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Her meeting was scheduled for eleven and it was now nudging twenty past. She was sitting in the rather draughty reception area of *Boyter, Cameron & McGill* whose shopfront signage proclaimed them as Solicitors, Estate Agents and Property Managers. She was glad she had worn her heavy tweed suit, her padded dog-walking coat and heavy fur-lined boots.

Marjory Purvis, retired infant mistress, deacon and church organist/pianist, a spinster soon to be 54, was becoming irritated, although she concealed it by wearing a fixed smile, a technique which had served her well over the years. Forced into retirement and faced with rising fuel and food costs, she had reluctantly sold her fourteen-year-old Mini and bought a second-hand battery-assist bicycle. But riding to St Andrews was out of the question, especially with a steady breeze threatening rain. Another poor summer was being predicted by *Countryfile*, something to do with jet streams in the upper atmosphere.

She had been at the bus stop since 8.55 am waiting for the 9.13 am bus from Kilrenny to St Andrews, a bus which might randomly be early or late, for reasons never explained, despite several letters to *Stagecoach*, the bus operator.

In St Andrews with time to spare, she had browsed the charity shops before eating an acceptable but overpriced cheese scone and weak, cool latte in the student-run café next to St Salvator's Chapel before arriving at the solicitors' offices a clear ten minutes early for her meeting. Marjory Purvis was almost always early, seldom late. She was keyed up, irritated by the unexplained delay and was thinking of asking the severe woman behind the plexiglass Covid screen what was its cause. This odd, off-putting woman occasionally stared enquiringly at her from time to time as if expecting her to speak. However, Margy was not a confrontational person and kept her eyes down, re-reading the letter over and over, especially the part which stated:

"... Under the unusual circumstances stipulated in the Estate of one of our most important clients, it may be to your significant advantage to comply with an unusual request contained therein, should you be able and willing to complete this assignment."

The letter was from Collette Cottel-Boyter.

Thinking back to her early years teaching in St Andrews, Margy recalled a red-haired chubby boy called Colin Boyter, a bookish and clever child with a noticeable stutter. Was Collette his wife?

A tall, slim, red-haired youngish woman breenged through the front door on tall red stiletto boots, twirled to a dramatic stop then gushed:

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'I am so, so very, very sorry to have kept you waiting. You are Miss Poorvees, yes? My motor car she is broken down on the road at a mini-roundabout then she was boomp by a lorry trying to squeeze past, the driver was so naughty to say to me that I ree-ver-seed to him. It was 'orrible. He gave to me lots of shouting and swearing. I call-ed the police and they find some witnesses and he is schar-ged for reckless driving and distoorbing the peace.'

Marjory shook the hand which was extended to her. The grip was firm, mannish.

'Oh, how *terrible* for you. Were you *hurt*, at all?'

'No, I am very, very well. Come, please, we shall drink good strong French coffee and talk. My coosan Colin says you were once upon a time his teacher and help-ed him greatly. He sends his regards. He lives in France nowadays, where he is married to my sister Evette and they grow grapes and make children and breed to alpaca. He is quite, quite mad, you know. And my sister all-soo, mad with love for each other. Imagine, still making babies, at their age too. Come this way please, Miss Poorvees.'

Turning to the plexiglass screen she said loudly, '**Mary, coffee please.**' Then, more quietly, 'Mary, poor dear, she is deaf, more or less, but she is an excellent leep reader.'

'Please, Ms Cottel-Boyter, what *is* this about? I have hardly slept a *wink* since your letter.'

'This is about my aunt, Meezz Annalise Cottel-Boyter. She always spoke highly of you. You have a place in her Will, soobject to conditions. Let me explain. . .'

Sitting low in an ornate, heavily upholstered sofa chair, jammed into a corner by piles of legal files in Collette's tiny, disorganised, and very over-heated office, and now stripped down to her skirt and best blouse, Marjory had learned to her astonishment that Annalise, her quiet, elderly, dowdy friend from Kingsbarns had been far richer than she could have ever imagined. An only child, Annalise had never married.

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From Collette's rambling monologue, I learned Annalise had owned thirty-seven Airbnb holiday letting properties dotted along the villages of the East Nuek of Fife. After the Covid lockdown travel restrictions had eased, business had picked up again, mostly returning clients, mainly French golfing parties.

The original capital for this property empire had been built up by her parents but Annalise had added to this from her own earnings as an Accountant.

