

A Banquet of Consequences: A Lynley Novel (Inspector Lynley Book 19)

By Elizabeth George

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The #1 *New York Times* bestselling author’s award-winning series returns with another stunning crime drama featuring Scotland Yard members Detective Inspector Thomas Lynley and Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers.

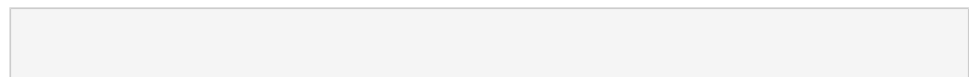
The unspoken secrets and buried lies of one family rise to the surface in Elizabeth George’s newest novel of crime, passion, and tragic history. As Inspector Thomas Lynley investigates the London angle of an ever more darkly disturbing case, his partner, Barbara Havers, is looking behind the peaceful façade of country life to discover a twisted world of desire and deceit.

The suicide of William Goldacre is devastating to those left behind who will have to deal with its unintended consequences—could there be a link between the young man’s leap from a Dorset cliff and a horrific poisoning in Cambridge?

After various issues with her department, Barbara Havers is desperate to redeem herself. So when a past encounter gives her a connection to the unsolved Cambridge murder, Barbara begs Thomas Lynley to let her pursue the crime, knowing one mistake could mean the end of her career.

Full of shocks, intensity, and suspense from the first page to the last, *A Banquet of Consequences* reveals both Lynley and Havers under mounting pressure to solve a case both complicated and deeply disturbing.

From the Hardcover edition.



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for "A Banquet of Consequences"

George's mystery unfolds with great psychological depth, finely drawn characters and gorgeous portraits of the English countryside. . . . [George] is an essential writer of popular fiction today.

"The Washington Post"

Irresistible.

"The Seattle Times"

Undoubtedly one of Ms. George's best mysteries, original in concept and fascinating in the breadth of its characters.

"The Washington Times"

As absorbing as her first book in this acclaimed series. . . . [George is] one of the reigning queens of the genre.

"Milwaukee Journal Sentinel"

"

"Praise for Elizabeth George

"Elizabeth George is a superstar of the crime-fiction world, British Inspector Division. Deservedly so: Her tales always provide nuanced character studies and insights into social issues along with their intricate mysteries."

"The Seattle Times "

"It's tough to resist the pull of [George's] storytelling once hooked."

"USA Today

"Ms. George can do it all, with style to spare."

"The Wall Street Journal"

"George's . . . ability to continually enhance the portraits of Lynley, Havers, and other recurring characters while generating fully fleshed new ones for each novel is nothing less than superlative, and her atmospheric prose, complete with lovely and detailed descriptions of her setting, combines to add literary gravitas to her work . . . A worthy addition to her portfolio and one that simultaneously disturbs and satisfies."

"Richmond Times-Dispatch"

"[Lynley is] one of the great character portraits in contemporary crime fiction."

"The Boston Globe"

"From the Hardcover edition.""

About the Author

Elizabeth George is the "New York Times" bestselling author of nineteen psychological suspense novels, three young adult novels, one book of nonfiction, and two short-story collections. Her work has been honored with the Anthony and Agatha awards, as well as several other prestigious prizes. She lives in Washington State.

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THIRTY-NINE MONTHS BEFORE

8 DECEMBER

SPITALFIELDS

LONDON

Since it was only to be a weekend jaunt to Marrakesh, Lily Foster reckoned they could use one suitcase, and a carry-on at that. What did they need to take, really? It had been deadly cold, grey, and wet in London since the middle of November, but it wasn't going to be that way in North Africa. They would spend most of their time lounging round the pool, anyway, and when they weren't doing that, they'd be getting romantic in their room, for which, obviously, they needed no clothes at all.

Packing took less than ten minutes. Sandals, summer trousers, a tee-shirt for William. Sandals, a clingy frock, and a scarf for her. Swimming suits for them both and a few other essentials. That was it. Then began the wait, which—confirmed by a glance at the plastic wall clock ticking away above the cooker—should have been less than thirty minutes. But it stretched instead into more than two hours during which time she texted him and she phoned him as well, only to receive no response. Just his pleasant voice saying “This is Will. Tell me and I’ll tell you back,” to which she said, “Where are you, William? I thought the job was only in Shoreditch. And why’re you still there in this rotten weather? Ring me soon as you get this, okay?”

Lily went to the window. The afternoon was spitting rain outside, the sky dark and angry with erupting clouds. In the best of weather, this particular housing estate was grim: a mixture of filthy brick blocks of flats tossed by the handful across a level plain, which was crisscrossed by cracked and heaving pavements that the residents ignored in favour of trudging across a dying patchwork of lawns. In weather like this, the place looked like a death trap and what was at risk of extermination was hope. They didn't belong here, and Lily knew it. It was bad for her; it was worse for William. But it was what they could afford for now, and it was where they would remain until she built her business larger than what it was and William had his own on firmer footing.

That part was tricky: William's business. He regularly argued with his clients, and people didn't like that when they were paying someone to work for them.

“You *do* have to take on board what people think,” she kept telling him.

“People,” he countered, “need to stay out of my way. I can't concentrate when they yammer at me. Why don't they get that? It's not like I don't tell them straightaway.”

Well, yes, right, Lily thought. Telling people was part of the problem. William needed to stop doing that.

Lily frowned down at the street. There was no one on the pavements below, certainly no William with his collar up, making a dash from his car to the narrow tower that contained their building's lift. Instead there was only a woman on a balcony of the block of flats sitting at an angle to theirs. She was gathering laundry in her arms, her bright yellow sari whipped by the wind. As for the rest of the buildings' balconies with their lines of dispirited laundry and their children's toys and their few haggard-looking plants and—always—their satellite dishes, whatever they contained was being left to fend for itself in the weather.

Through the window Lily could dimly hear the unrelenting city noise: the squeal of tyres on wet pavement as a car took a corner too swiftly, the metallic roar of a building site where yet something else was being redeveloped nearby but out of view, the siren of an ambulance on its way to hospital, and, much closer, the *thump thunka thump* of a too-loud bass underscoring someone's musical preference.

She texted William again. After two minutes of no response, she rang him as well. She said, "William, you *must* be getting my texts. Unless . . . Oh damn it, you haven't got your mobile on silent again, have you? You *know* I hate it when you do that. And this is important. I don't like to say but . . . Oh hell, hell, hell. Look. I've a surprise planned for our anniversary. I know, I know. You'll say ten months can't be an anniversary but you know what I mean, so don't be difficult. Anyway, this surprise involves our *being* somewhere at a particular time, so if you're just not replying because you're playing silly buggers for some reason, please ring me back."

And then there was nothing to do but to wait. She watched the minutes tick by and she tried to reassure herself that they had plenty of time to get to Stansted. All William had to do, really, was walk in the door because she had their passports in her bag, she had the tickets printed already, and every plan that needed to be made when one journeyed to another country even for a weekend had been made by her.

She realised that she should have told him that morning. But he'd been displeased with how the job in Shoreditch was shaping up, and she hadn't liked to break into his thoughts. Sometimes his clients took a bit of work on his part to bring on board, for even when William had a superb idea that he knew would work on their property, people liked to be in charge of things, even when they hired an expert, which was definitely what William Goldacre was. Expert, visionary, artist, and labourer. Give him your weed-choked garden and he worked magic.

When she finally saw his ancient Fiesta rounding the corner from Heneage Street, she had been waiting for him for four hours, and the Marrakesh plan was shot to hell. The money was wasted, they were stuck, and Lily was looking for someone to blame.

Where had he been? *What* had he been doing? *Why* hadn't he answered his bloody phone? Had he just done that early on—it was *one* simple thing, William—she could have told him about her plans and advised him to meet her at the airport. They could have even now been sitting happily shoulder to shoulder on that stupid plane as it winged them towards sunshine and a weekend of simple pleasure.

Lily was winding herself up as he got out of his car. She was choosing her words. *Inconsiderate* and *thoughtless* were at the top of her list. But then she caught sight of his face as he passed under one of the street lamps. She saw the set of his shoulders, and the way he walked towards the lift in the evening darkness. She thought, Oh no, and she knew what had occurred. He'd lost the Shoreditch client. That was two clients in three months, with both projects ending in acrimony, anger, and accusation. That would be on William's part. On the part of the clients would be a demand for the return of a rather hefty deposit, most of which would already have been spent on supplies.

Lily watched his progress from pool of light to pool of light till he disappeared from view. Then she took the carry-on through to the bedroom. She shoved it out of sight under the bed. By the time she'd got back to the sitting room, William's key was in the door lock, the door was opening, and she was sitting on the sagging sofa with her smartphone in her hand. She was checking her email. "Pleasant trip, darling!" from her mum didn't do much to lift her spirits.

William saw her at once—he could hardly help it as the place was so small—and he averted his eyes. Then his gaze came back to her again, and she noticed that it shifted from her face to her phone. He said, "Sorry."

She said, "I texted and rang you, William."

"I know."

"Why didn't you respond?"

"I broke the phone."

He had a rucksack with him. As if to prove to her the truth of what he was saying, he unzipped the thing and dumped its contents. His mobile toppled to one side, and he handed it over. It was destroyed.

"Did you drive over it or something?" Lily asked him.

"I smashed it with a shovel."

"But—"

"You kept . . . I don't know, Lily. I couldn't answer, but still you kept . . . It was the *ringing* and then the *buzzing* and every bloody thing was happening at once over there. My head felt like it was on the verge of exploding and the only thing I could do to make it all stop was to use a shovel on the phone."

"What's going on?"

William left the contents of the rucksack where he'd strewn them. He crossed the room to a sling-back chair. He flung himself into it, and she saw his face clearly. He was double blinking in that way he had when things were moving from bad to what was going to be worse.

"It's no good," he said.

"What?"

"Me. This. The whole bloody thing. I'm no good. It's no good. End of story."

"Did you lose the Shoreditch clients, then?"

"What do you think? Losing things is what I do, isn't it? My car keys, my notebooks, my rucksack, my clients. You as well, Lily, and don't deny it. I'm losing you. Which is—let's face it—what you wanted to tell me, isn't it? You rang and you texted and it was all to get me to ring you back so you could do to me pretty much what everyone does. End things. Right?"

He was triple blinking. He needed to be calm. Lily knew from experience there were very few ways to calm him if he got too far along in the direction he was taking, so she said, "I was taking you to Marrakesh, actually. I'd found a hotel on the cheap, a pool and all the trimmings. It was supposed to be a surprise weekend and I should have told you this morning—at least that I had a surprise trip planned—but that would have meant . . . Oh, I don't know." She ended rather lamely with, "I thought it would be fun."

"We've no money for that sort of thing."

"My mum lent it me."

"So now your parents know how bad things are? What a loser I am? What did you tell them?"

“Not him, her. Just my mum. I didn’t tell her anything. And she didn’t ask. She’s not *like* that, William. She doesn’t intrude.” *Not like your mum* was what she didn’t add.

He heard it anyway because his look became sharp the way it always became when the subject of his mother came up between them. But he didn’t go there and instead he said, “I should have seen from the first they were bloody mad fools, but I didn’t. Why do I never see what people are like? They say they want something special and I can give them something special and they *will* love it if they only let me get at it. But no, they want drawings and sketches and approval and control and daily receipts and I can’t work like that.”

He stood. He walked to the same window at which she’d waited for so long for him. She didn’t know what to tell him, exactly, but what she wanted to say was that *if* he couldn’t work under the aegis of someone else, *if* he could only work alone, then he would have to learn how to deal with people because *if* he didn’t learn that, then he would fail over and over and over again. She wanted to tell him that he wasn’t being reasonable with people, that he couldn’t expect them to hand over their gardens or even part of their gardens to his creative impulse. What if they don’t like what you have in mind? she wanted to ask him. But she’d said it before and she’d asked it before and here they were again where they kept ending up.

