duty, unable to resist his charm and flattery. He had only married her to make sure she did not leave for a promoted post elsewhere or usurp him, steal his job.

In the end she verbalised her compromise to herself, thereby making it seem more real, more acceptable:

*If we concentrate on mutual masturbation, he might be trainable and get me to come properly every time, not just nearly, by accident.*

It was a reasonable bargain, she believed, and resolved to give her marriage another try. A further month of increasingly infrequent fumbling under the duvet eventually led to a truce. Feigning exhaustion and pretending to fall asleep, Vero had waited for him to jerk off but it seemed Tristram had settled for abstinence. When he started to snore, if she was in the mood, she turned onto her back and enjoyed another encounter with Juan.

Her dream of a romantic, sex-filled, child-free marriage was over less than eighteen months after their wedding day.

As their second wedding anniversary approached, Tristram dropped his bombshell.

'Vero dear, I'm afraid I have bad news. Shall we have a cup of tea in the conservatory, please? If you have any of your nice coconut snowballs, that would be lovely.'

'Is it the roof, Tristram? Those slates which fell in March have cracked the plastic sheeting in the Conservatory. I did tell you at the time.'

'Yes, something like that. I'll turn up the heating, shall I?'

'But it's June, Tristram. It's summer, right?'

'Yes, Vero dear. It's just that I'm a bit shivery.'

'So, it's a wee cold coming on, is that it, honey bun?'

'Yes, something like that. Why not bring a hot Lemsip as well, please?'

'A Lemsip Max or just the ordinary?'

'A Max please, maybe two in the one glass, please.'

'So, it's another bloody cold, is it? I think I'll move to the spare bedroom. The last bloody thing I need is an end-of-term cold to spoil my summer break. Have you thought yet where we might go? How about Ireland. A car tour, test the new Jag out? I quite fancy exploring the south west coast.'

'Mmm. Perhaps.'

Ten minutes later they were settled in the Conservatory facing each other over the coffee table. It was late afternoon and the sun was still visible over the tops of the houses on the ridge behind them.



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'Would you look at that, Tristram. Look, those bloody snails are everywhere, climbing up the walls. Look, they're even on the bloody roof. Sometimes I feel as if they know what they're doing. Do you know, next door, what's her face, the new one, she told me she got her husband to collect hers in two big tubs. Hundreds and hundreds of them. He took them in the back of their Range Rover and dumped them out in the country, miles away and then, guess what?'

'Go on, astound me.'

'That next night, when they were coming back late from a wee dinner party, there they were sliding back down the pavement like a Legion of Roman soldiers, heading past ours for her garden. Homing bloody snails, they are. Like lost sheep, trotting back to their own wee patch to start munching again.'

'How amazing. So many mixed metaphors. I don't suppose they are edible. If so, there could be money in it for you, yes?'

'Aye, right. So, are you feeling any better, honey bun?'

'Yes, a little, thanks, my dear. Now, please don't worry. Everything will work out fine. Last month, during Whit Week, when you went off to that antiques fair in Preston, I went for further tests at the hospital. It turns out I have MS, Multiple Sclerosis. But it's at the early stages, and they're very hopeful that it can be 'managed'.'

'Oh, Tristram, you poor, poor wee lamb. Oh, honey bun, I'm so sorry for you. You don't deserve that. You should have said. I would have come with you. I only went to that Preston thing for a wee day out. I was hoping to get another Wally Dug to keep Bramble company.'

'Bramble?'

'Yes, the wee wally dug I got last month in the car boot sale in Pickering, remember?'

'No, sorry, I don't recall that purchase.'

'So, honey bun, how long has this problem been going on? Tell me, what symptoms do you have. I don't know a thing about M.S., nothing.'

'Look, if you don't mind, Vero. I don't really want to go into details except, well, what you need to know is I have bowel and bladder problems. It's an urgency thing so I'll have to wear incontinence pants from now on. Horrible. It seems my eyesight has deteriorated badly too. Dr Suliman at the health centre was very apologetic but he's had to write to the DVLA to suspend my driving licence, *pro tempore*. Will you be OK driving the new Jag?'

'Is that why you changed to an automatic?'

'Well, no, not really. They all have automatic boxes on that model, I think. Or perhaps it was a subliminal decision, I don't really know. Now, regarding sleeping arrangements. Perhaps it would be best if I moved downstairs to the Dining Room. We could re-organise it as a bedroom and perhaps knock through into the big cupboard and create a wet room, you know, get ahead of the game, as they say?'

'Tristram, really, tell me the truth, please, when did all this M.S. thing start?'

'Oh, I don't really know. A few months ago? I seemed to be having trouble with my waterworks about then. Anyway, it's all online. I suggest you look up all the gory details



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on your laptop, why don't you? These are delicious buns, thanks. You really are a superb baker. Now, if you don't mind, dear, I'll go for a lie down for an hour, shall I? I'll use the spare room until we get the dining room re-organised, shall I? We hardly ever use that room anyway, do we? You'll never miss it, will you?

'What about the afternoon concert. It's Chopin, your favourite.'

'You go alone, why don't you?'

'No, thanks very much. They're e-tickets, I'll phone the Box Office, tell them. They should be able to sell them and we'll get a refund to your card.'

'Ah, that card has been cancelled. Leave it to me, I'll speak to the Box Office, shall I?'

'Right then Tristram, I think I'll go and murder a few more snails. Imagine anyone re-homing snails to avoid killing them? Aye, right, I'll re-home ours but only to Hell!'

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Over the months which followed, whenever Vero probed gently, Tristram avoided answering most of her questions. The symptoms had come on suddenly, he claimed repeatedly. Later, during a hospital check-up, Vero had overheard a discussion with a paramedic, learning he had been an MS patient for four years. Vero read everything she could find online and knew for certain she had been snared, duped. Tristram Fraken had chosen her as a soft mark.

In her new life, with Tristram settled for the night downstairs and with no feeling of guilt, she reverted to her premarital self. When she was in the mood, she locked her bedroom door, turned the heating to full, slipped into her sexy underwear, lit a scented taper, applied perfume under her arms and to her bush and entered her world of fantasy sex.

Using wireless headphones with the speakers muted on her new large screen TV, Vero tuned to the pay for view channels and used her subscription password. With the bedroom lights switched off and her heavy curtains closed to ensure privacy, she retrieved her lockbox from under the bed. After a few stiff G&Ts, relaxed and in the zone, she deployed her selection of sex toys, dildos, vibrators and stimulating gels, items she had purchased online, using them to enjoy long, slow sex with well-endowed grunting and moaning strangers for company, rewinding and fast-forwarding to find her favourite scenes to build the tension until she was ready to climax in tandem with the actors.

It was not the sex she had dreamed of but it was better than nothing.

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## *Trapped by Duty*

During the first year after his revelation, Tristram declined quite rapidly, forcing early retirement on health grounds. Then, free of the stress of work, as if by magic, he enjoyed a period of remission, a plateau during which he was able to move reasonably freely with the aid of a Zimmer and ride-on buggy, operating just above the threshold which would have qualified him for home care, a burden which fell entirely on Vero. Although she knew she could have afforded paid help, she was wary of inviting strangers into her home. However, the strain and energy required began to take its toll, pulling her down. She had to compromise, and she needed time to herself, time to relax. Alcohol became a regular feature of her late-night TV watching and with this, chocolates and binge eating.

Gradually, she retreated from her previous high standard of cleaning and redecoration and the house declined, at least internally. However, in keeping with the other houses in her street, she had the roof re-slatted and replacement windows installed, an expensive design approved by the local planners. It proved difficult to get Tristram to agree to these works but eventually she won her case. As a quid pro quo, she paid for a new kitchen, designed and installed by a contractor recommended by IKEA, choosing from their premier range.

Externally the property looked spick and span. Internally, apart from the kitchen, it was becoming dingy, depressing with the faint odour of urine and excrement ever-present.

To fill his spare time, Tristram took up Bridge again, an activity which soon became a passion. This added to her burden as he needed transport to Bridge tournaments, often three times a week and on Saturday mornings to a gentleman only club located in a large sinister looking house quite near *The City Academy*. The fancy Jag was remaindered to the garage and she bought a Berlingo van to accommodate his wheelchair.

During the day, while she was out at work, he played Bridge and Chess online, he said. Tristram's dexterity was now much reduced and to conserve his energy he used voice-control software to control the cursor. Housework and food preparation were beyond his capabilities, he claimed, although he did manage to zap up food she left prepared for him and to dispense coffee for himself from a Thermos press-top dispenser. If he had an 'outage', he would telephone her and she would race back home to sort the problem.

Over those long years at *The City Academy*, Vero lost ground and under three new departmental heads her status diminished. These replacements came full of new ideas and great plans but soon moved on, unable to cope with the stress caused by their

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aggressive and disruptive near-adult students. On each occasion when the post of Head of English and Modern Studies was advertised, Vero's applications were considered by the Governors but she was never called for interview. The fourth incumbent, a man of twenty-nine with little practical experience failed to return after the Christmas break and, as an emergency measure Vero was asked to 'act up' *pro temp*. At last, she now had the chance to show the Governors how well she could do the job.

By Easter, just as she was getting to grips with a major overhaul of the timetabling arrangements, Tristram declined rapidly and had to be admitted to hospital for a few weeks. On his discharge, he was unable to walk, confined entirely to a wheelchair. She had to fight the local authority system to get help. During this hiatus, she was forced to take unauthorised compassionate leave.

Eventually, after a four-month battle with bureaucracy, a three-person 24/7 care team was appointed and lifting apparatus was installed to assist with toileting, bathing and bedding him. The house began to look and feel like a war zone. In the evenings, exhausted, she turned to self-medication, drinking up to half a bottle of gin each night to block out what was happening down below as the carers came and went, people who used her Conservatory as a smokers' cabin despite her vociferous protests and many emails to the authorities who ignored her.

As their sixth wedding anniversary approached, Tristram suffered another relapse and his needs intensified. Ralph Gettingsby, Tristram's best friend from his past who had been an occasional visitor during these years, coming always when she was out at work or shopping, came to her rescue. 'Mr Gettingsby' was now a Consultant in Geriatric Medicine and, as Tristram was now fifty-nine, this allowed Ralph to bend the rules. He found Tristram a comfortable single room in one of his wards where he could be visited at any time. In this new situation Tristram stabilised but was now on the verge of tetraplegia. Mostly he dozed but when he rallied, he spent his time watching rolling news on TV through near sightless eyes.

Vero, now free of her care burden, returned to *The City Academy* full-time but her new head had re-organised everything yet again. In her absence, the role of Deputy Head had been abolished, her duties allocated to three 'Assistant Heads'. The intention was to try to reduce stress on any one individual teacher. Although her salary was 'preserved' she was back in the classrooms, failing to control noisy, unruly and sometimes violent adolescents. Exhausted and dispirited, she struggled on through the autumn visiting Tristram every evening on her way home before returning to an empty house in Valley Road.

In hospital, Tristram was clearly entering his final phase, losing his battle with M.S. and a few weeks after his sixtieth birthday, he suffered a massive seizure which caused his

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heart to stop. The *Do Not Resuscitate* protocol which Vero had been asked to endorse took effect and he slipped away quickly, without pain. Because of the backlog at the local crematorium she was 'queued' to get a slot for his cremation.

On the run up to Christmas 2010, Vero wrote to the Governors and asked for six months compassionate leave. After a three-week delay, this was granted on condition she agree to relinquish her Deputy Head status but with her pension rights preserved.

Reluctantly, she agreed, already looking ahead to a future which did not involve *The Academy*. With the money from the sale of Valley Road, she would be able to make a new life, somewhere nice.