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As a twenty-year-old, Marc-Louis Cattel, who had Jewish ancestors, had escaped from Bapaume in the north of France just ahead of the Dunkirk debacle, hitching a ride as an engine room mechanic on a Spanish vessel bound for Dublin. The coastal trader's next port of call was Glasgow where Cattel had disembarked and submitted himself to the authorities, offering to fight for the British. Cattel, who had been studying aeronautics when the conflict started, was vetted, assessed as unsuitable for the RAF because of his poor eyesight then immediately dispatched to RAF Leuchars to assist with aircraft maintenance.

By the end of the War, promoted to Head of Engineering, Marc Cattel had married a girl from St Andrews called Miriam Boyter. In the months after the War, Rolls Royce Aero Engines had tried to lure him to Derby, but Cattel had his own ideas. With a personal loan from William Boyter, his new wife's father, Marc and Miriam opened a garage. Within ten years, the garage had grown into a specialist operation, rebuilding and restoring vintage and veteran cars, mainly Rolls Royces but also more exotic vehicles, particularly French cars, Citroëns and Renaults, large and small.

Aged seventy-three with his health in decline, he had sold up his garage business. Miriam, still in good health, with the help of her deceased father's firm of *Boyter, Cameron & McGill*, had already been re-investing their garage profits in holiday properties and used this new capital to fund several speculative developments in Anstruther and Cellardyke, properties which she sold on at a good profit.

By this stage, Annalise, who had studied Mathematics at Edinburgh University, was a Chartered Accountant, working for a firm called *KPMG*, travelling to Singapore for a spell then to Sidney in Australia before settling in Hong Kong where she became a Partner in the firm. Aged fifty-two, she had retired to return to Scotland to care for her mother who had suffered a stroke.

During her years overseas, Annalise had contracted malaria in several forms. As she grew older, her recurring bouts caused her to become increasingly weakened, fearful and reclusive, spending more time close to home, dealing with the outside world through the portal of her computer monitor, watching cable TV until the small hours then sleeping late. By this stage she was suffering from severe headaches. These were misdiagnosed as migraines when in reality they were the precursor to a more frightening illness waiting to strike.

In her final months, Annalise Boyter-Cattel had drafted her Last Will and Testament. In it she had designated five people who would each receive an equal amount of £50,000 provided they were willing to make a pilgrimage to Bapaume in Northern France, where they would be tasked with interring her ashes in the family grave, with her parents and grandparents. I learned there would be five of us in the burial party, plus Collette as

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chief mourner and principal heir to her aunt's Estate. All our travel and accommodation expenses would be covered.

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We travelled in a luxury mini coach, provided by *Kineil International Travel*. There had been an offer of flights but several of our group had declined, afraid of flying because of Covid. I had been to Edinburgh to renew my passport which had lapsed many years earlier, after my disappointing low budget walking holiday, a pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago Compostela in the north of Spain. It had rained every day and we all suffered from a dreadful summer cold.

While in Edinburgh, I took the opportunity of a 'Mondays only' discount walk-in deal at the *Sheraton Grand Hotel & Spa*, opting for a full treatment session of hair, nails, brows and waxing and a relaxing massage with hot stones and fragrant oil. I also bought a few new clothes, my first purchases since well before lockdown. Avoiding black, I chose a classy dark blue outfit at Harvey Nichols from their collection for 'The Taller Woman', every item matching perfectly. In M&S, I bought new underclothes and a shorty red nightie and pants combo. In St Andrews, from Rogersons, I bought a pair of expensive real leather dark blue low-heeled shoes which I felt would be useful for church and my organ and piano playing. My Mum would have called them 'walking out shoes'. They fitted perfectly - *absolute bliss!*

I was last on board, picked up from Kilrenny where I was standing with my overnight case on the edge of our village beside the sign:

Kilrenny Twinned with Bapaume

When I was settled and clunk-clicked, we fiddled west to join the M90 motorway then set off south. Everyone was cheery, looking forward to an interesting trip to Bapaume¹, to lay the ashes to rest in the grave of the family of Annalise Cottel and complete our mission.