“It’s London,” he said abruptly, to the window glass.

“What’s London?”

“This. It. Me. London’s the reason. People here . . . They’re different. They don’t get me and I don’t get them. I’ve got to get out of here. It’s the only answer because I’m not going to freeload off you.”

He swung from the window then. The look on his face comprised, she knew, the very same expression he wore when his clients asked questions he deemed unreasonable. It signaled that he’d made his mind up about something. She reckoned she was seconds away from learning what that was.

He told her. “Dorset.”

“Dorset?”

“I’ve got to go home.”

“This is your home.”

“You know what I mean. I’ve spent all day thinking and that’s the answer. I’m going back to Dorset. I’m starting over.”

SPITALFIELDS

LONDON

She got him out of the flat, no matter the rain. She suggested the Pride of Spitalfields. It wasn’t far, a bit gastropub-ish with its creamy exterior and deep-blue awnings dripping with rain, but inside there was still a decent cider to be had and usually a table or two tucked away in a corner. He was reluctant to go—“I can’t afford it, Lily, and I won’t let you pay.”

She told him it was money from her mum to spend in Morocco and what did it matter as they were in things together, weren’t they?

“It’s . . . it’s unseemly,” he said, and his use of that word suggested his mum was in one way or another

behind every decision he'd made since falling out with his clients: from smashing his mobile into oblivion to declaring a need to return to Dorset.

Without doing what needed to be done to school herself to patience, she said to him, "You've talked to her, haven't you? You told her about this before you told me. *Why* did you do that?"

"This isn't about my mum," William said.

"Everything's about your mum," she told him.

She entered the Pride of Spitalfields, and her annoyance with him was such that she found she didn't much care if he followed. But follow he did and they sat at the only table left, directly next to the door to the ladies', which shot a shaft of near blinding florescent light on their faces every time someone ducked in or out. Music was playing. An iPod or iPhone with a hookup to something of a satellite nature because it was a country and western mix of oldies only, Johnny Cash foremost with dashes of Willie Nelson, Patsy Cline, Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, and the Judds.

Lily said, "You didn't answer me, William."

He was looking round the pub but brought his gaze back to her. "Untrue. I told you that—"

"You tried to misdirect me is what you did. So let's go back. You spoke to your mum. You told her what's happened before you told me."

"I said this isn't about my mum."

"Let me guess at the conversation. She told you to come home to Dorset. She told you that you can 'start again' there. She promised help: hers, your stepdad's. When are you breaking *away* from them?"

"I'm not intending to live with Mum. At least not permanently. It's only till I can get established. It's for the best."

"God, I can even hear her voice in you," Lily fumed.

"I'm thinking of Sherborne," he said. "Or Somerset. Probably Yeovil because it's less costly but the business itself will do better in Sherborne. There's money there. Even Mum says—"

"I don't want to hear what 'Mum' says."

"It's London, Lily. It's attempting to have *any* kind of business in London."

"I have a business. It's working out."

"Tattoos, yes. Well, this is London after all. But what I'm trying to do . . . having my kind of business, what I'm *good* at, here . . . People don't connect the way I need to connect in London. You've said that yourself: the perfect place to be anonymous, but if one wants anything more than anonymity, it's not going to happen. I've *heard* you say that. It's no go for me here. It's only because of you I've hacked it for this long."

She looked towards the bar. She thought uselessly about how trendy Spitalfields was becoming as the City of London inched towards it one hideous glass tower block at a time. Even here—God, not that far from where Jack the Ripper haunted the narrow Whitechapel streets—there were young women wearing pencil skirts and young men in suits flirting with one another as they sipped white wine. White wine, for God's sake. Here. In

the East End. They were only a sign that nothing ever stayed the same, that progress was relentless and that “making progress” applied not only to society and economics and science and everything else but to people as well. She hated that: the very idea of constant change to which one had to become accustomed. But she also knew when fighting it was hopeless.

She said to him, “I suppose that’s it, isn’t it?”

“What’s it?”

“You and I. What else?”

He reached for her hand across the table. His palm was damp where it covered her balled fist. He said, “You can come to Dorset as well. You can set up a shop there. I’ve already spoken to—”

“Yes. Right. To your mum. And she’s assured you that there’s plenty of scope for tattoos in a place like Dorset.”

“Well . . . yes, if it comes to that. You’re reading her wrong, Lil. She wants you there as much as I do.”

14 DECEMBER

SPITALFIELDS

LONDON

Will hadn’t expected that Lily would be the first to move out of the flat. He’d more or less depended upon her to remain there—a constant presence in his life till he himself had packed up and departed. But two days later she was gone and this left him four days on his own till his mother and stepfather showed up with the bakery van to cart back to Dorset those of his belongings that didn’t fit into the Fiesta.

Four days on his own put him where he didn’t want to be and that was with his head as his only companion. Inside his head resided voices. They informed him of what he already knew: He’d wrecked his chances for a life with Lily; he’d proved once again what a loser he was; he’d been a wanking weirdo from the day of his birth and a look in the mirror’ll show you that, Will. Which was what he did, of course. He walked into the bathroom and looked in the mirror and saw those things he hated about himself. His laughable height. *What are you, a dwarf?* A deformed right ear. *Your dad’s a plastic surgeon and he wouldn’t even bloody operate on you?* Thick eyebrows forming a peak over his eyes. *Got a gorilla in your makeup, laddie?* Cupid lips that looked like something off a doll.

You are one arse-ugly bloke, my man. She didn’t see past it. She couldn’t. Who could? Gave her an out, and she took it, mate, and who can blame her? How long you think it took her, boy-o, to spread ’em wide for someone else? And someone who can do it the way it’s meant to be done. No excuses, no pills, no fast and furious and Sorry but you just get me going, woman. The real thing instead, which is what—let’s face it—you were never up to.

He rang his gran. He meant it to distract himself from what was going on in his head. But when he told her he was returning to Dorset, she said, “Don’t be a fool, Guillermo,” in her harsh, smoker’s Colombian voice. “This plan of yours. You make a mistake. You talk to Carlos about this, *si?* He tell you the same.”

But there was no point to talking to Charlie. Will's brother had a magical life, the polar opposite of Will's in every way.

"Dorset?" he would say. "Fuck it, Will. Don't go to Dorset. You're seeing her as the *solution*, you idiot, when she's been your problem for twenty-five years."

Charlie wouldn't believe what their grandmother didn't believe what Lily couldn't believe and that was the impermanency of this arrangement. Caroline Goldacre didn't want her son home indefinitely any more than her son wanted it. She herself had said, "We're calling this a temporary arrangement, Will. You do understand that, don't you?" and she hadn't allowed any plans to be made until he agreed: a few weeks to sort himself out and get reestablished somewhere. Sherborne, he thought. It would have to be Sherborne.

She told him he would have to wait in London till she and his stepfather could get away. The bakery didn't operate on Sundays, so they would drive up to London on Sunday. He'd be fine till then, wouldn't he? He said he would. But then Lily left.

His mind had started roiling shortly thereafter and the voices in his head were unrelenting. After twenty-four hours, he rang his mum and said, Couldn't he come down in advance of Sunday? He'd bring some of his gear in the Fiesta and then on Sunday they could all return and pick up the rest.

"Darling, don't be silly," his mother replied kindly. "Surely you can survive till Sunday. Can't you?" And then carefully, "Will, you *are* taking your medications properly, aren't you?"

He said that he was. He didn't tell her that Lily had left. He didn't want her to associate the two: his meds and Lily. There was no point.

Four days stretched out like the creation of toffee. There was nothing to distract him from who he was. By the day on which his mother arrived, Will had taken to pacing the floor and hitting himself lightly on the forehead. When the hour of her appearance began its slow approach, he started waiting at the window like an abandoned dog.

Thus he saw the bakery van cruising into the street. He saw his mother get out, as usual, to direct his stepfather into a parking spot. She waved her arms and strode to the driver's window to have a word. More arm waving ensued until poor old Alastair had managed to dock the vehicle without crashing it into another.

Will felt the bad rising within him as he watched. He tried to quell it. But his eyes began their double blinking, and deep within him from a place he could not manage to harness, the words bubbled up. "Cocksucking storm troop here it is." He locked his hand over his mouth as his eyelids danced. "Fucker fucker fucker bastard rain ice." He backed off from the window and tried to strangle them off. But still they came forth like the foul effluent emerging from a broken sewage pipe. "Whore slag whoreson slough off pantering."

The doorbell rang. He stumbled to the buzzer and released the lock to allow them to ring for the lift. He slapped himself hard and could feel no pain. "Fuck all merry men Robin Hood heap."

He swung the door open but retreated across the room. He raised his wrist to his teeth and he bit down hard.

He heard their voices coming his way, his mother's soft and Alastair's gruff. He heard her say, "It'll work out well," and then they were coming into his flat.

She spoke first, a reference to his ringing them into the lift without a query as to who they were. "Will, love,"

she said, “you really ought not to do that without seeing who’s there. It could be anyone, and in this part of town . . .” Her words sank into silence as she took him in.

He was triple blinking. He clutched his stomach to try to hold back what came out like a scourge intended for her alone. “Hot cunt cold cunt doggy meat pork.”

She didn’t react other than to say, “Oh my dear.” Quickly, she came across the room to him. She took him into her arms. He clung to her, but the words continued to pour from within him, so he broke away and went to the wall. There he began to bang his head, but still they came on.

He heard his mother say, “Darling, it’s only a seizure. It’s only words. You’re quite fine behind them. But you must try—”

He laughed insanely. “Bitch cock Broadmoor.”

“Not a bad idea,” he heard Alastair mutter.

“Let me handle this, Alastair,” his mother said sharply. “If you could just begin to gather his things . . . ? Perhaps take them out to the van . . . ?”

“Where’s his gear, then?” Alastair said. “Will, lad. Have you not packed? Did you not remember that your mum and I were coming?”

“Obviously, he hasn’t been able . . . You’ll have to . . . No. We’ll just take some of his clothing for now and Lily can send the rest afterwards. I’ll write her a note. God knows why she’s not here. Will, where’s Lily?”

“Lily cunt cock fuck the troubadour sings.”

The words were louder now. He pounded his fist on the wall. He felt his mother’s hand close over his arm and try to draw him into the middle of the room, but he jerked away and made for the kitchen because if nothing else a knife was there and he could cut out his tongue or do something to pain himself deeply, for it seemed that only deeply felt pain was going to make the Wording cease.

“Stop this, William!” his mother cried. He heard her come after him. He felt her arms come round him. “Please.”

“Caro,” Alastair said from the sitting room, “p’rhaps the lad doesn’t want to go.”

“He has to,” she replied. “Look at the state of him. Will, listen to me. D’you want me to ring for an ambulance? Do you want to be taken to hospital? Elsewhere? I believe you don’t want that, so you must sort yourself out at once.”

“I could ring Lily’s mobile,” Alastair said. “I could ask her to come. Isn’t her shop nearby? Would she be working today?”

“Don’t be foolish. It’s Sunday. Look around. She’s left. And Lily’s the problem, not the solution. Just listen to him. You can hear it yourself.”

“But the words don’t mean—”

“They mean what they mean.”

Will tore himself from his mother's grasp and clutched at his skull. "Forks knives and spoons because rainfall torrent of floor to fuck. And you too both of you fucking like goats so I can shag is what shag shag shag 'cause that's how she wants it like Jesus and Mary did to each other 'cause what else was he doing for those first thirty years?"

"Holy God," Alastair said.