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## *Fennella*

At this stage Vero was unsure where she might move to. In the back of her mind, she was considering a bold move back to the West of Scotland, to the Isle of Bute where property was less expensive. In this scenario, she might try for a part-time post teaching English to Syrian refugees. She had seen news reports of them on the TV and thought they looked like nice, friendly people, eager to learn.

It was then she remembered Fenella, a friend who had worked in the History Department of her previous school, before Vero had moved on to *The City Academy*. Fenella's story was one of romance in later life. When she seized her perfect catch, she was fifty-one.

The summer before Vero moved to *The City Academy*, Fenella had been on a walking holiday when she met a man called Ryan. He was ten years her junior, a computer software developer whose mother had died on Christmas Eve the previous year. According to Fenella, Ryan was a shy, reclusive man. Until their encounter, Fenella had been in the same mould. Immediately on her return from the holiday, Fenella had confided to Vero that Ryan had been persuaded by his sister-in-law to join the walking holiday primarily to find a partner but Fenella realised what he really wanted was a replacement mother, an older woman to cater for his needs.

After the holiday, Fenella had seized the initiative, making frequent trips to the outskirts of Carlisle to spend time with her new-found love. In addition, immediately after the summer break, Fenella had joined *Slimmer's World*, taking up serious power walking with a sub-group of her new friends. During the autumn she set about shedding several stones of blubber, taking more care about her hair, make-up and appearance and, as her weight dropped, splashing out on a new wardrobe.

The week before the Christmas break, Fenella confided in Vero she was about to call in sick and abscond to Carlisle to stay with Ryan to help him cope with the anniversary of his mother's death. When the new term resumed in January, Fenella did not return. Instead, she wrote to the local authority, resigning and advising she was no longer Ms Fenella Jones but Mrs Fenella Nesbit, requesting that her pension and severance papers be sent to her new address in Carlisle.

Vero found Fenella online and sent an email to try to find out how the partnership had panned out. Minutes after sending the email, Vero received a telephone call.

'Hello, Vero Fraken. Who is calling, please?'

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Vero could detect background noise which sounded like puppies barking and a washing machine on its final high spin as Fenella launched into her soliloquy:

*"So, Vero you got your man too! Do you know, it was as if he was expecting me, Ryan. On that first day, when I boarded the holiday minibus in Leeds, we were heading for Ireland, for the walking holiday. When he moved his rucksack to make a space for me and smiled his goofy grin, I knew instantly he was the one for me. OK, neither of us are film star material but he is very clean and tidy about his person which, as you will remember, was always one of my top requirements. I cannot abide smelly men. God, Vero, how do you put up with the stench from some of those kids. Disgusting. Of course, the fact he has such a nice house, Ryan, had nothing to do with it, **ha-ha!** Oh Vero, it has such a lovely big garden with sheep munching just over the fence. You would love it, you really would. Do you remember we used to dream about owning a home in the country? Of course, back then he only had a nearly new BMW X3, Ryan, and a very friendly Labradoodle called Mitzi. She passed on, the old dear and now we have a Rottweiler called Daisy, or Dopey Daisy, **ha-ha!** But she's a champion and her pups sell like hotcakes. So, last month we've upgraded to a nearly new Audi Q7, top of the range with leather seats and all the bells and whistles. Of course, it's strictly Ryan's car as I have the van, for the dogs. I won't try to make you jealous by telling you what he earns, Ryan. Being a schoolteacher is a mug's game, Vero. Actually, he said that right off, Ryan, on the walking holiday, almost the first words I managed to get out of him. Although he's quiet, bless him, he has very definite views, our Ryan. 'Software' is where the money is, he says. Let's put it this way, he insists I don't work, Ryan. He says it would make no sense, just throw more tax at the chancellor to squander on illegal immigrants and basket cases. Vero, can you imagine how nice it is not to have to teach anymore? No drudge, no horrible snotty-nosed, obnoxious adolescents who think they are God's gift because they have four or five GCEs. But where have you been, Vero. You're not even on Facebook. So, what have you been up to? Tell all!"*

Vero had tried to explain about Tristram, just the basics, omitting the gory details but before she had finished, Fenella was off again, talking over her as she always did:

*"Of course, I've had to develop my own interests. He's delightful but a bit set in his ways, Ryan. As you know, Vero, like you I've always loved dogs. So, I have a hobby business, strictly cash of course, working in an informal arrangement with my sister-in-law Elma Nesbit. She has thirty-odd dogs on her books and we both have our own vans. Two sessions on weekdays, one at weekends. Keeps me fit too. I'm down to a loose size fourteen again after all these years bulging out of an eighteen. He's a bit of a loner, Ryan, but of course I knew that from the outset. Although he works from home over the Internet, he's an outdoor man, really, so at every opportunity during the summer he's out trout-fishing, Ryan. In the winter he's after grayling and salmon*



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*although salmon are almost non-existent nowadays, he says. He ties all his own flies and has a website, Ryan, selling them to other people. But his main thing in winter is his model railway. It's up in the attic now, at last, thank God. I had to plead with him for months but when Daisy's puppies started eating his bits, he saw sense, Ryan. He's always breaking it down and rebuilding, making videos he posts on You Tube. There's some sort of league for these videos and he's almost always top gun, he tells me. Ryan's brother Ken, Elma's husband, is a Quantity Surveyor who travels all over the country. He has to stay away overnights most weeks, Ken. So, guess what? I'm deputy dog helping Elma. She has three kids, Jamie, whose nine, Emily whose seven and Olivia whose five. Boy o boy are they a handful, y'know, swimming, karate, football, ballet, drama group and Spanish lessons. You should sign up to Facebook, see their antics on my page. Oops, that's my Alexa alarm pinging. **Alexa, stop!** Got to go, Vero, time to collect the girls from junior choir. Do keep in touch, my lovey. Have you thought of internet dating? It's the way to do it nowadays, everyone says. I was just so lucky to find my man before someone else snapped him up, Ryan. It was lovely to get all your news, Vero. Bye-Bye."*

Sitting alone in her dingy house on the outskirts of Harrogate with the rain beating against the windows, Vero tried to imagine what it would be like to live a full-on life like Fenella's. She quickly concluded the very last thing she wanted was to fill her life with frantic activity while being jerked from pillar to post and having to pretend it was what she had always dreamed of, expected to post everything minute by minute on Facebook, obliged to respond in kind to the postings from others and their trivial 'amazing happenings'. Living on the Isle of Bute began to appeal again. It would be quiet and peaceful there and perhaps, when she was settled, she might get a dog. Or maybe two dogs, a Border Terrier she would call Bramble and a Westie to be called Rowan.



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## *Escape to the Country?*

In early January, a month after Tristram's death, Vero wrote politely to the Governors of *The Academy* regarding his pension. Their reply was, as she had come to expect, disappointing. They obfuscated, saying there were complications, irregularities in his contributions which might take several months to sort out. Reluctantly, wary of what it might cost her in fees, she sought the help of Tristram's family solicitor, a man called Henry Mullins. She knew from Tristram that as a much younger man just starting out, Mullins had bought out Michael Fraken's practice on an informal loan basis, paid off over a five-year period. Vero checked online and saw Mullins had an office in Scarborough where he had started out, one in Harrogate and another in Leeds, his head office.

To his credit, Mullins acted swiftly and contacted Vero's local MP, a man he claimed to know well and who was a fellow committee member at *Rudding Park Golf Course*, near Harrogate. Whatever was said by whatever party, the move worked. A week after invoking Mullin's help, amid a flurry of paperwork, Tristram's pension kicked in, backdated to his death, the monthly amounts to be paid to Vero's own bank to her personal account which she had never relinquished.

Further online research revealed that Mullins was generally considered to be a 'good mogul' with fingers in every pie but with a high reputation for do-gooding. Social media revealed Mullins had once been married, divorced and was now in a long-term relationship with a man called Robin Allardyce, a property developer active in the Leeds and Harrogate office refurbishment market.

With Tristram's pension arrangements finalised, Vero studied her personal financial planning spreadsheet then made her big decision. It would be her forty-ninth birthday in March. Free of the worry and drudge of caring and focussing on the prospect of freedom, she was beginning to feel more like her pre-Tristram self. Entering this real information alongside her guesstimates, she began more seriously to plot her future. Her first move would be to sell her small flat in Leeds which she had been renting out since they married. She expected this to net around £40,000, maybe a tad more. With this in the bag, she would sell Tristram's large Victorian villa house in Valley Road. Based on her research, she might expect around £700,000 net.

After a few more stiff gins, she wrote again to the Governors, this time to tender her resignation by email. The following day they 'accepted in principle' by email making her an offer which they emphasised was time-limited, for immediate acceptance and that a courier was in transit with the necessary papers. The enhanced package included six

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months' pay in lieu of notice and a proposal to pay her consolidated pension from her fiftieth birthday, should she wish to invoke this clause.

The courier turned out to be a supercilious thirty-something foppish man called Gary Belling. She knew him by name only: a lawyer seconded from the local authority part-time to act as the Secretary to the Board of *The City Academy*. She excused herself, leaving him in the kitchen while she crunched the figures. If she were to outlive her mother who had died aged seventy-four, she might need some form of income until her state pension kicked in at sixty-seven. Reluctantly, Vero signed both copies which Belling witnessed with a smirk, passing one copy to her for her records, taking his aroma cloud of spicy aftershave with him.

Twenty-three hours after she had sent in her request, the deal was done and she was a free agent.

*Christ, Vero, you got out at last! No going back now.*

Later that evening, overcome with loneliness, she medicated by drinking nearly a full bottle of gin. On the edge of another alcoholic coma, she turned out her bedside light, curled into a tight ball and succumbed to tears for the first time since her Aunt Janine had died.

By the next afternoon she was recovered sufficiently well enough to re-run the figures making an allowance of £10,000 a year from some form of part-time work. After a few sobering up gins, she began to feel positive again.

*C'mon Vero, you could make it work if you get yourself a less stressful job, maybe a classroom assistant in a primary school in a nice posh area or even home tutoring for slow readers. You were never cut out for secondary teaching, you know that.*

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The day after Tristram Poole Fraken's cremation, she rose late, very hungover. For brunch she ate an M&S microwaved Chicken Korma and drank two strong mugs of black coffee. After the coffee, she drank two litres of sparkling water. With the Conservatory heating turned up to maximum and the blinds down, she arranged two chairs facing each other and pulled a travel blanket over her, intending to sleep off the remains of her hangover, trying to think positive thoughts to fend off the dreadful feeling of aloneness she had experienced on entering the dingy house after the cremation. Feeling woozy, she was soon stuck again in a familiar daydream in which she was endlessly running towards a train about to pull away from the platform, a train she already knew she would miss.

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In the distance a telephone was ringing. She fumbled into her dressing gown pocket and found her mobile, to check the time, five o'clock in the evening. The ringing was from the house phone in the entrance hallway. She decided to let the answering machine take the call but when she heard Henry Mullins' voice she threw off the blanket and raced through to grab the DECT handset:

'Sorry, Mr Mullins, I was at the other end of the house.'

She moved back to the Conservatory, lay back down and pulled the blanket over her, pressing the phone to her left ear, putting a finger in her right ear to try to shut out the drumming of rain on the plastic roof. Through bleary eyes she saw drips falling into an already large pool of water in the far corner.

'Hello Veronique. Please, call me Henry. How are you today?'

'Fine, I suppose. You did well with the eulogy, thanks. I learned a lot about Tristram I didn't know. And please, call me Vero.'

