

**ONLY
THE
INNOCENT**

Rachel Abbott

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PROLOGUE

Bright sunshine flooded through the tall windows, touching each surface with its dazzling light. Every corner of the room was bathed in a soft yellow glow, and its elegant proportions were displayed to their best advantage. It was a disaster. The one thing she hadn't allowed for was a sunny day.

Maximum impact—that's what she was striving for. The clothes, the hair, the jewellery; her attention to detail had been impeccable, and any false note would influence his perception of her credibility. But instead of completing the illusion by creating subtle lighting and atmospheric shadows, the room was more akin to a floodlit stage. It was the end of October in London. It was supposed to be raining.

She didn't know what to do. Should she close the curtains? No. That would never work. Too obvious by far, and he wouldn't like it. But time was running out, and she had to think fast. She adjusted everything quickly until she was sure it was as perfect as it could be, angling a wingback leather armchair so that it almost faced the door, sufficient that she could see his face without turning her head. But not straight on. That would give her nowhere to hide. And the light from the window had to be behind her, of course, throwing her face into enough shadow to disguise anything that her eyes might inadvertently reveal.

Her preparations were complete. All she could do now was wait, and think of the inevitability of what was about to happen. Every muscle in her body was taut, and her shoulders were rigid. She forced herself to relax. She heard the sound of a taxi drawing to a halt and a car door slamming. She quickly glanced in the mirror to check that everything was perfect, and was alarmed to see the inner turmoil betrayed in her eyes. She breathed deeply and suppressed the thoughts and images that were crowding her mind, fighting to compose herself.

She heard nothing more for several minutes, but she knew he was in the house. There were no footsteps; the deep pile carpet in the hall and up the staircase to the third floor smothered any sound. But he was moving straight towards the bedroom. Every nerve ending in her body told her so.

The door opened slowly but he remained in the doorway, his expression inscrutable. He didn't speak for several moments, and she steadily returned his gaze. Nobody could deny that he was a handsome man. His tailored black suit hung perfectly on his tall, lean frame, and his grey-flecked hair was as immaculate as always. He looked every inch the successful man that he was. It was no wonder the media loved him so much.

Finally he smiled, the curve of his lips suggesting only the slightest trace of the victory he was no doubt feeling. Her heart jerked unsteadily, but her eyes didn't falter.

"I knew you'd come." He paused, and his glance raked her body. "You really had no choice, did you?" He nodded, as if with a sense of self-satisfaction. "You look perfect."

Knowing she could afford no mistakes, she had chosen carefully—selecting a black leather knee-length skirt with sheer black stockings coupled with a white silk-knit V-necked top, designed to cling lightly to her breasts and offer a just a hint of what was beneath. Her legs were artfully crossed showing a glimpse of thigh, and her simple but elegant gold jewellery completed the picture. It seemed that he was pleased. She had passed the first test, and prayed that she could keep her emotions in check for just a little longer.

"Why the gloves?" he asked, noticing for the first time the elbow-length black silk gloves she was wearing.

"I thought you'd like them."

He smiled again, and she knew he was mocking her. "And you were right."

He pointed to the ice bucket that she had placed on the marble-topped console table, together with two flutes.

"Champagne! I see we're celebrating." He chuckled without mirth.

She reached across and, willing her hands not to shake, she poured a thin trickle of the pale golden bubbles into both glasses. He walked towards the table, picked up a glass, and took one careful sip.

"Delicious, but a bad idea. I don't think we should be dulling the senses, do you?" He carefully put the glass back on the table, and looked straight into her eyes. "You've taken the initiative. That's good. Does this mean you're going to take charge today?"

She stood and walked purposefully towards him, her high stiletto heels sinking into the pile of the carpet. She knew exactly what he wanted, and she touched his cheek with a single gloved finger.

"It does. I hope you're ready for this."

She didn't need to wait for a reply. All she had to do was sound authoritative, and she knew he would comply. "Take your clothes off. All of them. Then lie down on the bed, and wait until I'm ready."

His eyes narrowed, but she knew he was pleased.

"And what are you going to do to me?" he asked, feigning a coolness that he was clearly no longer feeling.

"For now, I'm just going to watch." She forced herself to look into his eyes. They were glittering with excitement, although his face continued to betray little or no emotion. She had seen that look before, and she knew just how dangerous it could be. She pushed the fear to the back of her mind.

He walked across the room, and slowly began removing his clothes, facing her and watching her all the time. Each item that he removed was carefully folded and laid on a chair, until he was completely naked. As always, the sense of the unknown was arousing him and she desperately wanted to look away.

"And now?" he asked.

"Lie on the bed, just as I told you," she answered, her voice becoming stronger as she gained confidence.

He moved towards the four-poster bed in the centre of the room, his proud stance betraying how conscious he was of his near-perfect body. His lightly tanned back, muscular buttocks, and long firm thighs could have belonged to a man half his age. He turned and lay down on the bed, smiling with a sense of triumph.

"I'm ready." His voice was deepening with barely suppressed desire, and she smothered a shudder.

"See what I've got for you," she said with what she hoped was a convincing smile.

From her bag she drew out five matching silk scarves, in a deep rich crimson. "Your favourite colour."

He started to lick his lips as his excitement mounted. His features had transformed into an expression that was almost animal, his lips swollen with lust and his eyes blazing with expectation.

She moved over to the bed, and carefully and expertly tied first each arm, and then each leg to one of the four wooden bedposts. She took the fifth scarf, and hesitated just for a second.

With a quick intake of breath and a visible straightening of her spine, she advanced towards the head of the bed.

"Today's going to be special—I don't want you to see anything until the very last minute."

His answering smile held more than a trace of self-satisfaction, clearly believing that her only aspiration was to give him pleasure.

Without a word, she firmly tied the scarf over his eyes, and moved towards the door. His naked body displayed his excitement, and in a voice barely recognisable he asked, "What happens next?" She glanced across at him and forced herself to respond.

"Now you must wait. I promise you, it will be more than you are expecting."

Quickly she moved into the luxurious bathroom adjoining the master bedroom. She was out of her clothes in seconds, and carefully slid into her costume, never removing the long black gloves. In less than three minutes, she was ready.