"That's enough, William." Caroline turned him to her and he knew that he was quadruple blinking because he could barely see her. She said, "You must stop this at once. If you aren't able, I'm going to have to ring nine-nine-nine and they'll take you God only knows where and you don't want that. Where are your medicines? Are they packed? Did you pack them? Will, answer me. *Now.*"

"And when he did from the cross and the fucking cow bitch put the bastard in a bun."

Caroline said, "This is no good. Alastair, will you wait below?"

"I hate to leave you, luv."

"It's all right. You know I can handle him if it comes down to it. He won't hurt me. He just needs to get calm."

"If you think . . ."

"I do."

"Right, then. Ring me on my mobile. I'll be below." The door closed as Alastair left the flat.

Then, "Enough!" Caroline said sharply. "I said *enough*. Do you hear me, Will? You're acting like a two-year-old, and I won't have it. *How* did you let yourself get into this state when you know very well what to do to control it? God in heaven, can you *not* manage five minutes on your own?"

"Cunt in a bottle."

She shook him hard, a teeth rattling shake. She swung him round to face the sitting room. "Get out of my sight," she snapped. "Get yourself in order, and do it now. You know what it takes, so do it. And do *not* make me tell you more than once."

SPITALFIELDS

LONDON

Outside, Alastair MacKerron went directly to the bakery van. He was shaken more than usual by what was going on with Will. This was the worst he'd ever seen.

He'd had high hopes at first when Will had taken himself off to London. He'd found himself a girlfriend—bit edgy with all her piercings and those mad tattoos, but what did it matter at the end of the day?—and he'd managed to establish a business that did fairly well for a bit. He'd even made contact with his gran, and if he'd ignored his mum's advice to keep well clear of his dad and his dad's infant bride, what did that really matter either? He was setting off on his own at last, and the occasional upset surely wouldn't be enough to take him down. At least that was what Alastair had believed.

"Let him spread his wings, Caro" had been Alastair's advice. "You can't keep coddling the lad forever."

Caroline didn't see it as coddling, of course. She saw it as being a proper mum. For being that to her boys was paramount to her, and she'd made this very clear to Alastair from the moment he'd realised—much to his chagrin—that he'd fallen hard for a married woman.

He'd felt lucky to have her for quite some time. From the moment he'd seen her at that Christmas panto, sipping a virtuous orange juice at the interval and observing, bright-eyed and smiling, the gaily garbed families surging through the bar and lined up for ice cream and purchasing souvenir programmes right and left, he'd wanted to know her. He'd been there with five of his nieces and nephews and she'd claimed the same: two nephews who were running about somewhere making trouble, no doubt, was how she put it. That the “nephews” turned out to be her sons was something she admitted to only much later.

“I didn't know what you'd think,” she'd told him.

What she'd meant was that she didn't know what he'd think if she'd revealed she was married. Unhappily so. Tied to a man who lacked sufficient interest in the act to bed her more than once each season. But married all the same.

He wouldn't have thought a thing, he told her. Only that she was slim and gorgeous with mounds of dark hair and staggeringly beautiful bosoms and great dark eyes and lips so full that he lost his breath merely looking upon her. And part of the breathlessness he felt took root in the fact that she actually wished to talk with him, him a toad to her fairy princess, short and plain and thin of hair, bespectacled, and not ever what he'd dreamed to be: SAS man, a killing machine, decorated soldier and all the rest. A chance of fate had taken care of that, a badly set leg in childhood rendering him a limping, halting lump of a thing with one built-up shoe and no hope of the military life that would have made him the man he'd known he could be.

They'd talked happily that night at the panto: the coming holiday, the importance of family at Christmas, his parents in Scotland, her mum in London, what they would do, whom they would see. She'd revealed very little; he'd revealed much. Later, when the bell sounded to call the audience back to their seats, he'd slipped her his card and said shyly that if she ever wished to meet for a drink or a coffee or if she would like to see his business . . .

“What sort of business?” was what she asked.

“Repurposing,” he said.

“What's that?”

“You must see.”

He'd hardly expected anything to come of their meeting, but she turned up at his shop in Whitecross Street not two weeks later. There he sold what he made of what he'd found in car boot sales, estate sales, junk shops, and tips. Huge factory gears fashioned into tables; polo mallets made into lamps; metal garden chairs on which a decent coat of varnish formed a protective patina over an artistic display of rust and chipped paint; other people's lumber given new life.

She'd been charmed by it all because, truth to tell, he was very good at what he did, and she'd been filled with questions about how he decided what to make of what he found. He dipped a needy hand into her font of admiration. There were people in the shop, but he wanted to rid the place of them so that he could give Caro his full attention. He stammered and blushed and was determined to hide from her what his face was blazing: abject desire that could not be fulfilled.

She'd stayed till closing. They'd gone for a drink. They'd spent three hours talking of this and that and all he could remember of that evening was his heart pounding so hard that his eyeballs were pulsing and his bollocks were aching with desire.

At her car, she'd said how much she liked him, how he listened to her with interest, and how she felt completely safe with him. "Which is very odd, as I barely know you," she said. "But I have a very good feeling about you and—"

He kissed her before he could stop himself. Animal lust or whatever it was, he simply had to feel her in his arms. To his surprise, she welcomed the kiss with her lips parting and her body fitting closely to his and not a murmur of protest when his hands slid from her waist to her soft, full bosoms that rested heavily in his two palms.

He felt he might actually black out with wanting her. He managed to get control of himself only because they were on a public street. He released her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand over which he stared at this lovely creature and tried to think how to apologise, how to explain, how to go on with her as he wished to go on.

She was the one to speak. "I shouldn't have . . . I shouldn't have . . ."

"No. It was me. It was the drink and you looking so bloody gorgeous standing there and—"

"It's that I'm married," she said in a rush. "The boys at the theatre with me . . . at the panto . . . They're my sons. And I feel . . . What's *wrong* with me that I would want to see you again when I have no right . . . And I wanted you to kiss me just now. I can't explain it except to say how different you are from . . . Oh Lord, I must go. Really, I must go."

She struggled to unlock the door, and he saw how badly her hands were shaking, so he took the keys from her and unlocked it himself. She turned to him then and said only, "How I wish . . ." but then she was gone.

He'd had no chance to say that it didn't matter a whit to him if she'd lied about nephews, if she'd not mentioned a husband, if she—in fact—had three legs and two heads. What mattered was the word *together*. He was in love before he even knew the names of her sons.

And now, seventeen years along, he loved her still. He stared up at the building where Will was suffering, and he recommitted himself to her, despite their occasional difficulties. He recommitted himself to the boy as well.

It was because of Will that they had left London for Dorset, selling up everything they owned in order to purchase a business about which Alastair had known exactly nothing at the time. Baking, he'd thought, was the province of women, or so it had been in his childhood home. But this was a professional bakery, a thriving concern with a house on the property into which he could move Caroline and her boys. So he'd bought it; he'd employed its previous owner to teach him all he could about working with flour and yeast and salt and sugar and all else that went into breads, rolls, yearly hot cross buns, cakes, and other confectionery. Years into it now, he had seven shops in the county, and if the life of a baker was exhausting with its ungodly hours and its ruptured sleep, he'd been able to provide for his family.

Caroline had her hands full with the boys, especially with Will. Alastair only hoped that today in that flat with Will gone round the bend as badly as he'd ever witnessed, Caroline was able to wring a miracle out of the poor lad's madness. If she couldn't do that, they'd have to send for help or cart him off to hospital. Neither prospect made the promise of peace.

His mobile rang. He grabbed it up from the console between the van's seats and said, "Is he in order now, luv?"

But it wasn't Caroline, although he heard a woman's voice. She said, "Alastair, are you quite all right? I've had a feeling all morning that you're in a bad way."

He looked back at the building, at the windows of the sitting room that belonged to Will's flat. He felt a surprising pounding of his heart.

"I'm in London," he said. "But I'm that glad you rang."

THIRTY-FIVE MONTHS BEFORE

6 APRIL

BROMLEY

LONDON

At first, Lily had not intended to see William again. She'd intended instead just to move on. She'd done so before, and she knew that she could do so another time because it was never as difficult as other women her age made it seem. She'd taken a cooking class where she'd quickly become part of a group of foodies who, like her, believed that eating on the cheap did not mean eating takeaway burgers from American fast-food outlets but rather sussing out the best food stalls in every market from Spitalfields to Portobello Road. She'd taken a dancing class where the Argentine instructor made it perfectly clear that he'd be only too delighted to share his smouldering looks and his smouldering body with just about anyone willing to have a go. She'd joined a crew of women who kept fit by rowing on the Thames early Saturday mornings. In short, she'd redeveloped the life she'd let go of during the ten months she'd been with William Goldacre, and she vowed she'd not get so entangled again. But then he rang her.

He sounded wonderful, like the William of old. He also turned out to be just as good as his word because he wasn't living with his mum at all. He was back on his feet, and he was living in the village of Yetminster. Did Lily know it? Not far from Sherborne?

Of course she didn't know it because what Lily knew about Dorset could fit into a teaspoon. But she told him that was brilliant news, and he went on to enthuse about his digs.

"Just a cottage in the village, not far from the high street. Well, nothing's far from the high street here, is it. It's not much more than two up and two down, but it's got the most amazing garden. You must see what I've done with it, Lil. *And* I've got my first client right here in the village. A bloke who stopped by and saw what I'd done and asked could I do the same for him. Surprise for his wife, he said, who's off in Australia visiting their daughter and the grandkids and he wants something special for her lest she decides she wants to emigrate. Best part is—and I *knew* this would happen if I got out of London—he's completely on board with the way I work. I told him what I'd put in but not how or the exact cost because—I said to him—I don't

know the exact cost initially and that's how I work *but* I'll keep him in the picture every step of the way as costs come up and he says fine."

"That's brilliant, William."

"I knew you'd think so. Will you come down?"

Lily had known he was going to ask the moment she'd heard his voice on the phone. She'd been trying to prepare an answer as he spoke, but she didn't have one other than a hesitant "I don't know . . ."

He said, "I want you to see the place. And its garden. And the other garden that I'm working on. It's not much, but I'm entirely on my own here. I knew it was London, Lily. The noise, the traffic, the herds of people. I can't cope with cities. Will you come? Listen, there's no tattoo shop here. I've checked."

"There wouldn't be, would there, in a village?"

"I mean Sherborne, Lil. Yeovil. Shaftesbury. 'Course there might be something in Dorchester or Weymouth, but here there's not. You see what that means, don't you?"

Of course, she did. She could move house—to Dorset—and set up a shop, which was what he wanted. The problem was: It wasn't what she wanted. There were far too many variables—who in the country wanted tattoos, after all?—and one of them was his mum.

She said, "Your mum must be pleased you're doing so well."

"Yes, of course she is. But don't let's go there. She helped me get back on my feet, and that's an end to the story. I hardly see her now. I *did* do her a garden, though. But that was when I was stopping with her and Alastair. She's been showing it off to people who come by the bakery for special orders and such, and there's been some interest there as well. She's supported me, Lily, but that's all. I'm on my own now, I'm fit, and I'm thriving. Will you come down and see for yourself? I swear I can make it so you don't regret it. We were good together, you and I. I know we can be good together again. I guess what I'm asking is will you try? Will you let *me* try?"

Lily considered. She was drawn to William when he was at his best. She was drawn to his joy and enthusiasm. But there was far more to him than that, as she'd discovered.

She said, "I think it might be pointless, William. I'd never be able to support myself in Dorset and even if I could, we'd be setting ourselves up for enormous hurt."

"Is there someone else, then?" he asked. "I wouldn't blame you. After what I put you through . . . It was a rough patch for me. But I'm perfect now. I've a new medication to take care of the Wording. Not a single seizure since I've come home. See, it was the stress. I should have known that would happen in London. I should never have let myself get talked into giving London a try. I'm not like my brother. I can't even remember why I shipped myself there in the first place, to tell you the truth."