I was surprised by the three talkative, glammed-up dumpy thirty-something women. It seemed obvious that they had also splashed out on new outfits, dressed more for a disco night than a funeral. The other 'pilgrim' was a reserved, elegant, fresh-faced, outdoors man. I judged him to be ages with me, learning later that he was five years my junior.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bapaume>

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Our driver was a forty-six-year-old called Denise Daley, originally from Dublin, most definitely a 'character'; 'a round peg in a round hole', as my Mum would have said. Until settling in Carnoustie a few years earlier, Denise had been a nomad, wandering the world with a series of companions, (male and female) before 'finding' Sally Devlin in Tasmania. Sally, who was originally from Dundee, had 'lured' Denise to her homeland where they had married and now had two 'perfect' donor-sperm toddlers, both boys, Adam and Zain.

Edward was well-built but not heavy. He was well over six feet which made me feel less self-conscious about my height. He wore lightweight, quick-drying Rohan travel clothes like my own. His shirt and trousers were a pale green, a shade I had not seen before. He looked sinewy fit with curly, salt and black pepper hair, clean shaven with good skin, deeply tanned. He was good looking in an offbeat way with a long face, a large thin beak of a nose and long ears which huge thick lobes. He had light-brown eyes, sad and soft.

He smiled shyly at me and held my gaze, lifting his bushy eyebrows, as if 'enquiring'. When I smiled back, his eyes changed to a naughty, knowing look and I felt the same 'zing' ripple through me, the same 'stirring' I had experienced on first meeting David.

It was then I began to dream, to hope.

In the beginning, we each had double seats. My seat was at the front just behind and to the left of Denise. Unless I am driving, I am not a good traveller. On advice from the pharmacist in Anstruther, I had a selection of travel sickness pills but had held back from taking them, hoping I would manage. She had warned me to be careful, to keep the dose as low as possible because of my HRT medication, prescribed to help lift me out of the doldrums. I need not have worried, Denise was an excellent driver, stopping every two hours or so, taking us to nice places just off the motorway.

On our first overnight we stayed at a family run hotel in the Forest of Arden. We all had double rooms with single occupancy. On that first evening we were subdued, not sure of ourselves in strange company. But Denise soon had us laughing with her raft of rapid-fire tales about her madcap experiences.

Over a nightcap, released from our earlier reserve, we shared our stories. Thankfully, no one mentioned the money aspect of our trip.

I was intrigued to learn that Doctor Edward Tasker had taught Modern Languages at St Andrews and that he had lived for many years in the nearby village of Kingsbarns, only a few miles from me in Kilrenny.

Listening in awe, we learned Ed's slight limp was the result of an accident while riding his bicycle to work seven years earlier. He had been driven off the road into a ditch by an

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elderly lady driver overtaking him on a blind summit. Her car had smashed head on into another vehicle and both drivers had died at the scene.

Ed had been hospitalised for several months and in the aftermath had decided to retire from teaching. He now earned a living as a freelance consultant, translating documents online for the European Parliament, creating accurate grammar perfect versions in German, Spanish, French, Italian or English from the original digital recordings of the debates emailed to him from Brussels.

When the others had gone off to bed, I learned he was also a self-investor with a safe portfolio of investments, building on the capital he had inherited from his parents who had owned a small brewery in Yorkshire which he had sold when they died.

His connection to Annalise had been as a neighbour and friend, living in adjacent villas in Kingsbarns. Since both spoke French fluently, they had formed a close bond, playing golf as a pair at Ellie Golf Club, occasionally partnering visiting French golfers who were staying in one of Annalise's holiday cottages.

During her final decline, Ed had been her companion, working alongside her support team before she had been moved to the care home.

The three other ladies, Jean, Morag and Kate worked together at Bradshaw House, an upmarket care home in St Andrews where Annalise had lived out her final months before succumbing to Motor Neurone Disease.

When it was *my turn* to reveal myself, I told the others an anodyne version of my own life and of my link to Annalise through her attendance at Kilrenny Parish Church. I explained that on her first visit, our minister had been absent (a heavy cold). It had been short notice but, as I was a trained lay preacher, I had led the worship service, delivering a short homily on 'Love and Friendship', peppering it with references to Barnabas, my favourite Apostle, emphasising his gentle, persuasive kindness and his tireless efforts to bring new recruits into the early Christian church.

After the service, Annalise had waited behind to tell me she was a lapsed Catholic and asked if it was still acceptable that she attend when she felt the need.

Of course, I did not ever reveal my two affairs. Why would I?