As she moved back into the bedroom, she could see that his arousal had not diminished for a second; the anticipation had simply heightened his passion. But a note of uncertainty crept into his voice when he heard a slight rustle as she moved, and then the almost imperceptible sound of two objects—one by one—being carefully placed on the bedside table.

"What are you wearing? I thought it would be silk."

She moved her gloved hands down to the scarf that was blindfolding him, and quickly and firmly slid it down from his eyes to his mouth, where she pulled it tightly into place.

He blinked a little, and looked at her in her costume. His arousal had reached such a peak that it took several seconds for him to register what he was seeing, and he stared at her with a look of horror as he tried in vain to cry out.

The mask over her face revealed only her eyes, and they were filled with a mixture of feelings too complex to interpret. Only the few who knew her well would have recognised the most significant of those feelings—that of sheer determination.

She reached across to the bedside table where moments before she had placed a syringe. With a quick indrawn breath she parted the dark hairs in his groin with a gloved hand, and plunged the syringe in as deeply as possible. A low moan was all that could be heard as he

fought a futile battle to break free. She knew that the syringe hadn't hurt too much, but she also knew that he understood what it meant.

And then he was still.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Chief Inspector Tom Douglas glanced out of the window of his apartment as he quickly moved around the room collecting the few things he needed. The view across the wide, murky river to Greenwich was one that normally gave him real pleasure, but right now he needed to focus and not waste time looking at the scenery.

Bloody stupid having a couple of glasses of wine with his lunch, but then again how could he have known that his first big case with the Met was going to fall on his day off? Sod's law, no doubt. His performance in the coming days had to be impeccable, and he needed to win the respect and trust of his new team. Asking for a car to be sent as a result of midday drinking was certainly not the start he'd been hoping for.

He hurriedly looked around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, but his mantra of "phone, keys, wallet, notebook, warrant card" was so ingrained that he didn't think it likely. Nevertheless, he checked and double-checked that he had everything. Slamming the apartment door behind him, he raced down the six flights of stairs and arrived at the double front doors of his apartment block just as a dark blue car screeched around the corner and drew to a halt. Recognising the driver as his new sergeant, Becky Robinson, Tom opened the passenger door and jumped in. The car was moving again before he had so much as fastened his seat belt.

"Sorry about this, Becky. I didn't mean to drag you all the way out here," Tom said.

"That's okay, sir. A pretty posh place you've got, if you don't mind me saying so."

Tom turned slightly in his seat to look at Becky. He couldn't quite decide if this was just an observation or if she was fishing for information, but her dark, shiny hair was swinging forward and obscuring her face, so he wasn't able to judge. He really didn't have any wish to explain how a policeman, and a divorced policeman at that, could afford to live in a smart apartment in the heart of Docklands. Now was neither the time nor the place.

Fortunately Becky was concentrating on her driving, which seemed to involve a lot of rapid acceleration interspersed with fierce braking. He was in for a bumpy ride, and was slightly hesitant about distracting her.

"Think you can drive and talk at the same time, Becky?"

"No problem. The traffic's a bit heavy, but I can weave around it."

Tom had little doubt about that, and was relieved that she didn't apparently feel the need to look at him as she spoke.

"Okay, what do we know? All I was told on the phone was 'suspicious death' — and that it was one for me. I gather the incident took place in central London, so I guess that's where we're heading?"

“Yep. To the heart of Knightsbridge. The victim is none other than Hugo Fletcher. He’s dead. Obviously. The first officers called to the scene said it looks like it could be murder, but it’s not a sure thing. That’s all I know at the moment.”

Becky swerved violently to the left to avoid a black cab and pressed her hand hard on the horn. The cabbie stuck his middle finger up at her, and Tom couldn’t help feeling some sympathy for him, despite Becky’s mutterings about taxi drivers.

In the interests of arriving in one piece, he kept his thoughts to himself for a few moments. Hugo Fletcher, of all people. What a way to start his career in the Met. He knew something of the victim’s public life—everybody did. The media couldn’t get enough of him, and the man in the street thought he was some sort of demigod. But Tom actually knew very little about his private life. He remembered that there was a wife whom he had proudly, and rather nauseatingly in Tom’s opinion, presented as his “soul mate” a few years ago. But then there was a bit of gossip about her that he couldn’t quite remember and now she seemed to have dropped out of the public eye completely.

Bugger. This case was going to have a hell of a high profile, and they were going to have to suffer a relentless stream of inane questions from the press. People often asked how he coped with having to convey the worst possible news to families, but at least he could show how sorry he was. He didn’t stick a microphone under a grieving relative’s nose and ask how they were feeling.

The heavy traffic had slowed Becky to a crawl, so it seemed safe to ask her a couple more questions.

“Who found him?”

“The cleaner. She’s waiting to talk to us at the house, although I gather she’s pretty incoherent. DCS Sinclair’s off at some fancy wedding in Bath and a car’s gone to pick him up and take him directly to the scene. He’s asked me to be family liaison officer on this one because of its high profile. I did the job for yonks before my promotion, so it’s no problem.”

“Have we managed to get hold of the next of kin?” Tom asked.

“Afraid not. He was found at his house in Knightsbridge where he usually stays during the week, but his family home is in Oxfordshire. The local police have been despatched but there’s nobody home. There’s a daughter from his previous marriage, but as far as we know at the moment that’s it. We’ll send one of the locals to the ex-wife’s house as soon as we know what’s going on with the current wife. It would never do for the ex to know first, would it?”

Becky spotted a gap in the traffic, and put her foot down—dodging between cars and changing lanes before slamming her brakes on again. Although it was only about eight miles from Tom’s apartment to Hugo Fletcher’s house in Egerton Crescent, the early-afternoon London traffic was a nightmare.

“I’m going to put the siren on, sir, if that’s okay. We need to get a shift on.” Becky tucked her hair behind her ears and flicked the switch on the dashboard. Immediately what looked like an ordinary saloon car had flashing headlights and a siren to clear a way through the dawdling Saturday shoppers.