'Yes. Yes. Pity about the low attendance. Look, Vero, there's no other way to put this. Tristram re-mortgaged the house not once but twice. He sold off seventy-eight percent of his equity. When he died, all he had left was a few hundred in his bank account at the Yorkshire Bank and £23,000 remaining from a corporate bond he was running down in tranches of £500, sometimes twice a month. I take it you were unaware of his gambling. Poker, I'm afraid. At university he was quite sharp, making money on average but later it became an obsession. He did have treatment for it but, well, sorry. Anyway, let's look on the bright side, shall we?'

'The *bright side*? For Christ's sake, Henry, I've just tendered my bloody resignation from *The City Academy* on the strength of the money from this place. Jesus wept!'

'Well, anyway, I've struck a deal with the re-mortgage company, explained the circumstances, you know, 'long debilitating illness, sad death, frail widow in shock', the whole nine yards. I think we might have about six months maximum before they start proceedings to oust you and sell Valley Road off to get their money out. Unless, that is, you are in funds and wish to settle the amounts due?'

The drips from the plastic roof had now become a miniature waterfall.

*Those Saturday mornings at that sleazy house while I was doing the weekly shop.*

'Right, Vero, I'll take your silence as a 'no', shall I? Look, I'm really sorry, I thought I was doing the right thing. I know this must be unpleasant news but the situation must be faced, yes?'

'Yes, Henry but if you'd only told me earlier. Christ almighty, man!'

'Yes, yes, of course. That's the spirit. I always took you for a fighter but if they send any letters, pass them on to me and I'll head them off. Robin does a fair bit of business

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with them and he says they won't want to attract any negative publicity, especially as the Valley Road property is such high profile.'

Under her breath Vero grunted: *Bastards!*

'May I go straight to the bottom line?'

Vero was looking at the pool of water in the corner, her mind trying to grasp how this could have happened.

'I'll take that as a yes, shall I? After all, it's best to face bad news head on, yes?'

'OK, go on.'

'Now, I estimate, first stab only, that your share of Tristram's estate to be worth just shy of £130,000, yes?'

'C'mon, you must be joking!'

'I know, I know, not what you might have been expecting. So terribly, terribly disappointing for you. I've been agonising over how to break the news. As joint-executors, Ralph and I thought it best not to over-burden you earlier but now our dear Tristram is at peace we need to move on, yes? Of course, as his friend I will not charge fees but there will be unavoidable expenses. Naturally, I've allowed for those.'

Vero's head was pounding. She stood up, wobbled, caught a glimpse of her reflection in the conservatory glazing and saw a frightened woman she hardly recognised.

'Henry, where did he get the money to re-roof the house and install new double glazing?'

'Funded by a further release of capital from the re-mortgage company, to protect their investment. I take it Tristram was coy about what he was up to?'

'Too bloody right!'

'Anyway, pressing on, I understand they also did a thorough safety check of the electrical, heating and plumbing systems after you installed the new kitchen. You'll be pleased to hear everything was satisfactory. Your installer did a good job, they said. If you send me your IKEA invoices, I should be able to get something off the rent over the next few months until you are settled, re-located. I think from what you said yesterday you are already planning a move, yes? Actually, I have to confess during our little chat I was finding you hard to make out, sorry. I could tell you were under the weather, that's a dreadful cold you have. Are you feeling better today? Your voice still sounds a bit gravelly.'

Vero had been continuously inebriated for days on end and had no recollection of their 'little chat' at the funeral service.

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'Aye, I'm OK, thanks for asking. Look, the invoices, I've got copies on my iPad. I could send you the images by email.'

'Sorry, I'll need the originals. Will I pop in? I'm quite nearby, in the car, heading for our Harrogate office.'

'**NO!** Sorry. Sorry. No, Henry, I don't want to smite you. In fact, I'm indisposed just now. A tummy thing has just started. I'll post them to you later today, if the rain goes off. Tomorrow at the latest. Excuse me, nature calls.'

She snapped off the phone and threw it across the room at the puddle where it smashed to smithereens. With her eyes closed she rose, turned and looked towards a framed photograph of them on the steps of the registry office, a present from Juden sent on their first wedding anniversary.

In a low growl, she said: 'Tristram, you fuckin', fuckin' arsehole! Gambling! Why did I not spot it? Christ, Vero what did you expect? A life of luxury? Aye right! That only happens in chick flicks.'

She headed for the kitchen and opened a fresh bottle of Gin and poured a large one, tintured it with tonic and added a slice of frozen lemon.

Two hours later, the bottle empty, she slipped over into another alcoholic coma.

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## Catharsis

The next morning, after a long hot shower followed by two minutes enduring a cold overhead drench, Vero stood in front of her full-length bedroom mirror, shrugged out of her dressing gown and stood naked to examine herself critically:

*Well, Vero, some mess you've let yourself get into. Look at your hair. Fuck it, hen, your beginning to look like Mammy Martha, God rest her soul. But face it, you're not that bad off are you? What would she not have given to be in your position. But look at you, with a bum on you like a fucking elephant and a belly like your six months up the bun. Christ, hen, look at your legs! You're as hairy as a baboon. **C'mon, Vero, get a fucking grip!***

The rest of the day was spent clearing the house of loose debris, piling it outside the Kitchen door. Before turning in, she went online and ordered a skip paying a premium for a delivery by eight o'clock next morning.

Systematically she cleared everything relating to Tristram, all his clothing, medications, books, tapes, videos; everything went in the skip. She wanted rid of every part of him. Next, she dumped her porno videos, her dildo box which she left locked, the bottles of Gin and Vodka, tins of mixers, bottles of wine, boxes of chocolates and shop-bought biscuits. Everything which had contaminated her life during her failed marriage.

She cleared out all the junk food from the fridge into the skip then cleaned it properly for the first time in years. Her years of living like a slob were over. Phase one completed, she called the skip hire firm and they agreed to pick it up before dark.

She ate a banana, drank a glass of water then spent two hours deep cleaning the Kitchen followed by both bathrooms and the downstairs loo.

She locked the door on Tristram's bedroom. The former Dining Room was a wreck with its ugly inserted modular bathroom, piping and drains, lifting apparatus and special bed. She would deal with this disaster area later, when she was ready to face it.

During the rest of the day she worked steadily through the other rooms, cleaning them. As she did so, she realised she was probably wasting her time. Internally the whole house was a mess, worn out. She would be glad to be away from it but she did not want anyone to think she was a lazy, slovenly housewife. If it could not be nice, at least it could be clean, spick and span.



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*But would that be enough? The re-mortgage people probably have all sorts of clauses to protect their investment, put everything on the borrower. If the house price get forced down because of the state of repair internally, they'll take it from my share. Bastards.*

Munching an apple, she went out for a long walk. Four hours later, with a plan firmed up in her mind, Vero visited an all-night supermarket for stopgap supplies. For the first time since she had stood on her tiptoes to proffer a kiss to Tristram in his cubby hole office, she slept deeply and wakened late, fully rested, feeling positive.

Showered, with her legs shaved and her hair in a ponytail she sipped a large glass of V8 vegetable juice and ate a bowl of raspberries and mango slices with low fat yogurt.

Online, she found a sports megastore where she ordered the clothes and equipment she needed and paid extra for two-hour express delivery. Her order included an expensive high-tech e-bike with a front shopping basket and two side panniers.

While she waited, she found an organic fruit and veg outlet, again online. When her e-bike arrived, she cycled out to collect the organics she had ordered. From now on she would eat mainly vegetarian food and drink only tap water and her own, home-made version of blended vegetable juice with less added salt.

After further research online, she joined an all-female gym, taking out an introductory three-month 24/7 membership at a fifty-percent discount. A week later, she took up swimming, joining a group called *The Early Ducks*, a cheery group of ladies, mostly retired, who met at the municipal baths every morning from 6:30 a.m. to jog-swim. Afterwards, the other ladies met for coffee and breakfast muffins but Vero opted stay on for a Turkish Spa, where she relaxed to read the free newspapers before moving on to her morning gym session.

Online, she researched the value of Tristram's Jag then advertised it at a fair price. Within an hour she had agreed a sale to a man from Plymouth who arrived the next day with a trailer attached to his Land Rover Defender. She put his £9,500 in cash in her fireproof safe. Vero had never liked the Jag. And why would anyone choose a dull grey when you could have a nice cheery colour for the same price?

She also sold the Berlingo which she had bought second-hand from her own funds to transport Tristram and his wheelchair. It was nearly ten years old with many dents and scrapes but, to her surprise, it also sold on e-Bay within a day, yielding a further £3,200 in cash to add to her hoard. Although this left her carless, she resisted the temptation to buy a Honda Jazz, a car she had wished for many times over. This would come later,



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she promised herself. She would use her e-bike or public transport or, if necessary, she would rent a car, a small car with sensors to make it easier to park.

Two weeks on, Vero was swimming seriously, clocking fifty times twenty-five metre laps before going on to the gym. Online, she found a 'boot camp regime' which she adapted to her needs and tastes, omitting the body-sculpting heavy weights exercises. The boot camp approach was tough, with up to twelve hours of constant physical activity a day.

As had happened with Fenella, the blubber dropped off. Her energy levels soared.

In early March, five weeks after the news from Henry Mullins, when she checked her naked self in the long mirror her bum was nearly gone and in place of her sagging tummy she had flat, hard muscle from her sit-ups.

After checking reviews on *Trip Advisor*, she splurged on a visit to *Allerton's Aesthetics*, an upmarket health and beauty spa for a full consultation and make-over. They used digital imaging software to help their clients choose 'a new look' in advance of treatments. Jenna the owner, a woman in her late fifties had worked in films and TV as a make-up artist. After a long study of various possibilities, Vero accepted Jenna's advice and the treatments began.

In her new look self, Vero wore her hair in a shorter, fuller style. With Botox injections to her lips and brows and permanent make-up highlights around her eyes, she was coached in the use of a particular palate of expensive cosmetics to soften the sharp angles of her face. Repeatedly, she was encouraged to smile. The transformation was completed when, with a final flourish, Jenna placed a pair of (non-prescription) blue-green spectacles on the bridge of Vero's nose.

'Well, my darling, what do you think?'

Vero took time to study her new look self:

'My God, that's unbelievable. Amazing. Thanks very much.'

'Well, actually, compared to many of my clients, you were an easy challenge. You have such wonderful skin, like a teenager's. Now, I'll make up a pack of cosmetics and send you a personalised video clip to remind you how to maintain your new look. Less is best, remember? For you the secret is to apply just a little toning to keep everything as natural as possible. You have good hair but it's been damaged by something. Do you swim a lot, perhaps?'

'Oh, yes, I do.'

'Wear a bathing cap. Old fashioned but essential. It's also crucial to rinse this shiner conditioner through after every shampoo. Now, shall I book you for the same time next month?'

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'Eh, I'm not sure yet. I'll get back to you on that.'

'Right, my darling. I'll look forward to seeing you again, shall I? I know we are expensive but, trust me, it's best to stick with the regime for about a year until we have you fully adjusted and trained. The Botox will need topping up too.'

The next day, feeling energised and confident, Vero did the rounds in Leeds and found the clothes she had already targeted by online research, adopting a younger style of dressing, choosing outfits in brighter colours, items which she would not have previously dared to wear when her bum had been huge.

On the last day of March, on her forty-ninth birthday, Mrs Vero Fraken nee MacGillivray stood in front of her mirror wearing a lemon green tee-shirt under a puce coloured bolero jacket, her legs clad in dark green leggings, standing erect on pale green suede pumps, smiling broadly. She looked and felt a decade younger, ready to start again.

*Not bad, Vero. Not bad at all. The new bra is working too. So, 'my darling', with phase one in the bag, let's move on to phase two.*

Whatever might happen next, she must get away from Harrogate and Leeds, both places which she had come to detest. It was time to move on with her life and she was ready to start again.