Because you wanted to get away from your mum, Lily thought. And your brother wanted the same for you. But Lily didn't say that because he did sound good and he had done what he said he would do. And she cared about him. There would always be that.

He seemed to sense in her hesitation a movement in his direction. He said, "It's easy as anything, Lily. There's a station in the village. I'd have to wave down the train—dead quaint that, eh?—but if you tell me when your train's arriving, I'll be there to do it. And listen to this: After I show you the place, we'll go to

Seatown. There's camping well in sight of the beach. I've even been on my own for a night, and it was brilliant. There're miles of walks. A pub. A shop. A village. We can do some walking up Golden Cap. The views, Lily! And with the weather being all right . . . still a bit cold but not raining . . ."

"Camping?" she said because she knew what that meant: a tent, close proximity, the suggestion of an intimacy she wasn't sure she wanted.

He said quickly, "We'll do it just as friends. What I mean is that there'll be no expectations. We won't plan anything and we'll have an understanding about all that in advance. No worries on that score."

His words were tumbling out of him, which was a little troubling, but every single one of them made perfect sense. It wasn't like when the Wording came upon him. It was normal, excited conversation.

She said to him, "All right, then. But just as friends, William. I have to be honest with you about something anyway."

"So you do have someone."

"No, no. I've dated, but there's no one at present. What I was going to say is that I don't want to live in Dorset. I'm a London girl. Just so you know that. And if you want to withdraw the invitation now, I'll understand."

"No way. You're going to change your mind when you see Dorset. You've never been, have you?"

"Sheep being not my thing."

He laughed at this, his boyish, appealing William laugh, absent during those final dreadful days in London. "Just you wait," he told her. "You'll change your mind."

14 APRIL

SEATOWN

DORSET

It was more than sheep, as things turned out. Dorset was rolling chalk hills green with spring, disrupted by copses of hardwood trees coming into leaf and woodlands thick with firs and chestnuts and birches and oaks. The open land consisted of wide vistas that dipped into huge bowl-shaped valleys, of magnificent slopes occasionally broken by the intriguing undulations in land: medieval strip lynchets long ago scalloped into the hillsides for farming. It was a countryside of hedgerows sheltering paddocks and fields, of brick and stone villages where flint-banded buildings nosed directly to the edge of the roads like suckling puppies, and of churches everywhere, as if the people of Dorset knew something about the hereafter that the rest of the country was oblivious to.

As he'd promised, William met her at Yetminster Station, where he waved down the train to stop. He hugged her hard, stood back, and looked at her with his face lively with a kind of health and happiness that, admittedly, she'd seen rarely on him in town. He squired her round Yetminster—a limestone village that popped up in the middle of farmland not far from the stately beauties of Sherborne, with its castles and its

distinguished school. He showed her his tiny cottage as if it were a structure in which every corner contained a jewel of architectural wonder. He took her into his garden so that she could admire—and she did admire—what he'd done to transform it with an artful potting shed on which the newly planted wisteria would someday climb, a stone path winding across lawn richly edged by herbaceous borders, a tiny two-level terrace with seating and pots in which his eye for colour and shape had led him to plants that would be showpieces as spring advanced to summer. She called it stunning, and it was.

He told her that he'd known she would love it and she would feel the same about Seatown, so off they went on their camping trip. No mention was made of anything else. No word about his mum, especially, and for this Lily was grateful. For obviously Caroline Goldacre—as she always had been called, never changing her name from the surname of her two boys to the surname of her husband, Alastair MacKerron—had done a world of good for William, and Lily hated to admit this.

She wondered about the camping idea as they drove to Seatown, which was on the coast overlooking Lyme Bay. It was not just cold; it had oddly become unseasonably bitter with the kind of frigid wind that blew its way occasionally from the Ural Mountains and swept across Europe, stunning everything in its path. She mentioned this to William, but his response was, "Not to worry. We'll have the tent, I've two duvets along with the sleeping bags, and once we start the walk up Golden Cap, we'll be warm enough. You've brought a hat, haven't you? Gloves as well? We'll be fine."

Seatown comprised little more than a hamlet that was, wisely, tucked a good distance away from the bay in a fold of land that protected it from winter storms driving in from the English Channel. It was a small scattering of holiday cottages typical of many villages by the sea: nautical themes abounded on windowsills and in narrow gardens; upended fishing boats waited for their seasonal paint jobs; crab pots and floats and nets lay about, emitting the sharp scent of fish.

The camping area was just beyond the hamlet, facing directly onto the sea. The narrow lane they'd driven coursed past this area, dipping down a slope that ended abruptly at a shingle beach, where a stream bubbled across the pebbles, burying itself beneath them and reemerging near the salt water. The landscape, Lily saw, was as dramatic here as William had promised. For the beach was backed by tremendous cliffs looming over the shingle, and one of them was Golden Cap, the highest point in the county. It soared more than six hundred feet above Lyme Bay, providing—according to William—a stunning view not only of the water and of the town of Lyme Regis to the west of them but also of Dorset itself, which lay in splendour to the north. Walking here was where they would warm up, he told her, just as soon as they set up camp. And there was the Anchor pub down near the water—see it, Lil?—where they'd go for a hearty dinner after their climb.

The area for camping comprised two parts, both of which spread out on the east side of the lane to the beach, opposite to Golden Cap. Here, an area of caravans stood for hire on a shelf of land while slightly below and in front of these structures was the spot for tents. Perhaps a dozen of these mushroomed across grassland in rainbow colours, despite the cold.

Lily shook her head. "We English," she said.

William laughed, understanding. Nothing got in the way of the English when they intended a holiday. He swung into the camping area, parked, and dashed inside the little shop, where he would pay for the privilege of a handkerchief square of land on which to set their tent. He was back in less than five minutes, and off they went. Another thirty minutes and their tent was set up, their sleeping bags and the duvets were inside, and all was ready for the strenuous walk up Golden Cap to see the view.

A sign posted the way. William led, with a rucksack on his back and a confidence in his stride. They rested often, for there was no hurry. They paused to take pictures. They stopped to rustle through his rucksack,

where she discovered he'd brought chocolate bars, nuts, fruit, water, and even a bottle of red wine and two glasses. They sat against a boulder and looked back across the magnificent sweep of Marshwood Vale, all the way to a hill fort that Will told her was called Pilsdon Pen. Another month and the gorse would be blooming on Golden Cap, he told her. Then it would be yellow explosions, floral bursts of sun on a mantle of green.

When they made it to the very top of the cliff, it was all that William had promised it would be. The wind was intense, so they did not remain long. But in the western distance the crescent of Lyme Regis winked in the afternoon light while to the east Dorset's Jurassic Coast introduced itself along the length of Chesil Beach, where boulders segued to rocks to stones to pea-sized pebbles as the strand travelled its incredible eighteen miles, backed by a glittering shield of water, an enormous lagoon that William identified as the Fleet.

The sea was grey on this day, but the sky was blue. Clouds scudded across it as if chased by the sun, but there were no birds, which Lily found odd. She'd expected gulls, but not a bird was in sight. And the only sound was the relentless wind.

She said to William, "You're dead mad, you are, bringing us up here. Even the birds can't cope."

His response was a happy, "Swim to France? I feel like I could." He cast a look at her, and his face was boyish. He said spontaneously but a little shyly, which she found appealing, "Lily, can I kiss you?"

"Odd question from a bloke I shared a tooth glass with."

"Does that mean yes?"

"S'pose it does."

He leaned to her and kissed her, a gentle kiss without expectation of anything more. This, too, she found appealing. She responded, and the kiss lingered. She felt the stirring within her, as she ever had.

SEATOWN

DORSET

On the way back down to their camping site, he kissed her again. This time he didn't ask permission. He merely stopped abruptly, and the expression on his face told her what was coming. She discovered that she wanted it to come, but there was danger in this.

She said, "I've got my life back, William. I don't want to lose it again."

"We're not going to talk about that," he told her. "Not yet. I won't say not ever because things have changed for me. I've moved on as well."

"What's that mean? Is there someone . . . ?"

"I wouldn't have asked you to come down if there was someone, and I bloody well hope you wouldn't have come if there was someone on your side as well."

"I've said there isn't."

"But has there been? In these last months? Because there hasn't for me and—"

“William . . .” She said his name like a gentle admonition.

“Never mind,” he said quickly. “None of my business.” He resumed their walk.

They made love that night. Lily couldn’t have said what was behind William’s desire to be with her that way—aside from biology and the kind of animal lust that arises when a male and a female are thrust into intensely intimate quarters with each other after a pleasant day together—but on her part it was a half-and-half thing. Half lust, if she was honest with herself. Half curiosity, if she was more honest still. For their previous coupling had been an engagement of manic intensity where his release followed so hard on the heels of initiation that the end result had most often been abject apology, reassurance, and a recommitment to “make things different next time.” They’d never been different, but she’d kept up her hopes. Now she was merely curious.

Thus she let him seduce her once she read the signs that he wanted to do so: the earnest looks, the warm hand on the back of her neck as they walked back from their meal at the pub, the fingers gently brushing her hair from her cheeks. When he said without the hesitant preamble she’d come to learn was his style, “D’you want to make love with me, Lily?” she admired that new courage in him that gave voice to desire instead of sidling into the act as if it was the expected thing between them. This made her consider that perhaps it had been her own lusty approach which had, all along, been the source of his troubles. So this time, she followed his lead and let him guide her as he wished. They lay together afterwards on their sides with their hands intertwined on her hip.

“I love you,” he said. “Now and always.”

She smiled, but she didn’t say the words he wanted to hear. She thought he might protest at this, asking for more as he’d done in the past, but he didn’t. Instead he smiled back at her and said, “So . . . How was it for you?”

“You know very well how it was for me. But, William . . .” She waited for him to steel himself, but he didn’t do so behind that open and generous expression on his face. She said, “It doesn’t change anything. It’s lovely here. I recognise that. But I don’t want to leave London.”

“Yet,” he said. “Add ‘yet.’ You know it’s there, waiting to be said.”

“I don’t know that.”

“Yet,” he said.

She saw the compromise he was offering her so she went along. “I don’t know that yet.”

He reached out then. His fingers brushed lightly against her nipple, and she felt what she was meant to feel, the answering rush of blood between her legs that said how quickly she could be ready for him.

“You’re very naughty,” she told him.

“I can be naughtier still,” he replied.

SEATOWN

DORSET

Lily slept far better than she would have supposed possible in a tent, on the ground, in the ax-wielding cold. She slept dreamlessly and deeply, and when she awoke she could see the sun's halo on the canvas of the tent. She rolled onto her side to watch William in his sleep, but she found he was gone.

For a moment she felt like Juliet in the tomb, but "No friendly drop for me" related to her powerful thirst and not to a desire for oblivion. She was parched and she was also famished, the latter unusual as she normally did not wake with a need to eat. She stretched, yawned, and reached for whatever discarded clothing came to hand. She could see her breath from her nose like a snorting bull, and she had no intention of emerging from the warmth of the duvet and the bag till she was clothed.

No easy feat, she discovered, but she accomplished this with various grunts and groans. She called for William several times, but to no avail. She worked her way to the tent's zippered opening and stuck her head out into a brilliant morning. Not a cloud in the sky but still no birds. They'd taken off for Spain, she decided. She couldn't blame them.

She called William's name again and blinked in the morning light. No one was up and about near the other tents. It was either too cold or too early or both. A glance at her watch said half past seven. She grumbled and ducked back into the tent.

Her mouth and throat felt coated with a film of sand. There had to be something to drink nearby, and she needed to get to it. She also needed to have a wee, but that could come later.