For the sake of his safety and sanity, Tom decided that silence would be the best option, but he was actually quite impressed. Although Becky’s driving appeared erratic, she didn’t miss a single opportunity to nip into the smallest gap between two cars, or swerve into the

next lane when the narrowest of openings presented itself. Her face was a picture of concentration and determination.

Despite her best efforts, it still took a good fifteen minutes to get to the scene, which had already been sealed off. Tom looked at the elegant crescent of white painted houses, adorned on the outside with clipped box and bay shrubs. Clearly money was no object in this family—but even that hadn't prevented the untimely death of such a famous and well-respected man.

He was less impressed with the crowd gathered in the street outside, cameras at the ready. "Shit. Becky—if the wife's not been told yet we have to keep a lid on this. Have a word, would you? I'm not at my best when dealing with that lot."

He made a beeline for the front door before anybody could shout any questions at him.

"Top floor, sir," the young PC on the door helpfully informed him as Tom struggled into his coveralls. He made his way up the stairs, taking in the sumptuous surroundings. Over recent months, luxury had become no stranger to him—but somehow this house spoke of centuries of wealth in a way that was not so familiar.

He stopped at the bedroom door. The crime scene team had just about finished and were packing up to go. The pathologist was by the bed, performing his usual tricks. Tom looked around. It was a light and airy room, but strangely only the carpet seemed to have any relationship with the twenty-first century. For Tom's taste, the large four-poster was better suited to a country house, and the heavy pieces of dark wooden furniture made the room feel more oppressive than it should have done. Mind you, Tom acknowledged to himself, the dead body on the bed didn't do much to lighten the atmosphere.

He took in the two glasses of champagne, now gone flat, and could see that prints had been taken from them. And there was still condensation on the outside of the bucket, suggesting that the ice hadn't long been melted.

There was something tragic about this setting. An occasion that had clearly begun as a celebration or romantic tryst had ended with a dead body and an endless stream of men in white coveralls. Tom could picture the scene: glasses raised in a toast; a private smile full of promise; a kiss, perhaps. So what went wrong?

A young crime scene technician with pale skin and a spotty face looked up from where he was packing up his equipment and pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"Not much to go on, sir. We've got some prints, but nothing to compare them with other than the victim, so they could be legit. The only thing we have found of any consequence is one very long hair. Discovered it in the bathroom. It's a red hair—I don't know if that's significant. We'll have it checked out and get back to you. If we're lucky it might have some root attached to it. And then there's the knife."

Tom turned and glanced back at the bed, with a puzzled frown. "Based on a conspicuous absence of blood, I can only presume he wasn't stabbed?"

"No—he wasn't. Which is what makes the knife a bit odd. It was on the bedside table, right next to him. No sign of blood, no fingerprints. It's one of a set from the kitchen, and I think it's what you'd call a boning knife so it's very sharp—it appears to have been very recently sharpened, actually."

"Any idea what it could have been used for?"

"None at all, I'm afraid. But we'll take it back and do some more tests to see if anything shows up."

Tom nodded to the other technician, who was leaning casually against the wall, having clearly finished his work.

"Thanks, guys. I presume you've taken the cleaner's prints?" Tom asked.

"Yep—all done. She's in a bit of a state, though. We'll leave it up to you to find out from her who might come into this room in the normal course of events, so we can rule out their prints." He closed his bag of tricks with a decisive *clunk*.

"Right. That's us done. We just need to bag the scarves, when you're ready, then we'll be off."

Tom turned towards the bed where a large man with an equally large girth was leaning over the body, peering over a pair of half-moon spectacles. The deceased's arms and legs were tied to the four corners of the bed with dark red scarves, and the mouth was gagged. The body was naked and in good shape for a man of Hugo Fletcher's age. Tom stood and stared at the body. First champagne, then some form of bondage. But it didn't look like a typical BDSM scene. There were no physical signs of discipline or sadism.

He hadn't had the pleasure of meeting the pathologist before, and walked over to introduce himself. He always liked pathologists; he'd never met one that wasn't a bit quirky.

"Good afternoon. I'm DCI Tom Douglas. Thanks for keeping the scene intact for me, but I think we can release his hands and feet now."

"Rufus Dexter. Won't shake your hand just now," he said, waving a gloved hand that had been God knows where in Tom's general direction. He leaned over to start the untying process while the crime technician started on the other side of the bed.

"Strange one, Tom. He's tied up, so foul play? Probably. Sexually motivated? Scarves would certainly suggest that. Died on the job? Don't think so. Possible, though. No evidence that he actually was on the job. Penis is clean—I'd say it hasn't been inside a woman since his last shower. Have to check that, though. Could have been oral, I suppose? Don't know."

Tom interrupted this flow of information. "A bit of an assumption that it was a female, don't you think?"

"Hmph. Suppose so. Always appeared pretty straight to me when I saw him on the box. Ever hear a whisper about him having the remotest interest in men? Thought not, though anything's possible, I suppose. No signs of anybody being on or around him—female or male. The bed is undisturbed. I've been over his body and haven't found any hairs—pubic or otherwise—that don't belong to him. He's clean as a whistle."

Strange, thought Tom. All the evidence suggests that sex was on the cards, but nothing appears to have happened.

"Any idea on the cause of death?"

"Can't see any immediate signs of anything being done to him. Possibly he was tied up and left, and the resulting panic caused a heart attack, or he's been poisoned in some way? We'll test the champagne, of course. Won't have any answers until I open him up and get some tox results. Sorry."

Tom asked if they could turn the body over—just to check for any marks that could suggest some form of erotic sexual preference that might be linked to the bondage. The back

was clear, but bruising left by the scarves on both the wrists and ankles did suggest a struggle.

"Can't take that to mean anything," announced the young spotty technician. "They're supposed to writhe around in ecstasy when they play these games. It's how they show they're enjoying it. Doesn't mean he was struggling. And they don't always have sex—you know, in the usual way. She could have just jacked him off."

Tom looked at the crime tech with interest, but resisted the temptation to ask him how he knew so much about bondage. And fascinating though this speculation was, it was time to get some facts.