Her studio flat in Leeds, which was entirely in her own name, had been rented to a former colleague from *The Academy*, an introverted spinster girl not unlike Vero herself starting out two decades earlier. The girl was keen to buy and had a mortgage pre-agreed. With help from Anita's parents, the sale yielded a modest £44,400 to Vero's bank account after clearing the mortgage and paying all fees and expenses. The transaction was handled by Henry Mullins and, to her surprise and delight, took only two weeks to conclude.

To celebrate, she spent almost a thousand pounds on new clothes.

Her next move was to 'tart up' the Valley Road property, make it 'acceptable' internally. This was done without discussion with Mullins who, to the best of her knowledge had not been inside the villa since she and Tristram had married. The only people who had crossed its threshold since his illness had accelerated had been his medical and care team and council workmen.

She emailed Mullins to try to agree a timetable for the sale, hoping to get a handle on how much time she had left until she might be evicted. He agreed to check then rang back, advising:

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*"My dear Mrs Fraken, please, there is no urgency. The higher end is still soft after the dreadful winter. Higher income buyers have been distracting themselves with extra winter sun holidays. What we all need is a dry spell with bright sun and warmth to perk them up, get them in the mood for a house move."*

Mullins also advised that the company who owned the major share of the Valley Road house were willing to wait, pleased to agree she could carry on as their 'caretaker', rent-free on a rolling three-month extension provided she kept the house and garden in good repair.

In the first weeks after Tristram's death, Vero had received several letters dropped through her letterbox, hand-written unsolicited offers from her neighbours stating if she was interested in selling, they would make her a 'good competitive offer'. This had prompted her to think:

*Aye, right! They think you're on your uppers, that you can't afford a fancy car like theirs. They think you're a soft mark. Bloody sharks.*

Mullins had confirmed her own online research but had been reluctant to give her an actual figure. She knew the villa was considered by many to be the best property in the area and would, in the right market, do well, eventually. However, after only a few months of living there, Vero had grown to dislike the house and especially the dark north-facing front rooms. Although the large rear garden faced south, it was overlooked by a row of terraced houses perched above her on a steep, rocky hill which effectively blocked this Sun, except for a few hours a day in high summer. As a result of run-off water from this cliff, both front and rear gardens were constantly damp and muddy, a haven for snails and slugs.

The other issue which buyers would find off-putting was the damage caused by the council's slap-dash contractors when they installed the accessibility and lifting options for Tristram. This combined with the poor internal state of the rest of the house and the leaking Conservatory roof would put many people off, and might even knock £150 K to £200 K off the asking price, she guessed.

*As long as the re-mortgage firm get their money out and expenses paid, they will not care.*

Although Vero wanted away, her head ruled her heart on the matter. At least she had a roof over her head and must trust that sooner or later a period of dry windy weather would allow the garden to dry a bit.

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She would use the time to deal with the internal décor. She had watched many make-over shows on TV and knew well when the eventual purchasers took a house like this, they would gut everything down to the bare bones and start again, put their own stamp on the property. The first step would be to declutter. What was required was a tart up job, a few licks of paint here and there, perhaps a few new, cheap and cheery carpets and some basic IKEA furniture and fittings. The kitchen worktops, cupboards and appliances (only a few years old) were still in reasonably good condition but, probably, the new owners would redo it to their taste.

To make a start, she downloaded the IKEA free interior 3-D visualisation software to her laptop and, using an electronic measuring tape App on her iPhone, she set about creating a three-dimensional model of Tristram's villa.

A programme of works began to firm in her mind.

She would hassle the local authority to restore her dining room, make them remove the lifting gear and the unsightly shoe-horned modular bathroom. She would try to do as much as possible herself and stay within a maximum budget of £9,500, the money from the sale of the Jag which she had not discussed with Mullins.

She set a target date of the end of June. Perhaps by then she would have Valley Road ready for sale. Time would tell.

However, Vero's life was about to take another unexpected lurch forward.

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## *Death by Misadventure*

When Tristram died his mother stopped taking her blood pressure pills. Three months from the day of Tristram's cremation, Sally Fraken died of a massive stroke. Lorna, Tristram's unmarried sister, was found wandering naked ten miles from home, knee deep in the sea. Initially, Lorna was taken into care at the *Eventide Care Home*, an emergency measure arranged by Henry Mullins. However, this facility was not certified for patients with mental illness.

Only then did Vero learn Lorna had suffered many previous episodes of bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia - another of Tristram's secrets. Vero was astonished to learn that she was the only surviving relative and, *de facto*, Lorna's legal guardian. During a terse and tense meeting at the offices of the local authority social care team with Henry Mullins and Dr Thomas Briody (Lorna's GP) in attendance, Vero reluctantly signed the forms to have her sister-in-law sectioned, for her own good. A few days later, because there were no bed places available locally, Miss Lorna Fraken was transferred to a secure unit in Middlesbrough, fifty miles north of Scarborough.

Because of the unusual circumstances of Sally Fraken's death, there was a six-week delay while a post-mortem examination was arranged which returned a formal verdict of 'death by misadventure', allowing the body to be released for cremation.

Vero was again trapped by duty, obliged to become responsible for a strange woman she had only met twice before on brief visits to *The Eyrie*.

Her first visit had lasted less than an hour, most of which Vero had spent alone in a side room, a hobby room where Lorna made stuffed animals for charity. Sitting alone while Tristram spoke to his mother and sister in their TV room, she had heard screeching and crying. From the slurred words, she realised mother and daughter were inebriated. With only a fleeting glance at her new in-laws, Tristram escorted Vero back to the Jaguar and they drove off. He refused to say anything other than:

*"Vero, my dear, it's terribly, terribly complicated, and awfully sad for everyone. Best to let sleeping dogs lie, please."*

The second occasion had been when she had visited her in-laws to impart the sad news of Tristram's final struggle and sad ending. Again, both women had been inebriated, chain smoking. After a long, uncomfortable silence, it was Sally who spoke, her voice cracked, wavering:

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*"I suppose we should thank you for all you did for Tristram but frankly, he might have been better off alone. I expect his friend Mullins will take it from here. I think it best you leave now, please."*

The only fortunate thing regarding her weekly visits to Lorna in Middlesbrough was that she could use the Intercity train from Leeds thereby avoiding a horrible multi-bus trip.

Two weeks after Sally Fraken's funeral, which Lorna was unable to attend, the patient somehow escaped from her locked ward during a shift change.

Wearing only a flimsy dressing gown under a stolen raincoat and shod in pink fluffy slippers, she persuaded a freelance taxi driver that she had lost her purse but would pay him cash when he delivered her home. Mohamed Udaan, who had been born and raised in Scarborough, recognised the address she gave for *The Eyrie* was in the poshest part of the town and saw the opportunity. He later alleged that Lorna had agreed to a fixed fare of £150.

On arrival at her home shortly after midnight, Lorna saw the house in darkness. It was later judged that it was only then she remembered her mother was dead. According to Udaan's statement to the Police, as she fled from his cab his fare had screeched:

*"Mama, don't worry, I'm coming to get you!"*

As Lorna stumbled down the driveway to disappear from view around the side of the house, Udaan had assumed she was intending to enter the premises by the rear door. After a long wait, he switched on his headlights to illuminate the scene and then trailed Lorna. When he saw the coat, slippers, nightie and underwear lying on the lawn near the rear fence, he at once called the Police.

The officers on the scene quickly concluded that Miss Lorna Fraken, while in a state of confusion and grief, had disrobed, climbed over the rear fence and stepped barefoot into oblivion, falling over a hundred feet to smash onto the rocky cliff below.

Retrieving the remains had been a slow, fraught process during which the authorities enlisted help from the *Bowland Pennine Mountain Rescue Team*. Surprisingly quickly, the coroner issued a verdict of 'death by misadventure'. This was a convenient result for the manager of the Middlesbrough secure unit who was the coroner's husband.

Mo Udaan had somehow managed to get Vero's mobile number and began to pester her for the unpaid fare of £150. Wisely, she redirected him to Henry Mullins and the amount was quickly settled at £78, to be debited from Lorna's estate.

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## **Settlement**

*Mullins & Co* advised patience while their team unravelled the legal difficulties caused by the three deaths, all intestate.

When pressed by Vero, a rambling personal letter from Henry Mullins (not on letterheading) and riddled with many caveats reported a low-end speculative assessment couched in breezy terms:

*On a good day, 'The Eyrie' might fetch circa £650,000, given a fair wind.*

This amount, according to an unnamed independent property valuer, was based on a 'superficial only' inspection.

Throughout the remainder of the summer into the autumn and the ensuing winter, the sale of higher-end properties in Scarborough and Harrogate remained stalled and after further pressure from Vero she received a formal letter:

*"Dear Mrs Fraken,*

*while I fully understand your desire to move on and dispose of 'The Eyrie' I must urge patience. As at Valley Road, this remains the wrong time to be selling high-end properties. Give it six months, maybe a little longer.*

*In any case, there are certain legal aspects to be unravelled involving the peculiar nature of the affairs of the late Mrs Sally Fraken and her daughter Lorna.*

*My colleagues in our Scarborough office are keeping a close eye on the property to make sure the grounds are tended and the house kept secure and fully maintained, preserving its condition and value; you need have no concerns on that front.*

*I respectfully advise. . . ."*

Stalled, Vero occupied herself by maintaining a reduced version of her boot camp exercise regime. To progress her Valley Road project, working through one room at a time, she became reasonably adept at papering, decorating and laying carpets. Internally, Tristram's villa was now fresher and brighter and, she hoped, would prove acceptable when the market firmed. Online she had cross-checked recent house prices in the vicinity



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of *The Eyrie* and began to dream of having enough from its sale to be able to afford to retire completely and find a new and absorbing pressure-free hobby.

The whole business dragged on but for the first time in years she was now upbeat.

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In the Spring of 2012, two days after her forty-seventh birthday, the final package of documents arrived by courier service from Henry Mullins confirming Mrs Vero Fraken was now the legal owner of *The Eyrie*. By this stage, Vero had completed her freshening up of the interior decoration of the property at Valley Road. Every task had involved a steep learning curve and had taken twice to three times longer than she had envisaged and she had overspent her initial target of £9,500 by nearly £5,000.

*OK, not too bad but Vero, let's face facts, you're not up to this. From now on you should stick to planning and get experts to do the actual work.*

Although she had deliberately pushed herself to complete her plan, in truth, her heart had not been in it. Throughout the delay, she had been longing to be away, to escape to the country. In her mind she had settled on the notion of a move north to Pickering, a small town she had always liked, where she and Fenella had gone for walks in Dalby Forest or out onto the moors. Although the properties in this area were expensive, she felt sure she could find a place she could afford, perhaps a place needing remodelling which she could do up to her taste. Thereafter, she had calculated she should have enough money to live a quiet and comfortable life, join a reading group, perhaps take up gardening, try for an allotment and grow organic vegetables.

As she opened the Mullins package of documents, she was already thinking of properties she had short-listed as 'possibles', imagining long walks in the countryside with two well-behaved dogs, part of her new fictional life of genteel luxury.

At her request, Mullins had also sent a valuer to assess the worth of the contents of the Scarborough property. This woman's report was brief, confirming Vero's own impression from her two brief visits:

The furniture, fittings and carpets are old, badly damaged by cigarette burns, alcohol spillage and urine. They are less than worthless, more of a liability than an asset and should be disposed of as economically as possible and the house offered for sale empty. It requires to be thoroughly cleaned before viewing else the odour would be very off-putting to prospective buyers.

The 1976 vintage Rover P6 Coupe in the garage is badly rusted through, shell and chassis. At best, it may fetch £500 for vintage scrappage parts, probably less.