To do so would be unfair. It would sully the memories of the two wonderfully kind men involved, two men who wanted and needed me, accepting me despite my flaws. And to tell anyone about them would rob me of the secret pleasures which I still enjoy when I think back on those wonderful times.

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But first, before I tell you about my secret lovers, I should explain another well-hidden secret about my life before Mum and I moved to Kilrenny, after she managed to persuade her manager to give us a joint mortgage sufficient to make this huge step up in our lives after I got my first secure job as a teacher. This is *not* a huge house, merely a stone fronted end terrace with a good-sized garden, two small bedrooms to the front, a tiny bathroom, a compact kitchen, and, at the rear, a good-sized single living-dining room which opens onto a small south-facing conservatory cum greenhouse. There is a small, leaky wooden garage which I use for garden tools. When Mum died, I discovered a death policy which she had been paying into for years and the amount it paid out allowed me to clear the outstanding mortgage, with a few hundred pounds to spare.

To be honest, when we first moved in, I was *ecstatic*. And even now I still love my little house and *especially* my garden.

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As an only child raised in a Kirkcaldy tenement from the age of four by a widowed mother who worked as a senior clerkess in a building society office, I had never had money to spend on nice clothes until I found my first job as a teacher.

My father, Daniel Purvis, about whom my memory is very vague, was a miner who died in a roof collapse at Seafield Colliery, mine workings which extended out under the Firth of Forth from the entrance at Kirkcaldy. After that we moved in with Granny Venters, my mother's mum. I've seen photographs and Dad was a huge man but skinny, like me.

With a very slight turn in my left eye, a defect which was not 'corrected' until I was eighteen, I always had felt awkward, an outsider. Before then, before my eye was sorted, boys that I fancied did not even look at me. I was too tall, too odd, too 'different'. I suppose I could have found someone but not someone I wanted and who also wanted me. Perhaps, because of this absence of a father figure and a feeling of being unusual, to be wanted and needed by a man proved to be a very powerful aphrodisiac.

Apart from a few inebriated, tantalising 'fumbings' at parties during my time at university, my first proper lovemaking had been with Vincent, my assistant head.

Vince was separated from his wife Meg who had remained in Aberdeen with their two girls, Anne (5) and Kirsten (3). From Vince I learned that after Kirsten's difficult and complicated birth, Meg had rejected his advances, even though he had taken the step of having a vasectomy. As the months became years, she became increasingly shrewish, always ready to criticise and complain. After

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counselling, a trial separation had been suggested. Taking the chance of a promotion to our school in St Andrews, Vince had moved away, keeping in daily contact with his family by Skype.

Vince had an attractive almost girlish face. He was half a head smaller than me, slightly built, very softly spoken, eager to please, fluttering from task to task, like a butterfly. Like me, he loved classical music and joined the choir I was a member of at that time. Over a few months that first autumn, we drifted closer, sharing 'special' Friday nights over takeaway meals in his small flat over the Cooperative shop in St Andrews.

I never stayed overnight; Mum expected me home by eleven o'clock at the latest.

Our lovemaking was always slow and gentle, conducted in the half-light glow of a small bedside lamp with the blinds down and curtains closed. He always made sure the bedroom convector radiator was at full heat. After eating, we washed up our dishes, brushed our teeth and made his living area spick and span before moving to the bedroom. Lying side by side on his narrow double bed, we undressed each other while he whispered to me in fractured Italian learned from Annamaria, a colleague from his first school in Forfar, a romantic liaison which had lasted until she returned to Italy, this before he had met and married Meg.

On the edge of being gay, Vince had a rather disappointingly small slim penis which he tried to hide from me. But he compensated by applying a squirt of warm aromatherapy oil then caressing me with his wonderful hands, bringing me to the edge of ecstasy and holding me there forever, until I pleaded for satisfaction which he delivered with the unbelievable middle finger of his left hand. These orgasms were so, so much better than my mail-order fleecy glove and vibrating dildo.

When I was recovered, he turned off the bedside light and it became my 'duty' to repay him by scolding him for being naughty, pulling down his boxer shorts then spanking his bottom softly. When he was 'ready', he kneeled astride me in the dark, leaning back against my raised knees, self-masturbating to a full release, always with his catch phrase explosion:

"OH MY GOD! THANK YOU, MARGY, THAT WAS WONDERFUL".