Will's rucksack was the answer for drink. Lily crawled over to it. Inside was an orange left over from their snack on Golden Cap, some almonds, part of a chocolate bar, and—praise God—one quarter left of the bottle of water. She brought these treasures forth by dumping the rucksack's contents onto one of the sleeping bags. What tumbled out with them was a thin bound book.

Without a thought other than that William had begun putting his garden ideas onto paper prior to realising them, she opened the book. She uncapped the water, drank it all, and then glanced at the pages exposed before her. Several hasty sketches indicated a fountain here, a pond there, a rock course forming a dry streambed. But then the use of the bound book altered. It became a journal in William's hand.

She would think later that what she should have done at once was carefully put the journal back, allowing William his private thoughts. But the same curiosity that had driven at least part of her willingness to be sexual with William on the previous night drove her now to read his words.

She could see that he had written in haste, feverish thoughts that effectively mirrored the Wording when it came upon him. But unlike the Wording, there was nothing of an execrable nature within the writing.

recovering. a process. not something that happens in a day. process means movement and something changing. live through it and always hold on to better days coming.

Lily frowned, but she got it. Early days for him and he'd struggled. Who wouldn't have done? He'd lost his fledging business, and he'd also lost her. It had been bad for him. She flipped two pages, past another sketch, this a set of urns planted with gracious abundance. Then:

happened again. Talk over dinner like always but Lily comes up and then I go off and nothing stops it till

what stops it stops it. then again later and if there isn't another way what do I do no fucking good bloody useless

Lily felt the chill of warning. Then:

charlie rang. he says theres answers to everything come on Will he says you don't always have to be so afraid but it's not fear and he doesn't know that it's never been fear it's all inside where the twisting happens

Outside in the distance, a dog barked. Closer by, a car's engine turned over and someone stepped on the accelerator hard to rev it five times as someone else shouted to bloody well stop it as people were sleeping, you sodding fool. Lily dimly heard this as well as a child beginning to cry. Then:

so I looked close and it was there all along contempt like he said it would be and he must have always known only he doesn't know it all what I can't work out is how when I never saw it before only now I see it all the time and I want to die

Lily felt the sure grip of fear when she reached those words. "I want to die" seemed to shimmer on the page. So she turned to the next one and she began her descent into the mind of a man she had never known at all.

SEATOWN

DORSET

William left the little shop with his breakfast purchases. He'd had to wait until eight for their opening time, but it had been no bother. He'd sat on the stoop and he'd watched the morning sunlight striking the bay. He'd followed the progress of two early walkers who were crossing the emerald expanse of slope that rose to form the eastern cliff that hulked above the shingle beach. This one was far more friable than Golden Cap, signs posting its dangers. *Keep to the path. Dangerous cliff. Unstable ground.* The problem with it was that it looked so innocent: a steady upswing of cropped meadow grass leading towards a view and the azure sky. The occasional bench allowed for resting from one's exertions, but the wind-twisted hazels along the way offered no shelter from the weather.

Will breathed deeply of the morning air. He was completely back to himself. He hadn't had a seizure in weeks, and this wasn't entirely due to the religious taking of his medications. It was due to recovering from London, from the intrusion of people into his design process, from the pressure of being surrounded on all sides by individuals he didn't know and could not trust. It was also due, he knew this, to the fact that he'd established a residence away from his mum.

Lily had been correct about that. She'd also been incorrect about that. He'd had to get home to Dorset in order to recover, but he'd also had to strike out on his own and to prove to himself that he could be on his own. No living with Mum in Dorset. No living with Charlie and India in London. No clinging to Lily like a man going under and dragging her with him.

What he knew was that he needed the peace of the countryside, whether it be the rolling green downs with their patchwork farms, the shore with its magnificent cliffs and astounding geologic crumples, the deep pockets of woodland, the great distinguished overturned blue bowl of sky. He needed this place in order to live as a whole man and not as some blathering nincompoop afraid of his shadow and of everyone else's. There were no monsters in the cupboard or under the bed in the countryside. There was only the countryside itself.

His mum had known this. Lily would come to know it as well.

Lily, he thought. With her in this last day, he'd felt fully capable of winning her back. It would take time but they *did* have time, for they were young and the years stretched out ahead of them.

She could close up her shop in London. She could come to Dorset. He'd actually found her a place for her shop, although he wouldn't tell her that yet. Given time and the gentle urging of which he now found himself so fully capable, Lily would see what was meant to be. He'd put her through a terrible time, but he knew that love didn't die so easily for a woman like Lily.

When the shop opened, he made his purchases. He had to linger a bit in order to get them each a freshly made coffee as well. He saw to this and added what he knew she liked—milk and no sugar—and he headed with his purchases back to their camp.

When he arrived, he saw that she still wasn't up. He set his bag of breakfast goodies on the ground, put the two coffees on a flat stone, and knelt to the tent. He thought of the ways in which he could awaken her: the caress, the kiss on the back of her neck.

But she was awake, he saw, when he opened the tent. She was also dressed. She was sitting cross-legged on her sleeping bag, with her sweet neck bent so that her ginger hair parted to reveal the soft white flesh.

He said, "Ah, you're—" but her startled cry stopped his words. Her hands fell to her lap to try to cover what she'd been looking at. He saw it then. She said his name.

Then "Oh my God" came after that, and her expression broke as if a hammer had hit it.

He backed from the tent with a strangled cry. Where to go what to see what to do who to ask . . .

He began to run up the slope, towards the sea.

TWO MONTHS BEFORE

20 JULY

VICTORIA

LONDON

What took DI Thomas Lynley to the office of Detective Superintendent Isabelle Ardery had nothing to do with an investigation. Instead, it had to do with the very last thing he would ever have expected to bother him: Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers actually keeping herself in order for two months and counting. Forever had it been his most ardent wish that his longtime colleague would see the light of reason and begin to dress, talk, and otherwise comport herself in a manner designed to win the approval of those superior officers in control of her fate. But now he found that the version of Barbara Havers he'd been praying to see

for years was simply no match for the Barbara Havers whose maddening company had always ended up inspiring the work they did together.

True, she'd been infuriating from the day she'd been assigned to him. But the fact of the matter was that even on her best days, with attitude seeping from her every pore, Barbara Havers was twice the officer of anyone else, with the possible exception of DS Winston Nkata, who, admittedly, equaled her but in no way surpassed her except in dress sense. This new, putatively improved, toeing-the-line version of DS Barbara Havers, though . . . ? It didn't serve anyone's interests to have her keep her every thought to herself until she knew which way the wind was blowing. Least of all did it serve the interests of getting to the truth in an investigation. But so far she'd had absolutely no choice in the matter of her behaviour. For Isabelle Ardery held in her desk a transfer request that Barbara had signed, which could catapult her to the north of England. One wrong move and the date would be filled in, guaranteeing her a stunning new life in Berwick-upon-Tweed. No job was open up there, of course. But Isabelle Ardery knew people in high places, and a favour given was a favour owed. There were very few chief constables in the land who would turn away from the prospect of a favour owed them by a detective superintendent at the Met. Because of this, Lynley made the decision to have a word with the superintendent. He wanted to have a go at talking her into removing the sword of Damocles that was fixed above Barbara's head.

At Ardery's office, he asked politely if he could have a word, *guv*. Isabelle was dealing with some paperwork, but she set it aside. She gave him the eye at his tone of deference. She would, Lynley knew, be immediately suspicious.

She pushed back from her desk and rose. She went to a rather shabby credenza against the far wall and poured herself a glass of water from a jug that she held up in offer to him. He demurred. She said, "Do sit, Tommy," but she didn't do so herself.

Lynley saw that sitting at her command was going to please her. But he also understood that it would diminish him in both of their eyes. So he engaged in an eye-lock moment with her as she waited for him to make up his mind. He did, saying, "I'll stand if it's all the same," to which she said, "As you wish, of course."

They were an identical height. His was by virtue of genetics. Hers was by virtue of wearing shoes with a modest two-inch heel. They brought her to six feet, two inches, just like him, and when he stood in front of her desk with his fingertips on it, they were able to eyeball each other.

He knew he couldn't go at his subject directly. Still, there was no point to a quarter hour of social niceties, so he said, "I've some concerns about Barbara Havers, *guv*."

Isabelle's gaze on him narrowed. "What's the exasperating woman done now?"

"Not a thing. I'm finding that a problem."

"Because . . ."

"Because how she is just now—these last two months, actually—*isn't* how she does her best work."

"She'll adjust."

"That's what concerns me. Who she was and how she worked . . . That's disappearing a bit more every day. This new iteration of her—"

“I quite like this new iteration of her,” Ardery cut in. “It’s jolly good to know I can come into my office in the morning and not have someone storming along or ringing me up to demand my presence on high in order to discuss her latest misadventure.”

“But that’s just it,” Lynley said. “To do a decent job, one has to stumble now and again. If one becomes too cautious, too afraid of being disciplined or dragged into court or put through an internal investigation or . . .” He hesitated because if he said the rest, she would know instantly what he had in mind and he wasn’t sure this was the route to go. Isabelle didn’t take lightly to being offered advice.

“Or?” She lifted her glass and drank. Her gold button earrings caught the light as her blond hair swept back briefly and then fell neatly into place.

“Or being forced to transfer,” he said, as finally there was simply nowhere else he could go.

“Ah.” She set her glass down on the desk. She herself sat, and she gestured him to do likewise. He did so this time as she said, “That’s why you’ve come. Let’s jump ahead and save ourselves five or ten minutes of potential metacommunicating with each other as I get enough of that when speaking to the father of my boys. You would like me to withdraw Sergeant Havers’ transfer request.”

“I think it would help.”

“As before, Tommy, I like things as they are.”

He leaned towards the desk. In unconscious response, she leaned away from it. He said, “It’s that transfer request that you had her sign that’s keeping her from doing her best work, and I’d think you would have known that would be the consequence when you had her sign it.”

“We define ‘her best work’ differently, then, as I don’t see ‘her best work’ as becoming a filthy tabloid’s snout—”

“Guy, she intended—”

“Don’t take me for a fool. You know as well as I that Barbara provided *The Source* with information, that she used her rank as an officer of the Met to set up and pursue a completely unauthorised investigation of her own, that she defied orders and left without leave—left the bloody *country*, for God’s sake—and involved herself in a foreign incident.”

“I don’t deny she did all of that. But you of all people know what it’s like to try to work while under constant scrutiny from the higher-ups. When you’re under the magnifying glass, when you believe that the least little unguarded moment can result in your being taken to task or given the sack—”

“Sergeant Havers should have thought of that before she headed off to Italy without leave to do so, before she leaked details of an investigation to that loathsome journalist pal of hers, and before she forced me to transfer another DI simply because she and he could no longer coexist in the same department.”

“I think you know he’s not her ‘pal.’”

“Who?”

“The journalist. And as to your transferring John Stewart, wouldn’t you agree that he hanged himself?”

“She’s taken a baker’s dozen of fully mad actions that have alienated me and every officer above me in rank.

You *know* this.”

“A bit of an exaggeration, I daresay,” he pointed out.

“Do *not* go public school on me, Tommy. It’s unbecoming.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“You’ll have to be satisfied with the way things are and so will she. If Barbara can’t find it in herself to work not only as a member of a team but also as an individual whose responsibilities carry the weight of certain behavioural requirements, then she needs to find another line of employment. Frankly, I can come up with several but most of them have to do with sheep and the Falkland Islands and my guess is that lacks a certain appeal. Now.” She rose, and he knew what this meant. “Are we finished here? I’ve work to do and so do you and so does Barbara, who, I hope, has arrived on time, well dressed, and well adjusted.”