He turned to Rufus Dexter. "Any idea of the time of death?"

"Cleaner's a silly bat," he responded. "Didn't call it in for over an hour. In too much of a panic, she says. She'd been here quarter of an hour before she found the body. How long had he been dead when we arrived? Max three hours, more like two and a half."

The minute the pathologist paused for breath, Tom jumped in. "I understand we were called to the scene and arrived just before two, and you got here at about two thirty. So time of death was between eleven thirty and noon. Yes?"

Rufus nodded.

"Okay, Rufus, feel free to get the body moved when you're ready. When are you going to do the PM?"

"Tomorrow morning okay? Prefer to do it early. Press will want some answers. Bloody Prime Minister too, no doubt, considering who it is! Eight a.m. okay for you?"

Tom winced as he thought about the phone call he was inevitably going to have to make. "Put it like this—I'm going to be in enough trouble as it is for bugging up Saturday, so I don't think Sunday's going to make things any worse. We get an extra hour anyway—the clocks go back tonight. I'll speak to DCS Sinclair to see if he wants to attend. Sounds like he's here now, actually."

Through the open door, the quiet but authoritative voice of Detective Chief Superintendent James Sinclair drifted up the stairs. Tom knew that he would be giving orders in such a way that they seemed more like suggestions, but ones which nobody would even question. His strange lopsided face had left him burdened with the nickname Isaiah, which Tom was ashamed to admit he had failed to comprehend until it was explained to him, but it was always spoken with affection. He had infinite respect for this man, and although Tom hadn't known him long, he was genuinely delighted when he was appointed to work as his deputy in the murder investigation team. Although he had other reasons for moving to London, working for James Sinclair was an absolute bonus.

The undertakers had been summoned to move the body, and Tom took the opportunity to have another look around. He now realised what seemed wrong with the room. There were no feminine touches at all. He'd never seen a woman's bedroom that didn't have at least a couple of bottles of perfume and some evidence of makeup or face creams. But here there wasn't a trace. He opened the wardrobe door and looked inside. Nothing but smart suits. He walked over to the chest of drawers and found the same story. Laundered shirts all perfectly folded, and underwear and socks in another drawer.

Leaving the men to do their work, he wandered down the corridor and into a second bedroom. This one was just as featureless as the first, with similar furnishings. The chest of drawers was completely empty, and only the wardrobe held any evidence of a female member of the family, with a few dress bags containing evening gowns but no day clothes at all. It was abundantly clear that the apartment was only used by Hugo Fletcher as a rule, and then only during the working week. Even somebody as apparently important as this man would be unlikely to wear a smart suit or dinner jacket to relax in at the weekend. And from what he could see, the wife only came for special occasions.

Deep in thought, he made his way downstairs to where the DCS was talking to Becky Robinson.

"Becky, one of the PCs has been trying to get some joy out of the cleaner, but apparently she isn't making much sense and just keeps going on about the embarrassment of seeing the victim 'in the buff' as she puts it. Could you have a go, please? You know better than most how important this is—and time is everything."

"Okay sir, I'll see what I can do." Becky made for the stairs to the basement, having already got the lay of the land, it seemed.

Tom looked quickly around him. He hadn't noticed much on his way in, but now realised that the ground floor was mainly laid out as very smart offices, each of which looked more like an elegant study than a place of work, whilst the two floors above seemed to be living space.

Now that they were on their own, he turned to his boss and filled him in on his conversation with the pathologist. He could see that James Sinclair was quietly assimilating the facts.

"What do you think about the knife, Tom? Do you think he died of a heart attack, and the knife was originally there to cut him free if he'd stayed the course, so to speak?"

"It's possible, but we won't really know until after the PM. The knots were tight, but not so difficult that you'd need a knife. I'll get someone on the make of the scarves and see if we can find anybody who was daft enough to buy all five in the one shop with a credit card, but somehow I don't think so. He clearly knew whoever was with him; there's no sign of forced entry, and the champagne certainly suggests it was planned. We need to check if anything was taken, but there are no obvious signs of ransacking the house, and there's some valuable stuff around."

"I don't need to tell you that the eyes of the world will be on us for this one. But there's nothing like a high-profile case to test your credentials, eh, Tom?"

Tom glanced around the hallway at a series of pictures he hadn't noticed before. They were mainly framed photographs of the victim taken with various high-ranking politicians and several with other famous philanthropists. It was strange, somehow, to relate the smiling man in an impeccable dinner jacket with the bound and gagged naked body on the bed.

James Sinclair followed Tom's gaze. "Old Hugo may have been loved by the general public and the media," the DCS said, "but he ruffled a lot of feathers in his time, you know, and quite frankly I'm surprised that somebody didn't seriously beat the shit out of him before now. I understand that he had bodyguards. Where the hell were they today?"

Tom looked towards the front door. "This place is very well protected. I expect he thought he was safe in here, and perhaps didn't want the bodyguards to know what he was up to. I'll have them tracked down and see what they can tell us. I think I'll go and check on Becky's progress, though. With those vultures outside I'm not sure how long we can keep this to ourselves."

Tom headed down into the basement where Becky was seated on a low sofa in what appeared to be a very pleasant staff sitting room, gently holding the hand of a person who he could only assume was the cleaning lady. Although not in any way doubting her genuine distress, Tom could see that she was making the most of the attention. A PC was making her a cup of tea in the adjoining kitchen, and what looked like a small brandy sat in front of her on a low coffee table.

Still wearing her coat and a rather oddly shaped brown knitted hat the like of which Tom had never seen before, he would have put her age at about sixty. Becky was talking to her in a soothing voice. Tom decided to stay in the background and leave her to it.

"Beryl, you've been incredibly helpful. I know it must have been a terrible shock for you. But we desperately need to find Lady Fletcher. Do you have any ideas?"

Tom was momentarily surprised to hear the title. He'd forgotten that Hugo Fletcher had been knighted for his charity work. He never kept up much with the Honours List though.

"That poor Alexa. She loved her dad so much, you know."

"Beryl, I don't want to nag—but we can't tell Alexa until we've told Lady Fletcher."

Becky's pretty face was starting to go quite pink, which Tom assessed as frustration.