Then, almost at once, he rose, slipped into his boxer shorts, turned on the bedside lamp and fetched a soft warm damp cloth and wiped me clean, dried me off with a small fragrant towel then cuddled under the duvet beside me, his head on my breasts, his left hand moving again, stroking, feathering, squeezing, exploring, renewing the cycle of arousal.

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That first night, after my orgasm, when he turned out the lamp and described what he wanted, I had refused but Vince pleaded and pleaded until I relented. The next time was easier as I knew what to expect and I tried to relax, closing my eyes, waiting for his suppressed mewling and the hot splashes which followed. By the fourth or fifth time his needy imperative felt 'normal' and I began to enjoy giving him what he described as 'his just rewards'.

In the beginning, those special Friday meals and the exotic sex which followed took place only on his free weekends when he did not go back to Aberdeen see his girls. After Christmas we were also meeting on Tuesdays which, as far as Mum knew, was supposed to be our choir night. The choir had disbanded after the Christmas Concert when the MD had resigned claiming we would never be good enough.

Our liaison ended after two years when Vince moved back to Aberdeen to care for his wife who had contracted MS.

Even now, during my lonely nights in Kilrenny, I often think of Vince, imagining him beside me under my duvet. He had the loveliest pale grey eyes, the most wonderful soft and clever hands, and a beautiful high tenor voice. What I remember in particular, was Vince nibbling, licking and sucking my ears, my nipples, my fingers and toes and other secret places.

My only other proper affair, one which lasted almost ten years, was with David, who worked for Boots as a peripatetic branch auditor and occasional emergency locum. We met one summer at a week-long mediaeval music festival at St Salvator's. He had confident bright blue eyes, always ready for mischief. We just seemed to 'click'. I think it was his relaxed cheerful manner which hooked me. In my lowest heels we were equal in height. Best of all was, I could tell that he fancied me, right from the first moment we smiled at each other. It is so, so nice to be wanted, to be needed.

David was married to Elspeth, an NHS physiotherapist. They had three grown-up sons, all at university, living away from home in a flat he was buying for them, in Glasgow. From little clues and hints, I gleaned that Elspeth had a lover, a woman called Netta, a colleague from the same NHS health centre in his hometown of Dalkeith, south of Edinburgh.

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Aged forty-eight when we met, he was nine years older than me, slightly overweight, with a posh and plummy baritone voice. Things moved quickly from that first night and I was soon to discover he was still vigorous and like me, very needy.

We skipped the music festival on the following evening and had a meal at a very posh hotel called Rusacks where we drank a bottle of very expensive red Burgundy. With his arm around my waist, he led me to his room upstairs where we undressed each other.

David was very well endowed, almost frighteningly so, and he liked to display his manhood. Standing back, he leered at me and I leered right back, grinning. From a fresh box of ten, he snicked a condom sachet with his teeth and passed the latex ring to me. At his bidding, I unrolled the sheath into place over his erection, the first time I had ever touched a man's penis.

The bed was an American king size model, the ultimate in luxury.

During foreplay on that first night, when I was fully ready, David told me right off he preferred to be 'ridden', turning to lie on his back, steadying me as I eased myself down onto him, my hands resting on his chest, a verdant mass of soft, black curly hair. Safely 'in the saddle' with his hands massaging my breasts, I learned with practise to master the art of bringing us both from an initial slow 'rising walk' to a most satisfactory 'galloping' climax.

David's designated area was Fife, usually overnighing in a hotel less than an hour's drive from Kilrenny. Our routine followed the pattern of that first night at Rusacks. As we ate and shared our bottle of good wine, we used the time to catch up on our news prior to slipping upstairs to enjoy several couplings, always setting an alarm to enjoy a final 'canter' before showering and dressing for an early breakfast so that I was not late for school.

The occasions I remember best were at the upmarket Balathie House Hotel, in Perthshire. This was an upgrade, a deal brokered by the HR department at Boots. David was needed as a safe pair of hands at a large pharmacy in the centre of Perth. This pharmacy, which was linked to a busy health centre, was in disarray, stunned when the usual pharmacist and his two lady pharmacy technicians were killed outright in a five-vehicle road accident while driving to work on an icy February morning. This posting, which was expected to last a few weeks, went on for over two months with me visiting Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays except when I was 'inconvenienced'.

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Travelling to these varied locations to meet David for our secret overnight trysts always felt like going on an exotic holiday. I told Mum I was attending educational conferences and training courses, which she accepted without questioning me, a sign that she was already in decline.