Lynley didn’t know. He hadn’t yet seen Havers that morning. But he blithely lied and told Ardery that well dressed and well adjusted appeared to be exactly Barbara Havers’ state.

VICTORIA

LONDON

He was in the corridor heading to his own office when he heard Dorothea Harriman behind him, her identity telegraphed by the snapping of her stiletto heels on the lino as well as her typical style of greeting anyone at the Met: by full title only, no initials allowed. She said, “Detective Inspector Lynley?” When he turned, she was casting a glance back over her shoulder.

He waited for her to catch him up. That glance she’d tossed in the direction of Isabelle’s office told him that Dorothea—the department’s civilian secretary—had probably helped herself to an earful of what had gone on between the superintendent and him, a not unusual behaviour on her part. Information, Dee knew, was paramount when it came to police work, even at the secretarial level.

She said when she reached him, “Could I have a word?” and she indicated one of the stairwells in the centre of the building, a frequent hideaway of Met smokers hoping to get away with a few drags to sustain them until they had time to duck outside and pace the requisite distance from the entrance. Lynley followed her through the door. Two uniformed constables were on the landing applying coins to a vending machine while having a conversation about “the bloody bastard deserving what he got, you ask me.” Dorothea waited till they’d made their purchases and clomped down to the floor below. She didn’t speak till she heard the door click shut behind them. Then she said, “Not wishing to be the bearer of bad news, but going there anyway—”

“Christ. I haven’t driven her to transfer Barbara at once, have I?”

“No, of course not. And rest assured she won’t do that unless the detective sergeant forces her hand.”

“But Barbara being Barbara and hand forcing being her primary forte, along with line crossing and going entirely off the rails . . .”

“You’d hoped to forestall what you see as the inevitable,” Dorothea said. “That’s what I reckoned you were up to. But really, there’s not going to be a change in that direction, Detective Inspector.” Dorothea indicated the route she’d come from Isabelle’s office as means of identifying the antecedent when she went on with, “She thinks she’s done the right thing and the only thing. She’s not about to back off.”

“Not without a miracle the likes of which I’ve not yet encountered,” Lynley agreed.

“And truth to tell, the detective sergeant does look ever so *slightly* more put together these days, wouldn’t you say?”

“Her physical appearance is hardly the point. As you no doubt overheard.”

Dorothea dropped her gaze and strove to look embarrassed although Lynley knew very well that the young woman experienced absolutely no shame when it came to her peerless skill at eavesdropping. “Admittedly,” she said, “things haven’t been nearly as lively as they used to be now that Detective Sergeant Havers is being so . . . so not Detective Sergeant Havers. And things definitely have become less interesting.”

“You won’t find me disagreeing, Dee. But aside from persuading the superintendent to be rid of that transfer request—”

“Which she will *never* do.”

“—I’ve not the first idea how to put Barbara into the position where her brain is firing the way it once did without the additional problem of that same brain encouraging her to go her own way and ignore what she’s been ordered to do.” Lynley sighed and looked down at his shoes which, he noted, wanted a decent polishing.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Dorothea said.

“How to bring Barbara’s work up to snuff?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“What does that mean?”

Dorothea smoothed a nonexistent ruck in the seam of her frock. She was wearing a frothy summer dress of swirling, saturated colours, and she’d topped this with some sort of hot pink half-cardigan affair whose style Lynley’s late wife would have been able to name without hesitation, but Lynley himself could not. It was far too dressy an ensemble for a day at the Met, but Dorothea as usual made it work.

She said, “It’s this. Obviously, she’s desperately unhappy just now. She’s being someone she isn’t. She’s like a pendulum that’s swung too far one way and now is swinging too far the other.”

“That fairly well describes it,” Lynley said.

“Well, I think that there’s *always* been a solution to the problems she has here at the Met although I’m fairly sure you aren’t going to like it if I bring that solution to light. Shall I anyway?”

“Try me,” he said.

“Fine. Here it is. She’s too focused. She always has been. She’s been . . . let’s call it hyperfocused. It’s generally been on her work, an investigation, that sort of thing. But now the *only* focus she has is how to stay out of trouble with Detective Superintendent Ardery.”

“As Ardery’s holding the transfer paperwork, I don’t disagree with that assessment at all.”

“Well, that’s due to *something*, don’t you think?”

“What is?”

“Her problem with hyperfocus.”

“I daresay it’s due to Barbara’s not wanting to end up in Berwick-upon-Tweed. And I can hardly blame her.”

“Certainly, but that’s only half of it, Detective Inspector. The rest of it is what she’s *not* thinking about. And thinking about *that* would relieve her of the strain of thinking only about how not to get herself sent up north. Yes?”

“Agreed, more or less,” Lynley said cautiously. He did wonder where all this was heading. “So tell me,” he went on. “What is it that she’s not thinking about that she actually ought to be thinking about?”

Dorothea looked patently startled at the question. “Goodness, it’s what everyone else is always thinking about, Detective Inspector.”

“I’m intrigued. Go on.”

“Sex,” she said.

“Sex.” He glanced round the stairwell to emphasise what he was about to say. “Dorothea, ought we to be having this conversation?”

“Sexual harassment being all the rage, you mean? Detective Inspector Lynley, let’s please set political correctness aside for a moment and just get down to facts.” Dorothea indicated the stairwell with a manicured hand, by which she also indicated the Met. “Detective Sergeant Havers needs to think like the rest of humanity. She’s always needed that. Which means she needs to think of something more than the Met, her job, and being transferred. Sex is just the ticket for that, and I suspect you know it as well as I do. Call it love, romance, making babies, finding a soul mate, settling down, or anything else you like, it all comes down to the same thing at the end of the day. A mate. The detective sergeant needs an outlet. She needs someone special so that her whole entire world is *not* this place.”

Lynley eyed her. “You’re suggesting Barbara needs to find a man, aren’t you.”

“I am. She needs a love life. We all need a love life. Have you ever known the detective sergeant to have one? You don’t even need to answer. No. She hasn’t had one, and that’s why she keeps falling afoul of—”

“Dee, has it occurred to you that not every woman on the planet wants—or even needs—a man?”

Dorothea took a step backwards, her smooth brow creased. “Heavens, Detective Inspector, are you suggesting the detective sergeant is an asexual being? No? Then what? Not that she’s . . . That’s completely ridiculous. I don’t believe it. Because she and that professor, her neighbour, the man with the lovely little daughter . . .” She paused, looking thoughtful. “On the other hand, there *is* her hair. And the strange lack of interest in makeup. And her absolutely appalling dress sense. But still . . .”

“Have we gone down the rabbit hole?” Lynley asked. “Or is this merely an intriguing illustration of random thinking?”

Dorothea looked flustered, which was entirely unlike her, but she gathered herself together heroically. “No matter. All that’s to be decided,” she said obscurely. “But we’ll use her professor friend as an example.”

“Taymullah Azhar,” Lynley told her. “The daughter’s called Hadiyyah. They were Barbara’s neighbours.

What are we using them as examples of?"

"What she needs," she declared. "What she might have had had they not left the country."

"Barbara and Azhar," Lynley clarified, just to be sure he was on the right track. "What they might have had. Together."

"Indeed."

"Sex."

"Yes. Sex, a relationship, a love affair, a romance. Had things gone that way, she'd be a different woman, you mark my words. And *being* a different woman is what she needs. And the way to get her there . . . ? The entire process of getting her there . . . ? I can be of help."

Lynley felt his scepticism rise. "You know, of course, that Azhar and his daughter are in Pakistan now. As far as I know, they're not coming back any time soon and Barbara certainly can't go to them. So what exactly are you suggesting? Surely not sending Barbara on a blind date? Pray not that."

"Oh please. Detective Sergeant Havers is *not* about to step out on a blind date. No. This situation you and I are looking at? It must be gone at a bit more obliquely." She straightened her shoulders and threw her head back. "Detective Inspector, I'd like to offer to take the project in hand."

"Towards what end?" Lynley enquired.

"To the obvious end," she announced. "The end that delivers her to love, of course, in any particular form it takes."

"And you actually think this will make a difference?" Lynley asked her.

She smiled a smile replete with knowledge. "Trust me," she said.

23 JULY

BISHOPSGATE

LONDON

As soon as she alighted at Liverpool Street Station, Barbara Havers asked herself what on earth she'd been thinking in agreeing to any kind of jaunt with Dorothea Harriman. She and the departmental secretary had exactly one thing in common—the possession of two X chromosomes—and no amount of plumbing either the depths or the shallows of their personalities was going to change that immutable fact. Additionally, Dee had not clued Barbara in as to their destination. Just "We'll start out at Liverpool Street Station, Detective Sergeant Havers. The rail station, I mean. We'll meet and see what happens from there. I must pop by Wentworth Street first, though. Have you been . . . ?"

Barbara realised later that the innocence of that question should have told her a great deal, but at the moment she did not twig to anything other than Harriman's offer of a mercy outing during their off hours. Since she

was doing nothing on the particular day and time of the proposed outing—when was she doing *anything* at this point in her life? she asked herself—Barbara shrugged and said Wentworth Street was fine by her and no, she'd never been. She had no clue what they would encounter in that part of London aside from the distinct possibility of urban renewal run amok, and being invited to engage in a Dorothea Harriman experience was a novelty anyway.

Barbara couldn't remember the last time she'd been in Liverpool Street rail station, but as she emerged from the underground and wandered into the vast maw of the place, she did know it hadn't been then what it currently was: an enormous shopping mall-cum-railway station with loudspeakers blaring announcements, people rushing by with valises, briefcases, and rucksacks; uniformed police pacing round and giving the eye to potential terrorists—male, female, youth, adult, or aged grandparent behind explosive zimmer frame—and adolescent girls with shopping bags the size of sandwich boards in one hand and smartphones in the other.

They'd agreed to meet at the flower vendor, which Dorothea had assured Barbara she would have no trouble finding, and this turned out to be the case. She sauntered up and interrupted the young woman in midflirt with an antique gentleman who was attempting to press an armload of tuberose upon her.

Barbara joined them with the excuse for her tardiness that every Londoner who used the underground had long ago expected to hear when someone was late for an appointment: “Northern Line. There's going to be a riot on the platform one day.”

“Not a problem,” Dorothea told her. She waved good-bye to the gentleman, linked her arm to Barbara's, and said confidentially, “I've had a skinny latte, bought some new knickers, and practised turning down an indecent proposal from a seventy-year-old. Lord. Have you noticed how men *never* seem to take the fact of their ageing to heart while, as women, we're continually bombarded with reminders that middle age is out there, waiting to claim us with crow's-feet?”

Barbara hadn't noticed. She'd never been the recipient of any sort of proposal, indecent or otherwise, and as for crow's-feet, her attempts to avoid them had so far been limited to not looking into mirrors longer than it took to see if she had spinach between her teeth on the rare occasions when she actually ate spinach.

As they walked towards a glittering exit that loomed at the top of a set of escalators, Barbara cast an eye upon Harriman's day-out-in-East-London ensemble of slim navy trousers tapering down to slender ankles and ballerina shoes in tan and white. She'd topped the trousers with a red-and-white-striped tee-shirt, and she carried a tan and white handbag that matched the shoes. On her days off, Harriman managed to look as put together as she looked on her days on, Barbara thought.

In contrast, Barbara herself had taken directly to heart the word “*outing*” that Dorothea had used to describe what they would be doing, and she had dressed accordingly. She wore draw-string trousers and a tee-shirt with *Are you talking to yourself or just pretending that I'm listening?* emblazoned across it while on her feet she'd donned—in honour of the occasion—her new shoes. The fact that they were leopard-print high-top trainers made a certain statement, she'd reckoned back in Chalk Farm when she'd put them on. Now, however, she decided that they might be a wee bit . . . well, *out there* was probably the term of choice.