"You should ask Rosie—she'll know where she is."

"Who's Rosie, and how I can get hold of her?" Becky asked, with a hint of desperation.

"Rosie Dixon—she's one of Sir Hugo's secretaries and looks after all the diaries and stuff. Her number's in the red book in the office. Try her mobile first, because if I know Rosie she'll be in Harvey Nick's. She spends the best part of every day there, as far as I can see. Why he puts up with her behaviour I'll never know." Instantly realising her inappropriate use of the present tense, Beryl's face fell.

There was no time to comfort her now, though, and Tom turned towards the stairs and made his way hastily back to the main office. Becky followed, leaving the PC to look after Beryl.

"Rosie Dixon's number—found it," he said a couple of minutes later. "Can you phone her, Becky, and get her here fast. And ask if she knows where we can get in touch with Laura Fletcher urgently."

Tom made his way to the front of the house where the DCS was talking to the policeman who had been first on the scene. Within a few minutes, a shout came from the office.

"Result, sir!" Becky raced out of the door waving a piece of paper. "Rosie's on her way here, so we need to get somebody to talk to her. But I've found out where Lady Fletcher is. Rosie says she's due back from their place in Italy this afternoon, arriving at Stansted any time soon. We need to intercept her."

Tom stopped briefly to give the DCS a quick update, then followed Becky out of the door. "Okay, we can do the organising from the car—let's get to her before the news breaks."

CHAPTER TWO

Becky was doing her best to get them to the M11 as quickly as possible. She tried to concentrate on the road ahead in order to shut out the difficult conversation that her boss seemed to be having, but it was impossible. Especially as she could hear the strident voice of a very angry female on the other end of the line.

The conversation ended abruptly, and she heard DCI Douglas exhale slowly as he leaned back against the headrest. She risked a quick glance and saw that his eyes were closed. For the first time she realised that he carried an air of sadness about him, and the skin around his eyes had a bluish tinge as if he didn't sleep well. She felt a strange urge to grab his hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. Ridiculous notion. Telling herself to get a grip, she was wondering how to break the silence when he saved her the trouble.

"Sorry, Becky. I would have preferred you not to hear that."

"That's okay, sir. Sorry for you, really."

"Under the circumstances, I think we can dispense with the formalities. When we're on our own, call me Tom. After all, you've just heard my ex-wife berating me and generally making me feel even more of a bastard than I did already."

"Ex-wife's prerogative, sir—sorry, Tom. My mum used to scream at my dad all the time."

Tom gave a half smile. "I don't blame her for being mad, if I'm honest. I was supposed to be picking my daughter up today. She was going to stay with me overnight for the first time since I arrived in London. We were both looking forward to it."

"Your daughter will understand, I'm sure," Becky said.

"Lucy's only five. All she knows is that her dad can't have her for the weekend like he promised. And do you really think that her mother will present the reason in a positive way?"

Tom gazed out of the window, obviously not expecting an answer. After a brief pause, he turned back towards Becky with a self-deprecating smile.

"Okay, back to business," he said. "Before I got a bollocking from my ex-wife, I passed on the details of Lady Fletcher's flight to Ajay in the office. I told him to contact the airline and ask a flight attendant to have a quiet word, and take Laura Fletcher into a private room when they land."

Becky glanced at Tom. "You do realise she's on a budget airline, don't you?"

She could see that Tom didn't appreciate the relevance.

"There are no assigned seats," she explained. "It's like a bus. You get on and find a seat wherever you can. And with a plane full of Italians, not known for their queuing skills, I can't imagine it's a bundle of laughs for somebody of Laura Fletcher's wealth and status."

“Christ—how the hell are they going to find her then? I suppose they’ll make an announcement. What on earth is Laura Fletcher doing using a cheap airline?”

“You’ll have to ask her that. Given her husband’s apparent gazillions I would have thought they’d have had their own Lear jet, or something.”

“Well, it’s intriguing, but not exactly relevant to the enquiry. Did you get anything interesting out of the cleaner, by the way?”

“Not really, except that apparently she shouldn’t actually have been at Egerton Crescent that day. She doesn’t work Saturdays, but she’d left her purse on Friday. I had a massive long tale about an argument with her husband who wouldn’t lend her any money to take the grandchildren to McDonald’s. So she had to come all the way on the bus to pick up her purse. Luckily for her, the argument made her miss the first bus, otherwise she’d have got there at about the time Sir Hugo died. She said she wouldn’t have gone upstairs normally, but she realised the alarm was off, so she assumed Sir Hugo was in the apartment. She went up to explain what she was doing there. That’s when she found the body, and she was so terrified she locked herself in the staff room for about an hour in case there was a killer still in the house. There was no phone, so she couldn’t call us.”

“I heard her mention Alexa,” Tom said. “Sir Hugo’s daughter, I presume?”

“Yep. Lives with the ex-wife.”

Becky was about to make some tactless remark about ex-wives when fortunately her mobile rang. Fiddling briefly with the earpiece behind her left ear, she answered, “DS Robinson.” Nothing. “DS Robinson,” she repeated.

With an irritated tut, she pulled the offending object off her ear and flung it over her shoulder onto the backseat.

“Sodding Bluetooth headset. It never works when I want it to. When whoever it was calls back, I’ll have to put it on speaker if that’s okay.”

Almost immediately the mobile rang again and Becky pressed the speaker button.

“DS Robinson.”

“Yeah, Bex. Finally! It’s Ajay. You with Throb?”

Tom turned his head and looked at Becky with raised eyebrows.

Becky winced. “Yes, Ajay. I am.”

“Better put this on speaker then so he can hear too.”

“Splendid idea, Ajay—if a tad too late.”

“Oh, bollocks. Sorry, sir.”

Clearly deciding it was better to get on with the message in the hope that his gaffe would be overlooked, Ajay continued. “I thought you might like to know that Laura Fletcher’s definitely on the flight, and has checked in a bag. No bags were unloaded for no-shows, and the flight manifest shows she’s on board. They’ll make an announcement just before they land, and they’ll call you on this number to make arrangements for you to meet up with her.”