Gradually, over our years together, I dreamt up various scenarios in which David might leave his wife and we would set up a home together, although I never managed to work out what we would do about Mum.

My dream was shattered when David contracted prostate cancer. Once diagnosed, the cancer developed very quickly and he died on the operating table, only six weeks after the initial finding, his body already riddled with secondaries.

I was devastated. Within six months of losing David, my mother also passed away after years of increasing loss of mobility due to arthritis and osteoporosis. Then came the third blow: because of my poor record of attendance and lateness during the preceding few years caring for Mum and being late returning from visiting David, I was forced into early retirement, fortunately with a fully enhanced pension and a small severance sum.

That year was my 'annus horribilis' and it left me sad, lonely and aimless.

As the months passed, I settled into the doldrums, rescued in part by my new friendship with Annalise. After her first visit to Kilrenny Parish Church, Annalise became a regular, travelling from Kingsbarns in her distinctive canary yellow Renault 4. As the weeks grew into months, we fell into a routine of taking day trips to visit gardens together on Open Days, car sharing in turn.

It was during these visits I realised that, like me, Annalise was also subject to bouts of melancholy and depression. This common suffering was a bond, of sorts; two lonely women who enjoyed chatting about plants and music, meeting most days to walk Bella my latest rescue dog along the beach from the car park at Cellardyke to Caipie Coves and back to our cars to drink takeaway coffees purchased from the kiosk at the Tidal Pool.

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The next morning, we set out early from the Forest of Arden, travelling onwards to the Chunnel, arriving by late afternoon at our hotel in Bapaume near the Belgian border.

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Ed and I agreed to freshen up then meet to walk around the town in order to get our bearings, stretch our legs and escape from the constant inane chatter of the other four women whose topics of conversation focussed on TV shows like *Strictly Come Dancing* and the many soap operas which, from the way they relived them with quotes of "he said" and "she said", appeared as if to them the television characters were real.

Using Ed's iPhone, we found our way to the Eglise St Vaas, where we were due to meet with Collette Collet-Boyter the following morning. Collette's busy diary meant she must fly in for the ceremony only then fly off at once back to Scotland.

When we arrived back at our hotel, we learned that Denise had whisked the other three ladies off by taxi to a shopping mall which housed a late-night food court. This was over an hour away, in the next town. Denise had left a note at reception, asking us to telephone her for directions if we wished to join her.

We decided we would eat at the hotel where the menu seemed very attractive and not too pricey. I was conscious that Collette had said she would cover all travel, meals and incidentals but she hadn't made it clear about who would pay for drinks.

After a shower, I dressed in a new blouse, slacks and sandals. I met Ed in the resident's lounge for a G&T while we selected our food from the menu. Ed seemed to be keen on an Italian wine but deferred to my suggestion we try the house red, a budget Cote du Rhône.

Seated, Ed smiled and said:

'Margy, have you thought what you might do with your windfall?'

'Oh yes! I'm planning to buy a new car, an all-electric Mini. How about you?'

'I thought I might do a cruise. Not a monster ship. Something smaller. Maybe a river cruise.'

'That sounds nice.'

'They offer themed cruises with expert speakers and day trips by coach from the ship to places of interest along the route.'

'Yes, I read about one to Switzerland and article in *The Guardian*. It made it all sound perfect.'

'Yes, I read the same article. Anyway, when I learned about Annalise's bequest, I took a chance and booked a cabin on one. It's a Mozart cruise.'

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'Mozart! I absolutely *do* love Mozart! Lucky you! I've always dreamed of travelling to Switzerland.'

'Yes, I managed to secure a last-minute booking, a cancellation. But this one is not to Switzerland. It departs from Amsterdam, final destination Budapest. It leaves four weeks today, early September.'

'Wow, Ed! lucky you!'

'Margy, you've hardly touched your wine. Is it not to your taste?'

'To be honest? No, not very much. It's too, eh ...'

'Too acidic?'

'Yes, I find it quite bitter, actually.'

'They have a very nice Barolo on their list. Shall we try it? My treat.'

'Eh, well Ed, if you're sure?'

'*Certissimo!*'

Ed waved to our waitress and explained in fluent French. The woman was very apologetic, assured us there would be no charge for the offending wine which was removed and replaced by a delicious Italian red. I suspect it was three or four times more costly than the one I had picked.