Right. Well. Too late to do anything about it, she decided. She followed Harriman onto the escalator. At the top, she decided a compliment was in order, and she told Dorothea that she looked—a word search was necessary—smashing. Harriman thanked her prettily and explained that Wentworth Street was responsible.

Barbara experienced an uh-oh moment. “I hope you're not saying what I think you're saying.”

“Which is what?” Dorothea asked.

“Which is that you intend to make me over. I went that route once, Dee. It didn’t take.”

“Heavens, no,” Dorothea said. “I wouldn’t presume. But I’ve a garden party to go to tomorrow afternoon and not a stitch to wear that everyone hasn’t seen two thousand times. This will take five minutes.”

“And after that?”

“I think it’s bric-a-brac day at Spitalfields Market. Are you interested in bric-a-brac, Detective Sergeant?”

“Do I look like someone who’s interested in bric-a-brac?” Barbara enquired. “Dee, what’s this about?”

“Nothing at all.” Dorothea had stepped off the escalator and was heading towards the towering doors. She stopped, though, when Barbara said her name more insistently.

“You’re not taking me in hand?” Barbara demanded. “You’re not following orders? Ardery says to you, ‘Do something with Sergeant Havers because she still isn’t quite right,’ and you go along with it?”

“You’re joking, of course. What on earth would I ‘do’ with you? Come along and stop being so difficult,” Dorothea said, and she once again took Barbara’s arm to make sure her directions were being followed.

They found themselves in Bishopsgate, where modern London of the City—in the form of looming glass tower blocks—was steadily creeping towards pre-Victorian London of Spitalfields. Here unrestrained capitalism was doing its best to destroy the history of the capital, and where there were not soaring buildings announcing themselves as multinational corporations, there were chain shops whose ownership by unknown multinational magnates fairly did the same.

The pavements were crowded. So was the street. But the congestion didn’t deter Dorothea, who kept her arm linked with Barbara’s and who carved an easy route through pedestrians, taxis, buses, and cars in order to cross over. Barbara expected her to pop inside one of the several shops they passed, but this did not happen. Instead, within five minutes, Harriman’s sure pacing had taken them in a crisscross pattern of narrowing thoroughfares and back into a London of another century.

A hotchpotch of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings sprang up in unwashed brick splendour, comprising questionable housing and forlorn places of business. There were colourful sari shops, dubious-looking hair studios with Mediterranean names, textile outlets, pubs announcing themselves as the Angel and the Pig and Whistle, and the kind of cafés where coffee came in either white or black via a kettle and a jar of powder. Within one hundred yards an open-air market sprang up, filled with stalls that offered a staggering array of products: from pin-striped business suits to ladies’ crotchless underwear. There were also food vendors of every ilk, and accordingly the air was filled with the scents of curry, cumin, cooking oil, and cod.

Dorothea took everything in, sighed with evident pleasure, and said to Barbara, “I know you’ve always wondered. I don’t like to say because of what people might think.”

Barbara drew her eyebrows together. She hadn’t the first clue what Harriman meant.

“This is how I dress myself,” Dorothea went on, with a gesture towards the dizzying number of clothing stalls that formed a colourful river spilling down the street in front of them. “Twelve pounds for a frock, Detective Sergeant. Twenty pounds for a suit. Thirteen pounds for a pair of shoes. Wear it for a season, then toss it because it’s probably falling apart anyway.”

Barbara looked from the stalls to Dorothea. She shook her head. “I don’t believe you,” she said. “Not what you wear, Dee.”

Dorothea said, “Of course there’s the occasional consignment piece. Well, there has to be, hasn’t there? It’s wise to have something decent *and* timeless now and then. But the rest is this. Cheaply made and cheaply sold but”—and here she held up a finger—“it’s utterly astonishing what a very good steam iron applied before wearing, the willingness to change out buttons, and the right accessories can do for a girl.”

SPITALFIELDS

LONDON

Barbara hardly expected to enjoy herself with a crawl through what she quickly discovered was Petticoat Lane market. But Dorothea Harriman was having no interference from her in the quest for clothing. She repeated her need for a suitable frock for the following day’s garden party, and she added the fact that a Certain Young Banker was going to be present at this affair. She firmly intended to catch his eye, she announced. *If* the detective sergeant wished to stand by mutely and watch the proceedings, she could certainly do that. On the other hand, if the detective sergeant wanted to do some browsing, Dorothea was only too happy to recommend her favourite stall, where a Bangladeshi family of six supported themselves with knockoffs of garments worn by celebrities and the two or three sole fashionable members of the royal family. “I don’t know how they do it,” Dorothea explained, “but I reckon it’s with computer hacking. So if the right person wears it to a film opening or to Ascot or to visit the White House, they’ve got it here on sale within five days. It’s brilliant. Will you browse or will you be difficult?”

“I’ll browse, I’ll browse,” Barbara told her. Dorothea’s expression telegraphed delight until Barbara added, “Over there,” and indicated the food stalls. At which point she sighed and said primly, “I refuse to believe you’re as hopeless as you wish me to think, Detective Sergeant Havers.”

“Think it,” Barbara told her. She took herself off to explore the edible offerings in Goulston Street, which were many, varied, and begging for purchase.

She was wandering along the pavement and digging into a second sumptuous offering from Tikka Express Indian Cuisine when she spied the display window of a shop that appeared to be directly up her alley. The place was called Death Kitty, the shop window exclusively given to tee-shirts. Sagging paper plate in hand, she went to inspect them. Alas, she thought as she approached. All of the tee-shirts were black and of a marginally obscene nature, which made them unsuitable for anything other than wearing to visit her mum whose current mental state would preclude her comprehension of the finer points of double entendre.

Damn, blast, and oh well, Barbara thought airily. She was about to walk off when she spied a colourful poster mounted in the shop window as well. It was announcing the publication of a book and the local appearance of its author. *Looking for Mr. Darcy: The Myth of Happily Ever After* was the first. Clare Abbott was the second. She would be reading and speaking at Bishopsgate Institute; women were encouraged to attend; men were dared to accompany them.

SPITALFIELDS

LONDON

Barbara made the decision to attend the reading at Bishopsgate Institute for two reasons, the first of which was a very late lunch with Dorothea at Spitalfields Market. There they tucked into specialty crepes at a small café with artsy tables topped with stainless steel and chairs that looked like stretched-out colanders. Delicately unfolding her paper napkin, Dorothea blithely launched into the kind of conversation that Barbara had managed to avoid having with another human being for her entire adult life.

Dorothea speared a slice of chicken-and-asparagus crepe, and she said to Barbara, “Detective Sergeant, let me be blunt and ask you something: When was the last time you had a truly decent bonk? I mean a grabbing-the-bedposts-and-howling session orchestrated by a bloke who knows what he’s about. This does, of course, eliminate any male who went to boarding school, but you know what I mean.” She chewed for a moment as Barbara attempted to ignore her by studying the mother and child at the next table who were engaged in a battle of wills over a miniature lorry that the child wished to plough across his plate of food. When Barbara didn’t reply, Dorothea said, “Do not make me drag the truth from you,” and tapped Barbara severely on the hand.

Barbara turned back to her. “Never,” she said.

“Never as in you’ll never answer me or never as in . . . you know.”

“As in you know.”

“Are you . . . You aren’t saying you’re a virgin, are you? Of course you’re not.” She cocked her head and examined Barbara, and a horrified expression upon her face indicated that a dawning thought had struck her. She said, “You *are*. Oh my God. No wonder. How *stupid* of me. When Detective Inspector Lynley mentioned—”

“The *inspector*? Oh, that’s brilliant, Dee. You and DI Lynley are discussing my sex life?”

“No, no, no. I mean, he’s worried about you. With your friends being gone to Pakistan. We’re *all* worried about you. And anyway, don’t let’s get off the subject.”

“Dee, this is cringe-worthy. I reckon you know that because you’re not an idiot. So let’s cut to the chase. I have a busy life, so when it comes to sex, I just don’t have—”

“Do *not* say what you’re about to say because no one on earth is too busy for sex,” Dorothea said. “Good Lord, Detective Sergeant, how long does it take? Ten minutes? Twenty? Thirty if you want a shower as well?” She looked thoughtful and added, “An hour, I suppose, if you require lengthy seduction. But the point is—”

“The point is changing the subject,” Barbara told her. “Let’s talk about films. Or the telly. Or books. Or celebrities. Or absolutely any member of the royal family, with or without prominent front teeth. You choose. I’m easy.”

“I have to ask, then. Do you *want* a man? Do you want a life beyond the Met?”

“Cops leave ruined marriages in their wake,” Barbara pointed out. “Just look at our colleagues.” She picked up the menu and studied its possibilities. Another crepe or possibly a dozen sounded good at this point.

But Dorothea plunged determinedly on. “Good heavens, I’m not talking about marriage. Am I married? Do I look married? Do I look like someone desperate to *get* married?”

“To be honest? Yes. Aren’t you the bird who said not an hour ago that there’s some bloke you want to impress at a party?”

“Well . . . yes, of course. That’s exactly what I said. But the point is: impress, date, bonk, whatever. And if that leads to something more at the end of the day, I’m on board with the idea. We all want marriage eventually.”

“We do?”

“Naturally. We’re only lying to ourselves if we say we don’t.”

“I don’t.”

“Am I supposed to believe that?”

“Marriage isn’t for everyone, Dee.”

“Stuff and nonsense and—”

Barbara got up from the table to approach the ordering counter. “I’m having another crepe,” she told her.

But when she returned to the table, she saw that her abrupt end to their conversation regarding her love life constituted only a pause in their minor conflict. The seat of her chair—so recently occupied by her substantial bum—now held a carrier bag. Barbara narrowed her eyes. Her gaze went from the bag to Dorothea, who said, “I *had* to get it. I *know* it will suit you. You mustn’t protest, Detective Sergeant Havers.”

“You said this wasn’t going to be an attempt to make me over, Dee.”

“I know, I know. But when I saw these . . . and you did mention my own clothes today. I just wanted you to see that dressy casual *isn’t* . . . Look. It’s only trousers, a jacket, and a shirt. Just try them. The colour is going to be perfect, the jacket will hit you just where it needs to, the trousers—”

“Stop. Please. All right. If I say I’ll try them, will you cease and desist?” And not waiting for an answer, Barbara pushed the bag onto the floor and dug her wallet from her shoulder bag. “What did you pay?”

“Good heavens, no!” Dorothea protested. “This is entirely on me, Detective Sergeant.”

That did put an end to their discussion, and Barbara drove it out of her mind that evening by shoving the clothing under her day-bed when she returned home. She might have forgotten everything about the excursion to Spitalfields save for Radio 4, which she tuned into prior to beginning the chore of weekly knickers washing in the kitchen sink. She’d rigged up the drying line and she was dousing her under things with Fairy liquid when she heard the sonorous voice of the radio host say to his guest, “That’s all well and good, but you appear to be arguing against the natural order of things. So I must ask this: At what juncture does this all become either posturing for publicity’s sake or a case in point of she ‘doth protest too much’?”

A woman’s harsh voice answered. She seemed to bark rather than to talk, saying, “Natural order of things? My good man, from the time of the troubadours, Western civilization has encouraged women to believe that ‘someday my prince will come,’ which is hardly natural and which more than anything has kept women subservient, uneducated, ill informed generally, and willing to do everything from binding their feet to having ribs removed in order to produce the waistlines of five-year-old girls so as to please men. We’re offered injections to keep our faces without wrinkles, garments as comfortable as being embraced by a boa constrictor to keep our flab in check, hair dyes to keep our flowing locks youthful, and the most uncomfortable footwear in history to facilitate very strange fantasies that have to do with ankle licking, toe sucking, and—depend upon it—schoolboy spanking.”