The conversation over, Becky disconnected and glanced nervously at Tom. She knew she was blushing, but bloody Ajay should have had more sense. They had nicknames for all the senior officers, but they usually had the wits to keep them private.

“Care to explain, Becky?”

Becky groaned. "I get all the dirty work. I'll kill Ajay. Oh well... You know when you came for your interview? Florence in the office saw you, and she said you were a bit of a heartthrob. When you got the job you became "The Throb," and it's kind of got shortened to Throb. That's it—simple as that."

Tom didn't say a word, but Becky was fundamentally incapable of being silent.

"Mind you, Florence is about ninety and blind as a bat!"

"Ah, that would explain it then," Tom responded sardonically.

The thing is, Becky thought, he really is a bit of a dish. Not her type—she preferred them a bit less contained. A bit rougher round the edges, if she was honest. But she wouldn't chuck him out of bed, and he had quite a body on him.

Quickly changing the subject, Becky pointed to a folder on the backseat. "You might want to look in there. I got some photos e-mailed to me while you were upstairs with the body, and printed them out in the secretary's office. The techies said it would be okay to use that computer. They make interesting viewing."

Tom was grateful to get away from the subject of himself, good looks or otherwise. He didn't know Becky well, but he suspected that the last hour or so had proved quite illuminating for both of them. He didn't think she was a gossip, though. She was tough and ambitious, and he was pretty sure she would respect his privacy. What little he had left.

He opened the folder.

The first image he came to was of a young and vibrant woman. Long, wavy red hair tumbled to her shoulders. She was wearing a pewter-grey silk evening dress, cut low at the front with wide shoulder straps, and she had a gorgeous figure. Not pencil thin, but slim with lovely curves. The thing that struck Tom the most was her amazing smile. It lit up her whole face, and she looked on top of the world. Becky glanced across.

"Laura Fletcher. That was taken about ten years ago. She'd just met her husband, and this was their first public date together. Did you notice the red hair? I'd have thought we were on to something, other than the fact that we know Laura Fletcher was in Italy."

Tom started looking through the rest of the photos. The odds were always on the wife in these cases, so that made her the number-one suspect. But there were too many things that didn't fit. Apart from the fact that she was apparently out of the country, the whole bedroom setup, the champagne, the silk scarves—it didn't feel like a rendezvous with a wife, particularly as the evidence suggested she rarely stayed at the apartment. Far more like an assignation with mistress. Wife out of the country; living apart during the week—a perfect opportunity for a visit from the other woman, Tom thought.

He had now reached the last photo in the pile, and couldn't help but utter an expletive.

"Shit—what on earth happened?"

"I thought that might be your reaction when you saw that one," Becky said. "The others are interesting too, though. They were taken over a period of time, but she looks different, somehow. What do you think?"

Tom studied the other photos. In none of them did Laura Fletcher shine as brightly as she did in the first one. Her clothes were undoubtedly expensive, but somehow she managed to look less sexy in each one. Still beautiful, but thinner. And in the third of the formal photos

her hair was no longer red. She looked like a brunette and it suited her. But she also looked stiff and uncomfortable in a dress that came unflatteringly halfway up her chest with small cap sleeves. He dragged his attention back to the last photo and turned to Becky.

“Do you know when this was taken?”

“About six months ago, I believe. Apparently there have been very few photos in the last four or five years. She’s stopped accompanying her husband to functions, and she’s spent a lot of time in and out of private care homes, of the psychiatric variety. At least a couple of reasonably long stays that we know of. That last photo was taken by some very opportunistic paparazzo who was actually at the hospital to visit his mother. He didn’t recognise Lady Fletcher, but he did recognise the car that was picking her up. Hugo Fletcher’s car has a very distinctive number plate.”

Tom looked again at the picture. The woman in the photo could easily pass for fifty, although he knew that Laura Fletcher was only in her mid thirties. She was wearing a pair of trousers that looked as if they were at least two sizes too big, with a baggy jumper and flat shoes. Her hair was scraped back from her face and was a dull mousy colour—not red. She looked pale and lifeless. He could only think that she must have been quite ill to have changed so dramatically. It was a sad picture, and he wondered how Hugo’s very public life had been affected by his wife’s illness. He hated to admit it, but the mistress theory was definitely looking like a very plausible scenario.

“Do we know what was the matter with her?”

Becky had done her research. “We’ve contacted the hospital, but of course patient confidentiality prevents them from saying anything. Anyway, you’ll be meeting her in a couple of minutes—because we’re about to turn off for the airport. We’ve made good time, so she probably hasn’t even picked up her bag yet.”

“Let’s just hope the airline staff have done their stuff.”

CHAPTER THREE

Laura indicated left and swung her car abruptly from the main road onto the unlit lane that approached Ashbury Park. Slamming her foot hard on the brake, the car slowed to a crawl as she stared nervously at a strange white glow, lighting up the sky above the trees ahead. She cautiously turned the final bend towards the gates of her home, and was met with a shattering sight.

“Oh, dear God,” she whispered.

There was no escape. The hordes of press, hearing the deep hum of her Mercedes coupé, rapidly whipped their cameras round towards her. The television teams swiftly adjusted their arc lights to point at her approaching car, the bright beams penetrating the interior with their harsh glare, momentarily blinding her. It wasn't unusual to see photographers at these gates, and she could practically taste their excitement. After all, Hugo's fame and near celebrity status had virtually been built by these very same individuals, as he skilfully fed them just enough information about his work to maintain their interest.

But this was different. This was a feeding frenzy.

And there was only one way that she could gain access to her home. Hugo had insisted that the electric gates had a keypad opening system rather than a remote control. That way, he could change the code regularly. Remotes could be lost, or even sold to the highest bidder.

As she drew to a stop, she could do nothing to prevent the ruthless flashing of cameras from exposing her anguish, and as her window wound smoothly down so she could type in the entry code she heard frantic shouts from the press, each one trying to secure the best picture.

“Look this way, Lady Fletcher.”

“Have you been told the news yet, Lady Fletcher?”