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The twenty-seven paintings (see attached list) are not in fact paintings but cleverly produced prints over-daubed and bearing faked signatures. We most strongly recommend that the Inheritor arrange for them to be incinerated at the earliest opportunity to avoid becoming embroiled in accusations of forgery and copyright infringement.

There is a small collection of rings, watches and jewellery which we have sent to you by courier for safe-keeping under separate cover with an itemised schedule. An approximate value for these items is circa £3,500, on a good day. If sold at auction, fees will of course, be deductible. I suggest a reserve value of £2,200. Selling each item individually online might yield more but would require time and effort.

It might be considered these items have greater sentimental than financial value.

Henry, in view of our longstanding business relationship allow me, please, to offer comment which is strictly outside my brief but which springs from a desire to be helpful and is based on many years of experience of visiting houses like *The Eyrie*. It is disappointing to have to report that what seems to be a very fine house when viewed from the outside is in such a poor state of internal repair. Very disappointing indeed. From the basic infrastructure and the echoes of the original decor still visible, this was once a very desirable property.

Of major concern is the close proximity of the house to the cliff edge, particularly given the notoriety which the unfortunate recent suicide of an occupant attracted. While there is no obvious erosion at the cliff edge, this cannot be taken as a sign that all is safe and sound. We recommend a geological survey be undertaken to re-assure potential bidders.

In a schedule, Mullins set down a list of accounts held at banks and building societies, all of which had been run down to a few pounds and which Mullins had now closed, netting £1,267, in total.

Share certificates for BP and Marks and Spencer had been sold, realising £15,335, in total.

From these monies, *Mullins & Co* had deducted their fees and expenses leaving a residue of £8,432 net.

By arrangement with the Inland Revenue Service the £34,245 due, would be settled on the sale of *The Eyrie* or, at the latest by the second anniversary of the death of Miss Lorna Fraken.

The key section of Mullins covering letter stated:

**Assuming the property is sold as it stands without upgrading, the amount payable to you as sole Inheritor, net of IRS payments) is estimated at £563,765.**

There exists an outside possibility the local authority might agree to the property being converted from a single-family dwelling into four autonomous flats. In this scenario, the

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estimated value of the property (undeveloped) is circa £850,000. From previous experience, I cannot recommend this option, particularly since the property externally is in reasonable condition. Simply put, the effort, delay and expense to attempt to gain this planning permission would not best serve your desire to move on with your life.

In this vein, I felt it appropriate to update you on the net amounts which might accrue from the sale of the Harrogate property including an *estimate* of the remaining contents and in its present, refurbished, condition.

**Accordingly, the further net amount due to you as Inheritor of the estate of Tristram Poole Fraken is estimated at 25% of £650,000, yielding £162,500 which with the Scarborough property sale as described should provide you with an amount circa £762,265 or thereby.**

In a covering letter she read:

As previously advised the former Mrs Carol Fraken was fully divorced from your husband several decades ago. I acted for Tristram in the divorce settlement and I can assure you hereby in writing, that Mrs Carol Fraken nee Wright was *generously* compensated in accordance with the law at that time. I can therefor categorically assure you that neither she nor her inheritors has any claim on Tristram's estate.

As you also requested, I employed a private investigator to report on her current whereabouts. Sadly, it seems Carol Wright married and divorced twice more before reverting to Carol King, a name change ratified by deed poll in 1987. King nee Wright was buried in 1993 in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Her death is recorded as '*self-administered drugs overdose aggravated by advanced syphilis*'. There is no record of any children.

As you may recall from our telephone conversation, I did meet Carol Wright on several occasions and was joint-best man with Ralph Gettingsby at Tristram and Carol's wedding. To put it bluntly, Carol Wright was not a nice person and she was already sleeping around for money before she snared Tristram. Sadly, he was besotted with her, an infatuation which persisted until he had the good fortune to meet you, probably the best stroke of good fortune enjoyed by my good friend during his entire life.

Ralph, Robin and I would like to formally record our thanks to you for the wonderful and loving way you cared for him throughout his terrible illness. May we wish you a long and healthy life, wherever you decide to settle.

At your earliest convenience, may I suggest a visit to *The Eyrie* to settle your mind regarding the above matters after which I shall be pleased to act on your instructions, unless you care to use an alternative solicitor. A set of keys for *The Eyrie* may be collected from our Scarborough office by telephoning ahead.

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Now that Carol Fraken was no longer a potential problem, Vero was satisfied the settlement figure which Henry Mullins had quoted tallied with her own spreadsheet estimate to within 5%.

Although she was pleased with the work he had done on her behalf, there lingered a doubt that she had been, somehow, 'manipulated', 'managed' during her long months waiting in limbo. And there had been the whole business of sorting out her position as inheritor of Sally and Lorna Fraken, a process which had required her to scrutinise many legal documents before eventually signing them.

Perhaps Mullins had been right all along to advise she hold off trying to sell the properties in Harrogate and Scarborough, telling her repeatedly to offer them for sale ahead of establishing her legal ownership would have caused confusion.

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## *The Eyrie*

Vero Fraken was ready to make the journey to Scarborough.

She called Henry Mullins and asked him to proceed with the sale of Valley Road through his Estate Agency office. At his suggestion, they agreed he would make arrangements for a final deep cleaning after she vacated the premises and sold off the remaining furniture or ditched it. She would be glad to leave this gloomy house and its memories and start afresh with everything new and to her own taste.

Accordingly, she rented a self-storage unit, hired a van for a morning and moved out of Valley Road by clearing the fridge then moved to a Travel Lodge where they provided a room to securely store her new folding e-bike and helmet with its inbuilt flashing lights back and front.

The day before her trip to Scarborough, Vero had paid a visit to *Allerton's Aesthetics*. Her hair was shining, her face rejuvenated by top-up Botox injections and her make-up perfect, she decided to wear her tiny *Crimson Scorpion* earrings and her cosmetic spectacles with bright green frames. Checking her mirror, she smiled:

*Have you ever looked better in your life?*

*Perhaps at last you are the lady Aunt Janine had hoped for.*

After a long debate with her mirror, she chose a practical outfit, dark green leggings, almost black, red sports pumps, a bright lemon green anorak for cycling visibility and a small rucksack with her purse, iPad and iPhone, her toilet bag and a couple of changes of underwear against the possibility she might stay overnight in a local hotel and take a few days to check out Scarborough as an alternative place to settle.

She hefted the bag containing her e-bike over her shoulder and set off early, taking a bus to York then the train to her destination. From the station, she rode to *Mullins & Co* for the keys and the code for the alarm system. She declined a lift and soon regretted it. The climb up to South Cliff was very steep. The battery had not been fully charged and expired half way up the hill. Dismounted, she rolled the e-bike over the last half mile.

Although she had visited *The Eyrie* with Tristram twice before, the memory was blurred. Approaching on foot, now she had a chance to see it properly, she realised how impressive it was, easily the best among the other grand houses nearby. The curtains and blinds had been drawn, giving the house a closed, foreboding appearance. She glanced at the windows of the other houses, glimpsed movement, saw a face which pulled back out of

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sight. Self-consciously she opened the double gates and wheeled her bike along the long front driveway to the rear of the triple garage. She spotted an external power point by the garage door and put her e-bike battery on charge. The garden was in good order. Only then she remembered Henry Mullins had told her he would ensure the gardening service would continue to care for it until she was ready to sell.

What surprised her most of all was how near to the cliff edge the rear house was, less than fifty paces at its nearest point, she judged. As she walked to the boundary to check, imagining Lorna's suicide leap, she realised there was a gap in the fence; a small horseshoe-shaped part of the cliff edge was missing leaving the exposed rock raw and shiny.

*Oh God, no! The cliff is crumbling away. No! No! No! Does Mullins know about this? Is this factored into his valuation? Can the cliff be stabilised? Is this place fully insured to cover me?*

A gust of wind buffeted her back, making her cry out and scuttle back towards the house. Inside, beside the rear entry door to the utility room, she keyed the code provided on the tag attached to the set of keys and the bleeping stopped. Her first impression was one of anxiety, bordering on fear. The air seemed to be vibrating. Her head filled with strange notions of scuttling insects and faraway voices moaning and crying out for help. She scolded herself.

*Get a grip, Vero.  
When you're dead, you're dead.  
Don't let yourself get carried away.*

Moving forward the house was gloomy. It smelled of nicotine and urine. Moving from room to room, she switched on every overhead light, opened every curtain and raised every blind. In appearance the windows were of a traditional casement design but manufactured from dark brown PVC to look like wood. She used the tilt and turn control to edge the windows open. The spooky moaning sounds increased as the wind gained access to nooks and crannies.

In the Kitchen, the fridge was filled with rotting food, months old. The smell was disgusting, making her gag. The dishwasher was half packed, grease congealed in plates. She slammed it shut and retreated to the Victorian glasshouse which had been converted to a bright and airy sun room. Here again she found evidence of Sally and Lorna, two ashtrays overflowing with stubbed out cigarettes, one with dog ends with no lipstick, the other with bright crimson lipstick, Lorna's shade. Vero hated cigarettes and loathed the idea of touching the ashtrays. It was then she hit on a plan.

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Using her iPhone, online she found a firm which offered EOT (end of tenancy) deep cleaning. She called and was answered by a gruff Scottish voice. The man proposed to visit to give a quote. One o'clock was agreed. This gave her three hours to explore.

Moving from room to room she discovered more ashtrays, dirty tumblers, half of them smeared with red lipstick. There were dozens of empty and half-empty gin bottles and squashed cans of tonic water and empty boxes of chocolates, all *Black Magic*. From this she concluded that both mother and daughter had been heavy drinkers.

After a search, behind a large heavy cushion, she found an ornate handbag containing Sally's purse. There were three credit cards and two debit cards for different banks. She counted out the cash, just short of £740, mainly twenties mixed with the odd £10 note. There were three twenty packs of king sized cigarettes and two Zippo lighters, one inscribed SEF and the other MJF. There were several bracelets and rings, all of which appeared to be expensive.

To escape the smell of stale smoke, she moved out into the garden, keeping close to the house. Looking up at the rear façade, Vero spoke to herself, a habit which had taken hold again since Tristram's death.

*'Well, Vero, there's no way in hell you'll want the live here, is there? What was it like for Tristram before he made his escape? Was it Carol who had enticed him away? Isn't that what Mullins said? So, maybe you misjudged Henry Mullins. If he was at it, he'd have cleaned out Sally's purse and pinched that bracelet and those rings. He's had the keys for The Eyrie in his office for weeks. We'll see, we'll see. Aye, maybe Henry is a good guy after all?'*

She had Mullins' office number in her contacts and speed dialled Leeds to be told Mr Mullins was out for the day at a meeting at his old boarding school. The receptionist said she would text Vero his mobile number but warned his phone may be switched off if he was unavailable. A few minutes later, Henry's number arrived by text but before Vero could dial him, her phone rang.

'Hello, Mrs Fraken, Henry Mullins. How can I help? Teresa in my office rang to say you are at *The Eyrie*. I'm at a Governors' meeting today and we are enjoying a short comfort break at the moment.'

'Thanks. Look, I've decided to clear the place out as you suggested, do what is necessary to get it onto the market. I'm ready to move on.'

'Hold on, please. I need to move, for privacy.'



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There was a short delay. The phone became silent, mute.

'Right. Good. Now I can give you my full attention. So, *The Eyrie*, yes. I've only been in that house once, years ago, after Mr Michael Fraken passed away, a signing ceremony. My impression then was, eh, how can I put it, eh, it was gloomy, heavy décor and rather, well, to be blunt, very smelly. Cigarettes and, well, a lack of cleaning.'