'Thank you, Ed. This wine is *absolutely* scrumptious. I'm hopeless in conflict situations like that.'

'*Bonne Santé*, Margy.'

'Yes, Ed, *Salute!*'

'Margy, look, I know this is a long shot, but would you consider joining me on this Mozart cruise. Look, before you say no, I should explain, I have a suite booked, with two bedrooms so you would not have to put up with me snoring. And I promise, no hanky-lanky, honest injun!'

'Wow! Ed, let me think about it, please. You do know I have a dog. I would need to check and, well, you know . . .'

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'No rush, Margy. It's just they are pressing me on passenger details, something to do with security checks, they say. But I'm sure I can stall them for a few more days. Ah, here come our starters! Beats an M&S ready meal any day.'

'Yes, Ed, I know exactly what you mean.'

'*Salute! And Buon appetito!*'

'*Yes, Ed, Buon appetito!*'

That night I could not sleep. Lying in the dark with him through the wall in the next room. I mulled over my conversation with Doctor Edward Tasker and more or less decided to accept his offer, probably because he reminded me of David. And Ed might be my last chance to escape from the bleak, lonely future which beckoned.

The next day passed in a sort of blur. Collette appeared around noon with the necessary papers to sanction this act of burial and to authorise our bank transfers. It transpired the local mayor was her second cousin who attended briefly to ensure there were no hiccups.

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When Denise dropped me at Kilrenny, my mind was still racing, leaping about, filled with flashes of Vince and David who then merged into Edward.

The heating had been off since Easter and although it was late July, the weather was dull and cold with a thick haar (sea fog) rolling in off the sea, blotting out my view of the Isle of May. The house felt miserable and for the first time in months I turned the heating to 'High'.

I rang Jane, my friend and deputy pianist from church and asked how my hypersensitive Labradoodle had fared in my absence.

'Actually, sorry to say Margy but your Bella has settled here very nicely with Tasha and Letty. They're out in the back yard now, tearing round like puppies.'

'Good, do you mind if I leave her with you for another couple of days, please.'

'Sure. But it means I'll be taking them through to Dundee tomorrow, to visit Mum. Is that OK?'

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'Yes, and thanks again, Jane. It's just that I need to get some new clothes. I want to go down to Edinburgh again or maybe through to Buchanan Street in Glasgow.'

'More new clothes? Off somewhere nice again?'

'Not for a few weeks. But only if it all works out. I haven't actually made a final decision. I have a meeting tonight, to discuss arrangements over a meal.'

'Somewhere nice?'

'We're going to Rusacks, by taxi.'

'Wow, Margy! Splashing out big time, and very well deserved too, if I might add.'

'Jane, if I *do* say yes to this other trip, it would mean leaving Bella with you for around five weeks. It's a river cruise from Amsterdam to Budapest followed by a rail and bus tour of Switzerland and Italy.'

'Fantastic! And quite right too. If anyone deserves a special blessing it must be you.'

'But Jane, don't say anything to anyone, will you? It's not settled, still just a possibility.'

'Well, Margy, if you do go, don't worry about Bella. She'll be fine here with me.'

'Thanks, Jane. See you on Sunday at church!'

I checked the kitchen clock and switched on the immerser for a hair wash and bath.

I changed my pillowcases, sheet and duvet cover and draped my new nightie and panties across the duvet. By leaving the bedroom door open, Ed would be sure to spot 'my offering' if he decided to call in later for a nightcap.

Finally, I scooted round with my *Dyson Animal* and a damp cloth before topping up the scent in my diffusers.

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Much, much later, when we had learned to trust each other more, Ed shared his own sad story, explaining that two decades earlier he had been married briefly to a Canadian, a girl called Lois who had been a researcher in Psychology at St Andrews. He had been surprised and flattered by her attentions. Their marriage had lasted only three years. She had asked for a divorce, insisting on a 'no fault, clean break' with no marriage settlement.

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Only at this stage had Lois explained she had thrown herself at Edward after a rejection by her former lover in Toronto, someone who was married with two children. However, over her time in St Andrews, they had kept in constant touch by telephone and email. A few months earlier, Vera, the woman she loved, had finally obtained a divorce from her abusive husband, gaining full custody of her children. Both Lois and Vera were keen to try again. Lois, now with a PhD, had been offered a teaching post at McGill University in Montreal, her home city, where they planned to settle.