“Do you have anything to say, Laura?” As if use of her first name would elicit a more favourable response. Yet nobody actually said what the news was. This in itself spoke volumes.

A multitude of cameras caught her look of utter despair as she wound up her window. She felt certain that this image would feature on the front page of several newspapers the next morning.

Manoeuvring the car as quickly as possible between the overgrown shrubs towards the front of her home, she was almost overcome with nausea. She knew the police would be waiting. They had the code to the gate for security reasons, and she was certain they would be at the house. What would they expect of her? It had been a long time since Laura felt that she could simply react instinctively to life.

So it was with a sense of surprise that she saw a solitary policeman standing as if on guard on the steps to the front door of Ashbury Park. He seemed small against the huge black doors. Glimpsing his face in the headlights, she could see he looked wary and uncomfortable, and was speaking urgently to somebody on his radio. It was evident that he was not expecting to have to do this job himself.

She pulled up in front of the steps. The policeman pocketed his radio and rushed down to open the door for her, but he was too late.

"Lady Fletcher? I'm so sorry, ma'am, but we weren't expecting you yet. At least, I was here just in case, but the senior officers are on their way. They went to meet you at Stansted, but..."

Taking a deep breath, Laura interrupted in a voice quivering slightly from tension. "It's okay, Officer. Just tell me what's happened."

"We tried to keep the animals at the gate at bay, your ladyship. There's a press embargo until you've been told, and they know not to say anything. They didn't say anything, did they?"

"Enough. Enough for me to know that this is very serious. Tell me."

"Do you think we should go inside, ma'am, and perhaps wait for the senior policemen to arrive?"

Laura just wanted to get this over, and then to be alone as quickly as possible. She tried to control her mounting panic. "It's my husband, isn't it? If it were anything else, he would have called me. And he hasn't. The reality can't be any worse than I'm imagining, so for God's sake just tell me. Please."

The young policeman took a deep breath. "All I know, ma'am, and I'm really sorry to have to tell you this, is that your husband was found dead at your London home sometime earlier today. I realise that this must be deeply distressing for you. Would you like to go inside? Surely that would be for the best?"

Laura couldn't trust herself to speak. She stared mutely at the policeman for just a few seconds, and then turned her back on him and walked towards the house without a word. It wasn't his fault, but she couldn't bear the thought of anybody being with her now. Forcing herself to place one foot in front of the other, she climbed the steps to the front door as if her legs knew what had to be done, even though her mind seemed to be a total blank. She felt as if she were somehow outside of her body, looking down and watching a performance—and a bad one at that. The policeman clearly hadn't known what to say, and she hadn't known what she should do, or how she should behave. A scream was hovering just below the surface, but she somehow prevented it from breaking through. She couldn't fall apart yet.

As she reached the top step she heard an unwelcome sound. The press at the gates were out of sight, but a steady throbbing noise growing in volume indicated that a helicopter was fast approaching, and as she inserted the key into the front door lock, to her horror a huge overhead spotlight flooded the area, illuminating both her and the hapless policeman. The spell was broken.

She hurriedly turned the key and pushed the door open, relieved to escape the probing lenses of the television crew overhead. Slamming the door with force, she leaned back heavily against it, and only then did she let the tears come. They flowed in relentless channels down

her cheeks, but her weeping was soundless. Slowly, her legs gave out and she sank to the cold stone floor, her back still pressed hard against the door. She bent forward and rested her forehead on her knees, her arms tight around her head, trying desperately to stop herself from falling apart completely.

Her mind was filled with images of Hugo and how he'd looked the very first time she had seen him. How handsome and self-assured. And she had been as bright as a butterfly, flitting through life without a care in the world, loving her job, her family, and her friends. How had it ended like this?

The silent tears turned to deep, wrenching sobs of regret, and she was still huddled by the door fifteen minutes later when she heard the unmistakable sound of a car racing up the drive, its door opening practically before the car had stopped. She heard muffled voices consulting with the policeman, but she couldn't make out the words. Hastily she pulled a sodden tissue from up her sleeve—a habit that she had never been able to break even though Hugo always thought it was the height of unsophisticated behaviour—and wiped the tears from her face. She pushed herself shakily to her feet, and before the new arrivals had a chance to ring the bell, she opened the door.

Standing before her was a man who she guessed was around forty, dressed in a leather jacket, black T-shirt, and jeans. She vaguely registered that he was tall with dark blond hair that was slightly messy. She didn't know how she expected a senior policeman to look, but it certainly wasn't like this.

Having parked the car on the far side of the drive, a young dark-haired girl in a conservative black trouser suit was quickly making her way across the gravel to the front steps.

As she stood in the open doorway, Laura felt herself swaying. The policeman leapt up the last two steps and grabbed her forearms gently but firmly.

"Come on, Lady Fletcher. Let's get you sat down."

She saw the policeman signal with a flick of his head to the girl, who gently eased past them and disappeared down the hallway.

"I'm so sorry," Laura said. "I'm not usually so pathetic. I'll be okay in a moment."

"You're not being pathetic. You've had a shock. Which way to your sitting room?"

Laura felt oddly relieved to hear a northern accent. It felt like a million years since everybody in her life had spoken like this. It was a reminder of an untroubled life.

With the policeman holding her right elbow, obviously fearing that she was about to keel over, she led the way across the stone-flagged hallway to the drawing room. This had never been her favourite room, with its gloomy dark panelling and drab furniture, but it seemed the most appropriate to the occasion. The young woman had clearly found the kitchen, and was hovering with a glass of water in her hand.

The policeman guided Laura to a sofa and waited until she was seated, and the glass was placed on the table at her side. She was so cold, but although the fire was made up and ready to light, she felt no inclination to make the effort.

"Lady Fletcher, I'm Detective Chief Inspector Tom Douglas, and this is Detective Sergeant Becky Robinson from the Metropolitan Police. We're expecting Detective Chief

Superintendent Sinclair to join us, but he got stuck on his way to the M40. He'll be with us in about ten minutes."

The two police officers sat down on the facing sofa, and Tom Douglas took a deep breath. It was clear that he wasn't enjoying this moment.