'Quite. Very, very smelly. I've got a firm called *Macrae's EOT Cleaning* coming to give me a quote. I'll need to find someone to clear the house contents. My guess is that most of the furniture and carpets will be worthless, cigarette burns and ingrained food and drink spillages. There is clothing too, again, grubby and smelly. Disgusting, really. I'd no idea Sally and Lorna lived in such squalor, poor things. And Tristram, He must have hated living there. He hated smoking, as you know.'

'So, Mrs Fraken, you found *Macrae's* on your own. A very good move. The very firm I would recommend. I know Kenneth from Golf. He's very persuasive, you know. Got me onto his committee, *Fresh Start Yorkshire*. Nice man. Gruff chappie but straight as a die. One of your kinsman, from somewhere called Woodilee, I think, near the centre of Glasgow. His father was a minister, Methodist, I think. Kenneth will probably bring his sister with him. He has issues reading. Margaret does house clearances. She has an online antiques business and sell things on *eBay*, as a sideline. Margaret is a great talker but has a heart of gold. Used to be a schoolteacher. Kenneth worked as a prison instructor for a while, teaching joinery, I think. They moved to Scarborough to care for their aunt, years ago now. She plays golf too, Margaret, or used to, before, well, never mind. Anyway. I'll give her a ring to see if she's free to come with Kenneth, shall I?'

'Oh, interesting. OK, do that, please. But from what I can see there is little here of any real value but yes, two birds with one stone. Look, Henry, what is it about this place, it's giving me the Heebie-Jeebies.'

'Sorry?'

'Scottish expression, means it's creepy, weird.'

'Oh yes, right, I follow. *The Eyrie* by name and *eerie* by nature. Anyway, good luck, let me know how it works out, please. Sorry, must go now if that's all?'

'Yes, thanks. Bye.'

She had meant to ask him about the cliff edge problem.

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With two hours to spare, Vero locked up *The Eyrie*, and with her battery topped up, rode down to a café on the beach and ordered a tuna salad. In the toilet mirror she caught sight of herself and smiled. Her new low-carb diet and gym membership were taking effect. Since Tristram's death she had lost more than two stones, thankfully most from her hips.

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Sitting outside, sipping a mineral water with lemon, she scrolled through her contacts, found Fenella and made a call, got her answering service, left an outline of her proposal to meet soonish then rang off. (As it transpired, Fenella was in Norway on holiday and did not pick up the call until a month later, by which time Vero's world had changed entirely.)

The Macraes arrived a few minutes before one o'clock and reversed their wine coloured Luton van into the driveway and parked it beside the garage.

Margaret, who looked older by ten years, took charge, introducing herself and her brother, Kenneth. Although she was sure she had never met him before, there seemed something familiar about Kenneth. A shy man, he kept his head down, occasionally glancing up, looking over her shoulder, unwilling to meet her gaze. He was medium height, slim, neat and smart, dressed in a blue boiler suit with the firm's logo. Margaret, taller, rake thin and spindly was dressed like a minister's wife in a 1970s twin-set trouser suit and blouse in a pale shade of blue. Incongruously, she was wearing a small felt hat held in place by a pearl hat pin. In her manner, she reminded Vero of Janet from Dr Finlay's Casebook, one of Mammy Martha's favourite TV programmes. (Vero would learn later that Margaret wore a wig, her baldness caused by her ongoing cancer treatment.)

'Well, well, well. So this is *The Eyrie*. We have passed by many times but at long last I get to look inside. My aunt was always talking about it. She knew it when it was owned by an émigré Russian family who claimed they were royals, she said. Auntie Marjory used to play here with a school friend call Evangelina or Vani, before the tragedy. Vani and her brother Boris climbed through what was a hedge trying to rescue their little dog, Oswald. All three fell to their deaths. The mother committed suicide by putting her head in the gas oven. The mother was troubled soul, never left the house, afraid of her shadow, Auntie said. There was no husband, but there was mention of her cousin being a priest, I think. The grandfather sold up and moved abroad to live with his brother, in Bucharest, Aunt said, gave the house to his cook, who might have been his mistress. That's when the house became a rooming house.'

'A priest?'

'Yes, Paris, I think. Tragic a similar thing should repeat itself, don't you think? May I call you Vero? We prefer first names, don't we Kenneth. But always Kenneth, never Ken or Kenny, please. Anyway, shall we get started, make the tour? Just give me a minute to get into my boiler suit. You might want to borrow one too, Vero. And these disposable gloves and overshoes. We don't want your lovely clothes to get messed up, do we? What a lovely canary yellow top. Those dark green leggings suit you well. You do have nice strapping legs, doesn't she Kenneth. And pumps! I've always fancied pumps but I've never had the nerve, with my spindly-spider legs.'

They entered by the rear door and made an initial tour of the ground floor rooms.

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Margaret said: 'So terribly sad to see how badly it is run down. Yes, the smell is disgusting, ingrained in the furniture, carpets and curtains and caked on the walls. Maybe one of the worst we've ever seen. Do you agree, Kenneth?'

'Yes, but structurally it seems otherwise sound, I would say. No smell of rot and no tell-tale cracks in the plasterwork. It will do up nicely, for someone who has the money to spend.'

Vero responded: 'As you will discover, everywhere is disgusting. It seems to me the entire contents should be cleared out and the place taken back to its bare bones, what do you think?'

Margaret nodded vigorously, replying: 'Yes, it certainly looks that way but first we must check and check and check before we jettison anything. This is what I call the treasure hunt stage. Let's face it, this house has been trashed by neglect and those paintings are clearly fakes. As you said, best to take it back to the bare bones. It'll take tens of thousands to upgrade it to a standard that the modern buyer expects in this day and age. If you are agreeable, I think you should let Kenneth order a few skips and clear out the furniture and carpets, get this place cleared out before they do the deep cleaning. As they do this we can keep checking to see if anything else is hidden under carpets, sewn into curtains, hidden in upholstery. It's amazing how devious and inventive people can become when they want to hide something from others. Kenneth's people are experienced and a hundred percent trustworthy. If they find anything, it's yours. This will take a few days to complete but when Kenneth and his team are finished, this old place will be sparkling clean and smelling like spring flowers. And Vero, I strongly advise you leave it at that and let the purchaser do the remodelling and upgrading. What do you think?'

'Yes Margaret, I agree. I've had some experience of this sort of thing with my house in Harrogate after my husband died. Doing it up for sale was very hard work. Looking back on what I achieved, what I attempted was a mistake. Put bluntly, the result was, well, amateurish. I simply don't have the skills.'

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An hour later, in the attic, behind a water tank, they found a small packet. It was well wrapped up inside a newspaper, tied neatly with string. When opened up, inside was a silk bag, purple, with a black cord drawstring. The bag contained a small casket about six inches long, four inches wide and two inches deep. The lid was inlaid with tiny white ivory flower heads.

Despite the wrapping, the casket was grimy, covered with what looked like fine black salt crystals. From his small rucksack, Kenneth produced a duster, cleaned the casket, making the ebony sparkle in the beam from his head torch. The lid was locked. As directed by Margaret, Kenneth sealed their find into a Ziplock bag which he offered to Vero.

Still holding the newspaper, string and the silk bag, Vero was shocked to see the fingers of her gloves were stained a purple-black. Kenneth proffered another larger Ziplock bag and Vero dumped everything into it, adding her stained gloves. He added the duster which was also stained, zipped the bag closed and placed it in his rucksack then passed her a fresh pair of disposable gloves.

Holding the Ziplock pouch containing the casket, Vero felt her earrings become warmish, tingling, as if they were vibrating.

'I think those salt crystals are a preservative to prevent corrosion of the contents. Hopefully we have something inside worth having,' said Margaret.

Moving warily across the creaking, dusty floorboards with Margaret guiding and probing using a high-powered torch, they continued searching but now even more carefully, checking every corner before retracing their steps and re-checking areas they had already visited. However, their hunt yielded nothing else.

'Now we've checked thoroughly,' said Margaret, 'let's sit out at that nice garden table beside the sunroom and see if my lock-pickers will let us into our find. Exciting, isn't it? This is the best part of clearing houses. Because we are very used to checking forensically, we often find objects the sellers have missed, usually small items like this, often watches and rings and bracelets and nicknacks, mostly of low value but occasionally there is something worth sending to auction.'

'Margaret, let's get out of here, please. As I said to Henry Fraken on the 'phone, this place gives me the Heebie-Jeebies.'

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'Ha-ha. OK, let's get out into the sunshine and see if we have a real find here or just a nice box but empty.'

It took Margaret only a few minutes of working on the lock to get the box open. The interior was lined with dark green velvet with a slim purple pouch laid out on top.

Margaret hefted this pouch in her hand. Turning it over, she undid the silk tapes and unfolded it to reveal five rows of tiny pockets each with its own flap. From her handbag she took a pair of white gloves and a jeweller's inspection magnifying glass which she placed in her left eye socket then began checking, removing each pearl in turn, holding it to her eyepiece using tweezers coated in a soft woollen material.

'Thirteen missing, leaving you with eighty-seven, assuming they are all genuine pearls. Probably used as currency, easily carried, easily concealed. We'll need to check, get them valued. I know a reliable man in Leeds. Good quality pearls are always popular at auction.'

She replaced the pearls in their pockets, closed the pouch, tied the draw tapes and laid it to one side on the table before lifting the thick velvet protective flap.

Underneath, in the central recess lay an ornate brooch in the shape of a scorpion with a silver body and a fine silver chain. Its thorax was fashioned from a single crimson stone surrounded by eight smaller green stones for its feet and a larger blood red stone for the tail, all sparking in the sunlight.

The central crimson stone which formed the body seemed to contain a moving liquid, like blood.

Vero shuddered. Her ears tingled. Her head buzzed with fear, anxiety, dread.

'My Goodness me!' said Margaret. 'I'm fairly sure what we have here is a Crimson Scorpion. I've read about them, of course. Rumour says they were made for one of the Czars, in the mid-1800s to give to his mistresses. They say he had three of them made, in Paris, by Fabergé. We have no photo-evidence, just drawings and descriptions. From memory, the central crimson stone is a garnet called Rhodolite. The shining interior is caused by asterism, tiny fibres in the structure. The green feet are probably Demantoid garnets, I think. I'm not sure about the tail.'

Margaret held the brooch in her padded tweezers, rotating and checking it thoroughly using her eye-piece:

'Ooh, wonderful! Exquisite workmanship and in excellent condition. This is a Queen Scorpion. These two empty recesses are deliberately smaller, for her males, called Suitor

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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Princes, fashioned as earrings. One single Suitor Prince turned up in Chicago last year, sold for over six million dollars to an Internet bidder, probably Chinese or Saudi or maybe a Russian oil mogul. Crazy money. It was less than half-an-inch in length. One report said if the earring was dissembled to its constituent parts the value would in fact be worth only twenty thousand dollars. This is, let me check.' (She used a small ruler.) 'The Queen is around one and a half inches.'

'Margaret, how much is it worth, do you think?'

'Well Vero, who knows. But in an online auction, to a world-wide market, not less than twenty million dollars. Maybe even thirty. This find is the stuff of dreams. But watch out, it will change your life, money like this. But before we get carried away, we need to get these pearls and this brooch properly assessed and removed to a place of safety as soon as possible.'

'But wait. *Look!*' said Margaret. Using different tweezers, she eased a piece of paper from a slot pocket in the base of the central recess which had been concealed by the Queen Scorpion. As it became free, the stiff paper began to unfold and she held it top and bottom with both sets of tweezers.

It was a certificate of sale bearing the Fabergé imprint made out to Igor Ivanovic Stevtovich of Moscow, dated 10 Avril, 1848.

Margaret turned the receipt over. Hand-written in a quick scrawl, was a message in French which Vero read out to them:

Boris, veuillez accepter ce cadeau, un héritage familial, comme dot de notre chère Vani. Merci d'avoir accepté de l'épouser et d'avoir promis de prendre grand soin de ma pauvre chère fille et de la garder en sécurité jusqu'à ce que ces temps troublés soient terminés, lorsque nous vous enverrons chercher tous les deux et vous ramènerons chez nous, dans notre chère Mère Russie. Donnez notre amour à Henri à Paris. Un bon gars. Il vous aidera à vous installer et vous donnera un juste prix pour cette dot.

Sergie Milinkovic Romanoff.

*Boris, please accept this gift, a family heirloom, as our dear Vani's dowry. Thank you for agreeing to marry her and promising to take great care of my poor dear girl and keep her safe until these troubled times are over when we will send for you both and bring you back home to our dear Mother Russia. Give our love to Henri in Paris. A fine chap. He will help you settle and give you a fair price for this dowry.*

*Sergie Milinkovic Romanoff.*



# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Margaret, when my Aunt Janine died, she left me a present. These.'

Vero removed her earrings and passed them to Margaret who held them in the palm of her hand.

'Wow! Could these be a pair of missing Suitor Princes! Look, they fit into the recesses perfectly! What an astonishing discovery. As a complete set, this Queen and her Princes might be worth double the value of the Queen alone. Vero, this is astounding. You are a very lucky woman. Would you like to try them on, as a set?'

'No, Margaret. No, no, no! I want nothing more to do with them. Why I wore them today I have no idea. I have never worn them before, ever. I meant to sell them years ago but, well, somehow there was always something else to be done. Anyway, I have always been, well, wary, afraid of them. There is something sinister, maybe even malign about this jewellery. Can't you feel it? Look at the way the Queen's body is writhing. And look at the tail, it's glowing, isn't it? Please can we get rid of them as soon as possible. Would the man from Leeds take charge of them immediately?'

'Kenneth intervened:

'Vero, is this a flashback to something that happened in your past? Something to do with your Aunt?'

'Yes, possibly. Look, Kenneth, I'm not sure. It all happened so quickly. We had an argument and then when I took her breakfast the next day, Aunt Janine was dead and I was alone again. It threw me. And yes, I have had problems in the past. That might be what's causing this.'

'OK. Here's a suggestion. Let's lock this casket in the glove compartment of the van while we try to sort this out.'

'Yes,' said Margaret, 'I'll get in touch with *Salters Online Auctions* and ask them to send a courier to collect the casket. How would that work for you, Vero?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'Right then, try to relax while we get organised. Kenneth, when you've locked the casket in the van, would you bring the Thermos of coffee and the biscuit tin, please?'

'Right then ladies, back in two ticks.'

'Margaret, the Russian man who used to live here, surely he must have expected to come back for it. Surely this jewellery still belongs to him or his family.'

'No, Vero. I think Henry Mullins will be able to confirm that when a house is sold, anything left behind is assumed to be part of the sale. Sold as seen. And with this letter, even though it offers a provenance of sorts, it is not proof of ongoing ownership.'

'Margaret, that newspaper, did it have a date on it? Would you look please, I don't want to touch it again.'

Using fresh disposable gloves, Margaret delved into Kenneth's rucksack and opened out the newspaper:

## *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'The newspaper is dated Friday 23 April, 1937. My Auntie Marjory would have been eight then. She kept diaries from about that age. I have them at home and I can check what Auntie wrote about her friend Vani and what she said about when she and her brother died. I can't remember what Vani's mother was called but I suspect it was Evangelina too. Maybe Boris was named after the missing father? My guess is that the package was hidden by the mother after she lost her children, while she was grieving but before she committed suicide. Who knows? Probably we will never know. Vero, are you all right? You look white as a sheet.'

'Margaret, are you sure this casket and its contents are actually mine? I feel uncomfortable about this. We should try to find the original owners, if we can.'

'That will have to wait, Vero, we have another more pressing issue. Put frankly, given the potential value of this find we are all at risk here, not just you but Kenneth and me. Our liability insurance doesn't cover anything like what these items might be worth. What if I give Tom Lindsay at *Salters* another ring from the van, explain the basics and get them to send someone as soon as possible. I'll email him photos of the casket and its contents and ask him to put insurance cover in place immediately, jointly on behalf of all of us. I know they have a comprehensive global policy, given their online turnover and they have couriers which deliver and collect items of great value all the time. What do you think?'

'Yes, thanks. So long as I never have to see them again, ever.'

'Right. Ah, here's Kenneth with the coffee and biscuits. I'll go and ring Tom now.'

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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## *Uplifting*

Kenneth and Vero were alone together at the table, sitting in bright sunshine while Margaret telephoned from the van.

Vero turned to accept the mug of sweet milky coffee and their eyes met. Her heart thumped.

*His blue eyes.*

*His smiling blue eyes.*

*His warm, kindly voice.*

*The touch of his hand when he cleaned the scrape on her knee.*

*His firm grip on her elbow, helping her onto the bus.*

'Vero, I wonder if you remember me, from that day at the bus stop in Castlemilk?'

Vero's mind whirled back:

*It was the day she had been sent away from Castlemilk to Woodlands Road. She had been standing in the rain at the bus terminus. A crowd of boys from her school charged towards her, calling her names.*

*They grabbed her shopping bag and turned it upside down, spilling the contents. She had been pushed from behind and fell onto the road, skinning her knee.*

*Eric Hamilton from P7, had grabbed her pencil case and the gang ran away with it, shouting and swearing.*

*A man on a bike had seen what had happened and swerved his bike into the path of the fleeing boys and grabbed the pencil case from Eric. The gang scattered. The man rode towards Vero. He was wearing a yellow cycling cape and a yellow hat. He had a small black moustache and bright, smiling blue eyes:*

*'Here you are, young lady. Safe and sound. Are you waiting for a bus?'*

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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*As she always did at school or when speaking to her betters, Vero adopted her poshest accent and best grammar.*

*'Yes. Thanks. I'm goin' to a place called Woodlands Road, it's somewhere near Kelvinbridge Subway.'*

*'Yes, indeed it is. I know it well. My father's church is in Woodlands Road. Are you going to visit a relative?'*

*The bike man had helped Vero re-pack her shopping bag, wiped her skinned knee with a clean hankie. He waited with her until the bus came along and helped her up onto the step.*

*'Well, do you remember me, Vero?'*

*'You were the bike man, from the bus stop?'*

*'Yes. And from *The Aragon*, on Byers Road?'*

*'Sorry?' Vero could feel her face become hot.*

*'I was working behind the bar. You're team always won those pub quizzes. You were the star.'*

*'No, I'm sorry, I don't remember. In fact I don't remember much about those quizzes.'*

*'I missed you when you stopped coming in.'*

*'You were at Glasgow Uni too?'*

*'No, the College of Building, Joinery. I was not quick at school. Margaret was our brain-box. Later I saw you again but you were with a big crowd of girls, heading for the Pond Hotel.'*

*'The hockey crowd, the reunion at Kelvinside Academy?'*

*'I was passing with a bunch from Glasgow Wheelers.'*

*'So, Kenneth, how did you find your way here, to Scarborough?'*

*'Yes, odd we should meet so far from Glasgow but people move around a lot, nowadays. Anyway, that day I saw you, I was returning from a spin out to Cathkin Braes. You stood out with your lovely red hair and green eyes. But you looked so sad, so forlorn. I wondered if I might see you around Woodlands Road but very soon after that day, everything changed for us, for Margaret and me. Mum died first, a stroke. Dad put a brave face in it but he gave up, resigned from the Methodist calling and moved back to Invergordon to live with his younger sister. Margaret went to St Andrew's and I got a flat in Havelock Street with Mrs Stillie. Her son was the manager of *The Aragon*. I was in the shipyards by then and later, when I qualified I went to Jordanhill and ended up in Dennistoun as a Technical Teacher. Then I was recruited by a man from my father's former church in Woodlands Road who persuaded me to become an instructor at Barlinnie Prison teaching woodwork. When I got used to it, I quite enjoyed it. They gave me a flat at a low rent nearby and so I could save money for the first time ever. Now, top up? Biscuit?'*

*'Yes, thanks. A Tunnock's Caramel Log! When did I last have one of these?'*

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Working in a prison is like living in a closed community. It's very hierarchical but I was reasonably happy there. Then, when Auntie Marjory, my father's older spinster sister became unwell with breast cancer, he asked Margaret to help her in her business. Margaret had moved to Whitby where she was a teacher, Maths and Sciences. She roped me in and we moved here to Scarborough to live with Auntie. Margaret took over her antiques business and more recently transformed it to become an online enterprise. It was Margaret who suggested the EOT business. We do OK. I have two lads who work for me, Jimmy Durie and Bert Strang. They're ex-cons, both former inmates at Barlinnie but good guys. They've been going straight for over ten years. Both from broken homes. I've trained them up and we make a good team doing house clearances for Margaret and EOT cleaning if required. Margaret does my books and payroll. We live in Pickering now, in a converted smallholding. Jimmy and Bert have a small cottage nearby, Scarborough and the surrounding area is our home patch. Occasionally we work in York doing EOT cleaning for university student lets, less often in Leeds. That's about it. So, Vero what about you?'

Vero had enjoyed his slow revelation, enjoyed the sound of his deep baritone voice, his Glasgow cum Highland lilt, probably from his parents. Most especially, she liked his smiling blue eyes.

'Well, Kenneth, I came here straight from Glasgow, soon after my aunt died, to my first job, to teach English, French and Modern Studies. After a few moves I ended up at *The City Academy* in Leeds. As fate would have it, I married my boss, Tristram Fraken. His mother owned this house. Tristram had MS and after a slow decline, he died. His mother Sally stopped taking her medications shortly after Tristram died and about six weeks later she died of a stroke. They call it 'slow suicide'. His sister Lorna was bipolar and borderline schizophrenic. She went into decline and threw herself off the edge of the cliff, just there. Frankly Kenneth, I think this house is cursed. So far as I can tell, everyone who has lived here has suffered a tragedy. I think that brooch has caused it. Have you seen how the stone looks like blood?'

'What will you do about it, the jewellery? Sell it as Margaret suggests?'

'Kenneth, despite what Margaret says, I don't feel it's mine. Clearly Tristram's family knew nothing about it. If it belongs to anyone, it belongs to the person who brought it here. Maybe that Russian family came here from Paris. As Margaret said, we will probably never know. If we sold the jewellery, I would think of the money as 'blood money'. Look, Kenneth, I've never had big dreams. All I have ever hoped for was to be married to a nice man and to live quietly, take on some voluntary work, maybe coaching slow readers. Maybe somewhere like Pickering, actually. When I get Tristram's house in Harrogate sold and *The Eyrie* off my hands, I should be able to afford to live comfortably without needing to return to classroom teaching. To be honest, I made a mistake teaching secondary kids, particularly at *The Academy*. I had always wanted to teach primary.'

'So Vero, what do you intend to do about it, the jewellery?'

'Maybe I could hire a private detective to find the Russian man who went to Bucharest?'

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Try the arithmetic. If his daughter Vani was about eight when she died, her grandfather would have been at least forty, maybe even fifty. Assume that was 1937. This is 2012, which is seventy five years on which makes this Russian mystery man around a hundred and thirty years old. Although there is an outside possibility he might be alive, the probability is he is long gone, dead and buried.'

'But he might have relatives. Look, Kenneth, I know that's stretching it but I do *not* want that blood money, even if it might legally be mine.'

'Vero, I will be bold here. I have a different suggestion.'

'Which is?'