"I'm so very sorry that we weren't here when you arrived home, and that you had to run the gauntlet of the press out there. It must have been a very stressful experience, and I'm not at all surprised that you're feeling a bit shaky. I know you've heard that your husband was found dead this afternoon in your London home, and you have our deepest sympathy for your loss."

Laura closed her eyes and clamped her top lip between her teeth to stop it from trembling. She dropped her chin to her chest in a vain attempt to hide her lack of control. The tissue that had remained clutched in her hand was somehow torn to shreds in her lap. She had no recollection of doing that, and now her nose was starting to run. Bundling the bits into a ball, she attempted to wipe her eyes and nose. She felt a clean tissue being pressed into her hand, and knew she was being rude to not thank the thoughtful young sergeant. But she couldn't bring herself to look at them or to speak. She just held the tissue to her streaming eyes and nose.

The chief inspector began to talk again, and she tried to concentrate on what he was saying.

"Police officers were called to the apartment in Egerton Crescent at around two p.m. following a call from a Mrs. Beryl Stubbs, who had discovered your husband's body about an hour earlier."

She looked up sharply, her hands dropping to her lap. "Beryl? What on earth was *she* doing there on a Saturday afternoon?"

The sergeant answered, "She came to pick up her purse, but it was helpful having her there to be honest. She told us how we might find out where you were. We did try to catch you at the airport—there was supposed to be an announcement on your flight, but I gather you didn't come forward. I'm sorry we missed you. We could perhaps have saved you some distress."

Laura managed a barely audible response. "I'm afraid I slept all the way home. I didn't hear any announcement."

At that moment, the shrill peal of the doorbell shattered the quiet of the house.

"I'll go," Becky said.

Laura could feel the chief inspector's eyes on her. But she said nothing. Not even when the sergeant and the DCS entered the drawing room did she feel able to speak. She simply gave a fleeting look at the new arrival and then returned her gaze to her hands, which were tightly clasped around the now soggy ball of tissue.

"Lady Fletcher, I'm James Sinclair. I do apologise for my delay in getting here. May I offer my sincere condolences on your loss. Your husband was a great man, and was much loved in this country and elsewhere in the world."

Laura felt her body jolt at the policeman's words.

"I'm also sorry to say that the minute you drove through the gates it provided a signal to the media to go public. Given your husband's profile, I'm afraid it's bound to be given

priority coverage. We're informing Sir Hugo's former wife, but is there anybody else that you would like us to notify on your behalf?"

Laura knew she should respond, but somehow the words just wouldn't come. All she could do was shake her head.

"I know that my two colleagues here have hardly had a chance to talk to you, but we will need to ask you some questions, I'm afraid."

The DCS paused and glanced at his colleagues. "We still don't know exactly how your husband died, but we do have to treat his death as suspicious. We'll have to wait for the results of the postmortem, but some new evidence has just come to light that strongly suggests foul play. You're probably aware that the faster we act in such a case, the more chance there is of finding the perpetrator of this monstrous crime."

Fighting hard to keep her feelings in check, Laura glanced up briefly. She was conscious that both the other police officers were looking at the DCS with interest.

At that moment, a woman officer pushed the door open and brought in a tray of tea. The conversation paused briefly whilst the tea was poured, and Laura was grateful for the respite. She needed to retain some vestige of self-control until they left, but at least the shaking had stopped.

James Sinclair was the first to break the silence. "I'm sorry, Lady Fletcher, but we also need to ask you to identify the body. This is just a formality, but it has to be done. The postmortem is scheduled for tomorrow morning. I would prefer you to see him beforehand, but that would mean you coming in first thing."

"I don't sleep much, Chief Superintendent. Just tell me where and when." Laura felt herself fading. The stress was wearing her out. She was keeping her emotions under control, but just barely. She just needed them to leave.

"We could send a car for you at about six thirty if that's not too early. And then we would like some time with you so that we can learn everything possible about your husband. We do think that if he was murdered, it was by somebody he knew. I'm sure that you can assist us with that."

Laura answered quietly, "I'll do my best."

"Do you know of anybody who was threatening your husband, or anybody who could be harbouring a significant grudge?"

"Nobody. Well, nobody obvious. Because of his work there was always a perceived threat—but he didn't tell me of anything specific. I'm sorry."

"We know all about his work, Lady Fletcher. Who doesn't? So we'll be looking into that in great detail, of course. Think about it overnight and then perhaps we can talk to you some more tomorrow."

The policeman paused. When he started to speak again, his voice had softened. "I'm really sorry to have to ask you this, but I'm afraid I must. Do you believe that your husband had any relationships with women outside your marriage?"

Laura couldn't stop a shudder from running through her body. She paused for just a beat, and then looked up. "I don't know. I'm sorry," she replied, almost in a whisper.

"Is there anybody that we could call to be with you, Lady Fletcher?" the young sergeant asked.

"I don't want anybody, thank you. I would really prefer to be alone." Laura paused for a second. Glancing up, she cast a worried glance out of the window through the still open curtains. "But if it's not too much trouble, do you think you could ask somebody to bring my case in from the boot of the car, please? I don't really want to go outside if that helicopter's still hovering."

The ever-helpful sergeant jumped up. "I'll get it."

Laura was vaguely conscious that the chief inspector was asking if she wanted them to call her doctor, but she had tuned out of the conversation and was in another place and time. The sound of their voices was echoing hollowly in her head, but the words were no longer registering.

She was relieved when the sergeant reappeared, carrying a small suitcase.

"Excuse me, Lady Fletcher, there's a lady here to see you. The policeman let her as far as the front door, because she said she's a relation of yours. Should I let her in?"

Before Laura could gather her wits about her and answer, the door was pushed open farther. A slender young woman stood in the doorway, her long strawberry-blonde hair shining in the light of the chandelier behind her.

"Laura, I just heard the news. I'm so sorry. I had to come. I couldn't possibly let you face this on your own."

The slight but unmistakable North American accent was the last thing Laura was expecting to hear.

She felt her heart begin to pound, and she leapt out of her chair. She couldn't stop herself, and all her pent-up emotion exploded from her lips.

"What the *fuck* are *you* doing here?"

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