His hands reached across the table and took hold of hers. His skin was hard, calloused, the hands of a man used to hard manual work. But they were gentle and warm. Vero felt her heart race and her head become woozy. She closed her eyes and he continued:

'Here's my proposal. As Margaret said, the casket is yours but you don't need to benefit from it personally. Sell the jewellery, set up a Trust and give the money to good causes. Goodness knows there are lots of people around here who need help and guidance, a leg up. Margaret and I have a charity which could do with help, if you are interested.'

'Is it called *Fresh Start Yorkshire?*'

'Henry told you?'

'Yes. He said you 'roped him in'.'

'Ha-ha! Yes, well, Margaret did most of the 'roping in'. Anyway, so you know, we help folk like Jimmy and Bert to re-engage with their lives and get traction, train them up. They usually become gardeners and jobbing builders, handymen and handy women, delivery drivers and the like. We have had a few who have made it into IT support and a few who are into Software Engineering. Since we started twelve years ago we have helped around eleven hundred men and women out of despair into productive lives. It is wonderfully satisfying, seeing them progress, reconnect with their families. 'Uplifting', is the word Margaret often uses.'

'Sounds impressive. Where are you based?'

'We have a converted church which we use as our training base. It's on the outskirts of Pickering near our smallholding. We bought it for £100 and used it as our first project, doing all the building and renovation work ourselves.'

'I think I may have seen it. Is it the place with the huge rainbow flag outside? I've been to Pickering often. I used to go walking there with my friend Fennella.'

'Vero, can I share something personal with you?'

'Yes, Kenneth.'

He squeezed her hands then cupping them gently in his own, began stroking her palms with his thumbs.

'Margaret has terminal cancer, the prognosis is that she has six months at most. She's driving herself forwards using painkillers and prayer.'



# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Yes, I wondered about her hair and her hat.'

'And I have dyslexia. Just words, not numbers. When I worked at Barlinnie, I got a lot of help. Many inmates suffered from dyslexia in various forms. I must be honest here, without Margaret, I fear I will not cope. Look, I know it's a big ask but would you be willing to consider becoming her understudy? We have a few spare rooms at our place. Why not come with us now and stay over for a few nights, get the feel of the place. And you said you were looking at places in Pickering. You could use our place as a base and we could help you with local knowledge. What do you say?'

'Yes, Yes please. Thanks.'

Margaret was approaching. Her nose was streaming with blood, dripping onto her boilersuit.

'Kenneth I need help, please.'

'Here's sit down. Use this hankie and press hard at the bridge of your nose. You know the routine. Head back, that's better. You'll feel the blood running down the back of your throat. Your new pills will be making it worse.'

'Yes, that's it easing now.'

'Margaret, what happened?', asked Vero.

'After my phone calls, as I was getting out of the van, I tripped and fell headfirst into the side of the garage.'

'There you are Kenneth, it's just as I said, that jewellery is cursed'.

'No, Vero, let's not be superstitious, please. Margaret is prone to nose bleeds and her new medication has made them more frequent. Let's get her back home and find out what she has been discussing with Tom Lindsay at *Salters*.'

'All good,' Margaret mumbled from behind her hankie, 'I'll tell you later. Yes, home please. I need to lie down for a bit, sorry.'

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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## *Dalby Steading, Pickering*

Vero had not booked accommodation and accepted the invitation to stay over with Margaret and Kenneth.

By agreement with Tom Lindsay of *Salters*, a man called Trevor Winks, his most senior courier, was due shortly to collect the casket and transport it to Leeds for valuation, cleaning and safe-keeping. Trevor did not drive and would travel by train and taxi. They should expect him around 8:00 pm.

Meanwhile, Vero had asked that the casket remain in the locked glove box of the Macrae's van, in plain view on the other side of the yard from the Kitchen.

After discussion with Margaret, Tom Lindsay had agreed an insurance valuation of £25 million for the contents of the casket based on the photographs Margaret had sent him by email and her explanation. He had emailed her a copy receipt stating this valuation; a hardcopy to be delivered by Winks and signed in their presence when he had examined and catalogued the contents.

There was a well-established process. As part of a detailed physical check, Trevor would also take high quality images of every item and send these by email from his laptop to lodge them directly into *Salters* database server in Leeds. This step would complete the loop to put the insurance in place before signing for the items and removing them in exchange for his signature on the hardcopy receipt which he would in turn photograph, emailing a copy to Tom Lindsay, Mrs Vero Fraken and Margaret Macrae as her agent.

A taxi arrived, a white Mercedes. From the rear, a tall gaunt man wearing a Harold Wilson style Gannex raincoat unfolded himself stiffly from the vehicle carrying a large pilot style briefcase. This briefcase was permanently attached to his wrist by a locked bracelet and a stainless steel cord sheathed in black leather. The key code for the bracelet was held by Tom Lindsay and the codes for the three briefcase locks held in Trevor's memory. Winks spoke to the driver agreeing to phone him for the return journey to York station to catch a fast Intercity train back to Leeds. The taxi left.

'Honestly Margaret, that brooch and earrings are giving me the jitters. Do you think he could do his business without bringing that horrible stuff in here, please.'

'Vero, you have a point. Although I'm not normally superstitious, I've must say I been feeling queasy since we found that casket. Kenneth, would you head him off and use our office please. Call me if he needs any information from me.'

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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Ten minutes later Kenneth returned briefly then departed again with a glass of water.

'Poor Trevor has a migraine coming on. He has a Doctor's prescription which helps. Huge pink pills.'

'How is he getting on with the business side?' asked Margaret.

'He's done the Scorpions and is working his way through the pearls. He reckons everything is genuine, high quality, definitely the most expensive consignment he's ever been asked to collect or deliver. He's called his taxi back, it should be here in twenty minutes.'

Trevor Winks waved as he climbed wearily back into the Mercedes.

'Trevor is eighty-three,' said Kenneth. 'He lost his wife five years ago to dementia. Poor man, he doesn't look well. Said he keeps working to fill the time. Better than sitting at home with his memories. His daughter lives in Brussels where she works for the EU as a high-powered negotiator. She phones once a week on Sunday afternoons.'

'Well Vero, phase one complete. Shall we celebrate with a nice mug of herbal tea?'

'Do you have Chamomile or Lavender?'

We make our own Lavender infusion, organic too. Great for a restful night's sleep.'

'Yes, Lavender, please.'

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Vero's guest bedroom smelled of lavender furniture polish. She opened the small wardrobe. It too smelled of lavender, transporting her back to Woodlands Road and the Methodist Church where she had helped Myrna Clancy and had sung in the choir. On the bedside table there was a Gideon's Bible, just the new Testament. Opening the drawer, she placed it out of sight.

She used the en suite shower room then lay under the duvet wearing a fresh pair of knickers from her rucksack. She checked her mobile phone. No call back from Fennella. Just the usual rubbish emails. She powered down the phone, intending to take time to unsubscribe, perhaps tomorrow.

She lay on her back and closed her eyes. Kenneth's smiling face swam into view. Her left hand moved to cup her right breast. Her right hand slipped inside her knickers. It had been weeks since her last pleasuring.

In the Kitchen with the door closed and Vero at the far end of the corridor, Margaret and Kenneth were free to chat alone for the first time since arriving at *The Eyrie* hours before.

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Well, Kenneth, what do you think?'

'Vero Fraken is a very nice person. From what Henry has said of her, she did everything a wife could do for poor Tristram Fraken. I met him only once. It was in connection with our lad Tony Shirley. Tony had been under Tristram Fraken in his time at *The Academy* and he gave the lad a good testimonial, even sponsored him to the tune of £200. Tony's done well since then, running an EOT cleaning outfit in Manchester, reconnected with his wife and two kids. When I met Tristram, he was in hospital for a spell, more or less frozen by his MS. I had to guide his hand to sign the document and get it countersigned by his Consultant. But as happens, he made a partial recovery and was able to move back home. Henry told me Vero was a saint, caring for him brilliantly during his remission period while still working at *The Academy*, keeping all her plates in the air. Vero is a clever woman too, Henry said, lots of degrees and qualifications.'

'But Kenneth, there must be something odd about her. I mean who in their right mind would even contemplate giving away such a lot of money?'

'Come on Margaret, it's what we did with Auntie Marjory's legacy, wasn't it? Using it to found *Fresh Start Yorkshire*. Vero takes the view the jewellery money does not belong to her. You warned her of the dangers of great wealth didn't you? And it's true. She understands that. Vero is from a humble background. I think the idea of being a multi-millionaire is what really frightens her, not the actual jewellery. Henry said she's got a nice place in Harrogate and she has *The Eyrie*. Why would she need more?'

'Yes, Kenneth, I see your point. Still, not many widows would give up such an inheritance so easily, would they?'

'Only someone who wants to do the right thing. It's her call. We should do our best to support her.'

'Yes, Kenneth, you're right. Did you tell her about my illness?'

'Yes.'

'On the face of it, she would make a good replacement, when, you know.'

'I asked her to give it a try, as your understudy.'

'And?'

'She said yes.'

'Good, I like her, she seems to be entirely suitable. So, time for bed.'

'I'll just check the chickens first. Nighty-Nighty, Mrs Mactighty.'

'And to you too, Kenneth.'

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Vero slept late. At nine o'clock Margaret knocked softly on her door, bringing her up from an erotic dream to the reality of another day.

'Good morning Vero. I think you should join us, please. I've had a call from Tom Lindsay.'

'Right away. I'll be with you in two ticks.'

# *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Here, Vero. Coffee, strong sweet and milky,' said Kenneth. 'Brace yourself.'

'Oh, so the jewellery is fake, is it?'

'No,' said Margaret. 'According to Tom, poor Trevor fell onto the tracks in front of a high-speed non-stopping freight train. It was caught on CCTV. He appeared to stumble, put his hand up to his head and walked forward off the platform. He had the briefcase in his hand. York station was closed overnight, tremendous disruption. It has only just fully re-opened. The forensic team confirmed him dead. It is also confirmed that his briefcase and its contents have been totally destroyed, tiny fragments spread over a half mile of track.'

'So I was right, those Scorpions were cursed. Poor Trevor. I hope that is the end of it.'

'Yes, poor, poor man. Tom Lindsay has also confirmed that he has alerted his Insurers who will instigate an independent investigation, he said. Given we have a secure audit trail to verify every stage of the process, Tom expects the Insurers will concede in due course although it may take several months, maybe as many as six at the outside, he said.'

'So be it. I'm glad that casket has been destroy. Do you know, I feel a great load of responsibility has been lifted from my shoulders.'

Tom stood up, reached across and touched her lightly on her shoulder. The exchanged smiles.

'Vero, I'll be off now to collect Jimmy and Bert. I've ordered two skips and hopefully by the end of today we will be able to clear *The Eyrie* and make a start at deep cleaning.'

'Thanks, Kenneth. I'll give Henry a ring and bring him up to speed on everything. Bye.'

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'Right Vero, did you sleep well?'

'Yes, that's the best night's sleep I've enjoyed in years.'

'Hungry?'

'Ravenous.'

'How about scrambled eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms, all home grown and organic. I can juice you some organic apples, also home grown.'

'Feels like I have arrived in Paradise.'

'Coming up. And later, how about we take my Jazz and run round to our *Sanctuary Training Centre*?'

'Sounds good.'

## *The Crimson Scorpion*

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'Kenneth said you are willing to give it a go as my understudy for a bit, see if it suits your expectations?'

'Did he explain that I've been looking for a house in Pickering?'

'Yes, but as you know, there will be a vacancy here fairly soon.'

'Ah, are you suggesting what I think?'

'Give him a few weeks to build up the courage. I know he wants to ask you to marry him.'

'Margaret, if he does, I'll say yes.'

'Yes, that's what I told him this morning, when he raised the issue.'