The radio host chuckled, saying, “Yet women do go along with all this. No one forces them into it. They hand over their cash or their credit cards, all in the hope—”

“This isn’t ‘hope.’ That’s just my point. This is rote behaviour designed to produce a result they’re schooled

to believe they must have.”

“We’re not talking about automatons, Ms. Abbott. Can’t it be argued that they’re willing participants in their own . . . Would you call it enslavement? Surely not.”

“What choice do women have when they’re bombarded with images that mould their thinking from the time they can pick up a magazine or use a telly remote? Women are told from infancy that they are nothing if they don’t have a man, and they’re even less if they don’t have what is now *ridiculously* called a ‘baby bump’—God, where did that extremely stupid term come from?—within six months of capturing their man. And in order to end up with the requisite man and the requisite bump, they damn well better have perfect skin, white teeth, and eyelashes long enough, curled enough, and dark enough when they leave the house in the morning because God only knows their prince might be waiting on their doorstep with an armload of roses.”

“Yet you yourself have been married twice. Couldn’t it be argued that the position you now take arises from bitterness at the failure of those marriages?”

“Of course that could be argued,” the woman agreed. “It could also be argued that the position I take arises from having the veil lifted from my eyes after experiencing wifedom firsthand and coming to realise that wifedom and motherhood chosen blindly in order to fulfil someone else’s definition of a successful life or chosen without regard for other possibilities robs women of the very opportunities that have given men dominance over them from the Garden of Eden onward. My position is that women must be able to choose with their eyes wide open as to the consequences of their choices.”

“Which are not, as you say, ‘happily ever after.’”

“Believe me, the very first time Cinderella heard the prince emit an explosive fart, the entire idea of happily ever after got itself flushed directly down the loo.”

The radio host laughed. “And perhaps that says it all. We’ve been speaking with longtime feminist icon Clare Abbott about her controversial new book, *Looking for Mr. Darcy: The Myth of Happily Ever After*. She’ll be appearing at Bishopsgate Institute tomorrow evening at half past seven. Get there early because I have a feeling there’s going to be a crowd.”

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THE CITY

LONDON

India Elliott resumed using her maiden name eight months after she left her husband, which was two weeks after she accepted a second date with a man she’d met on her regular bus ride from the Wren Clinic at St. Dunstan’s Hill to her shabby little house in Camberwell. Prior to that, she’d been India Goldacre although she’d never much cared for the name and had only changed over to it because Charlie had insisted when they married. “You’re not actually married if you don’t change your name, darling” was how he’d put it, and only half in jest. “I mean, obviously you’re *married* but it’s like you’re hiding it from the world.” So she’d given in because when Charlie insisted on something, he never let up. And what, after all, did a little thing like a

surname matter at the end of the day? It pleased Charlie for her to change it, and she wanted to please him.

Everything had been perfect at first in their relationship, and everything had remained close to perfect for quite a while. But she knew now—these eight months after she'd walked out on him—that she'd been far too compliant in her marriage. And she had to admit that she'd been completely seduced by Charlie's mother.

The first time she'd been introduced to Caroline Goldacre, India had felt admired, embraced, and welcomed. On that day in Dorset, while Charlie had been appreciatively inspecting the transformation of the heating element used to fire his stepfather's enormous bakery ovens, Caroline had declared to India confidentially over tea à deux how delighted she was that "Charlie's found someone after all his dithering about with those piles of education he has." Then, within four days of being introduced, Caroline had sent her a scarf she'd found in Swans Yard in Shaftesbury with a brief note declaring the gift "a little something for you with great admiration from Charlie's mum." The colours were perfect with India's complexion, as if Caroline had made a study of her so that she would know what suited her best.

"For lovely India" had been written next, on a card accompanying a silver bracelet that Caroline had found "in of all places, one of our charity shops! With much affection, from Charlie's mum." Then had followed a string of intriguing beads, a handbag, and a small piece of antique silver. Not all at once, of course. And not every day. Not even every week. But just dropped into the post now and then or sent back with Charlie when he went down to Shaftesbury as he regularly did to visit his mum and his stepdad.

And then quietly one Sunday when she and Charlie had both gone down to Dorset for a midday meal, Caroline had said to her, "Thank you for humouring me, India. My entire life I've longed for a daughter—*please* don't tell either of the boys—and it gives me a great deal of pleasure to buy you the occasional little thing when I happen to see it. But don't feel you have to pretend to like everything! Something unsuitable? Just give it to a friend. I won't be at all offended."

Caroline was so reasonable a woman, so chatty and filled with stories of her life "with my boys," that India had relaxed her normal reserve, convinced that any caution she felt around Charlie's mum was the product of years spent as the only child of career diplomats who early on had inculcated in their daughter the message that a life spent moving from pillar to post suggested that her best interests lay in placing her trust largely if not solely in her parents when advancing through a foreign culture.

But Caroline Goldacre did not constitute a foreign culture, despite her Colombian birth. She'd lived since early childhood in England, and over time, India found herself charmed by her. So when she and Charlie married and Caroline asked her, "Please, would you call me Mum?" despite India's having a mother who was alive and well and, frankly, the only person India truly wanted to call her mother, she had gone along.

She'd told herself that it didn't really matter. She had always called her own mother Mama, with the accent on the second syllable in the fashion of someone out of the more antique sections of the British upper classes, so it wasn't as if the term *Mum* meant much to her. But it had meant a great deal to Caroline, and her evident pleasure the first time India had referred to her as Mum had caused Charlie's face to glow with gratitude. He'd mouthed, "Thank you" when Caroline hadn't been looking, and his blue eyes shone with a loving fullness.

What they'd had together during the years of their marriage wasn't a diamond-perfect thing, but India asked herself realistically what marriage *was* diamond perfect? She'd known from conversations with her own mother as well as with girlfriends that marriage meant compromise, as well as weathering sporadic storms with one's life's partner. But that was the point. One *had* a partner with whom one grew, and life without growth wasn't life at all.

She'd found it helped enormously that Charlie was a postgraduate student of psychology when they'd met, on an afternoon in the Wren Clinic with him on her acupuncture table and with her speaking in the gentle murmur she employed the first time she guided one of the thin needles into a nervous patient's skull. Because of his education, he knew how people and their relationships ticked, and that knowledge grew over the years once he opened his practice. By the time they married, he was a busy psychotherapist with a set of skills that he used to help India and himself through the occasional bad time that came up. And if it bothered her that he sometimes employed a therapist's technique when they were engaged in discussions that occasionally grew heated about this or that, she got past it because he always dropped it with a quick "Sorry, darling" when she pointed out to him that he was "doing it again." When he did that—giving her that affable apology—it set them immediately to rights.

But all that ended when Charlie's brother Will had died in Dorset. A single hysterical phone call from Caroline became the first blow upon what India had slowly come to realise was the far too delicate structure of the relationship she had built with her husband. The how of Will's death, the why of it, the where of it . . . ? These had been mere details to accompany the devastating fact of it: running madly up the hillside to the top of the lesser of two cliffs in a place called Seatown, where the greater cliff was 650 feet above a stony beach and the lesser cliff dropped a jumper 500 feet to certain death below. Only one person knew for certain what had actually occurred to fire Will's act that terrible day, while everyone else believed what they chose to believe, which was what they could bear to believe or could not bear or did not wish to face bearing, ever.

Charlie was in the last group, and India found this difficult to take in and more impossible to live with as the months wore on. The man was a psychotherapist, she told herself. He knew better than to avoid either his feelings or the truth. But avoid them he did, never mentioning his brother's name, exhibiting a false sense of heartiness—hale fellow well met and all the trimmings—that she was supposed to take as real, offering ill-timed jokes that were not the least amusing, shooting out inappropriate remarks so totally unlike him that she began to wonder if she knew him at all. All of this was meant to carry him through days that were torture for him while every moment declared a terrible truth that he could neither look at nor live with: He had not been able to help his brother.

Will's death had not been a horrible accident in which someone had wandered too close to a cliff edge that comprised sands and clay and was thus frighteningly unstable. There had been no terrible incident of someone backing up to pose for a photo with the sea behind him, no drug-induced flight from the tent where Will had been camping with Lily Foster. There had been instead a deliberate storming up the slope to the cliff's top in broad daylight, with Will's erstwhile lover chasing after him.

Lily Foster had seen it all, bearing witness to the excruciating spectacle of a young man's throwing himself to his death. At the base of the cliff, Will's head had splattered on a boulder while part of the fragile landscape above him descended on his body in a mock burial.

How do you regain yourself when your only brother takes his own life? There was a way, of course. What India believed was that there *had* to be a way. But Charlie Goldacre had obdurately refused to seek it. India Elliott—as she was now again and as she ever would be—bore with this refusal and its burdens on her marriage as long as she could, which turned out to be only as long as twenty-nine months after William's death. At that point she came to understand that, difficult as it was to face, there were times when the only life you could save was your own.

Part of that saving had been leaving Charlie. Part of it, she felt, was accepting the second date with Nathaniel Thompson. He preferred to be called Nat. She preferred Nathaniel as she found it a lovely name, but she went along with his desire and said, "All right then, Nat," and when after seven bus rides from St. Dunstan's Hill to Camberwell, he'd asked her if she wouldn't like to have a glass of wine near Camberwell Green, she

said she would like that very much, thank you, although the walk from Camberwell Green to her house would be a long one if she disembarked there.

The glass of wine had become dinner had become coffee. The hour was late at the end of this, so Nat phoned for a minicab and he rode along with her and then on to his own place after a chaste kiss on the cheek and a “see you tomorrow, then?” in reference to their regular bus ride together.

India found that the prospect of a real, planned date with Nat Thompson had an appeal to it that she hadn’t expected, so when on the next day’s bus ride, he told her of a show at Tate Britain that he was thinking of looking at and was she interested if he managed two tickets, she said yes, she was. She went back to calling herself India Elliott after that, something that Charlie discovered when he phoned the clinic. He’d been upset—“Come along, India. What man *wouldn’t* be?”—but she’d held firm.

That was before his mother showed up. Cleverly, Caroline had made an appointment at the clinic. More clever still, she’d made it under the surname MacKerron, which India glanced at but didn’t twig to as she took the folder from the holder mounted on the treatment room’s door, opening the first in prelude to opening the second. C. K. MacKerron was the patient’s name. New, she saw. Married, she saw. Female, she saw. Forty-nine years old and a martyr to unspecified hip pain.

She said, “Mrs. MacKerron,” as she entered, and then she stopped on the threshold with the doorknob still in her hand.

Caroline’s first words were, “Please don’t be angry, India. I thought you might not see me if I used Goldacre. I’ve had to come to London for an event with Clare, so I decided . . . Well, you see.” She was sitting on a straight-backed chair in the corner of the treatment room. The light was dim, as it would be in a clinic built from what remained of the ruin that had been Sir Christopher Wren’s rebuilding of an ancient Saxon church. Destroyed in the Blitz, what had been the church was a garden now defined by concentric circles, a fountain to dull the roar of traffic from Lower Thames Street, lush plantings, and ancient walls reaching upward, unroofed, to the sky. Only Wren’s original tower remained and in this was the clinic. Small rooms and few windows defined the space.

India didn’t know what to say, so she went with, “I’m not at all angry,” which was the truth. She wasn’t sure what she *did* feel at this unexpected sight of her mother-in-law, aside from surprise at the amount of weight Caroline was continuing to gain, but the heartbeat that tapped lightly behind her eardrums told her it was something and she would do herself a service to know.

She set the patient folder on a counter. She herself sat on the physician’s stool. The treatment table stood between them.

Caroline said, “You’ve done yourself up. Your hair, the new cut of it and the colour, the makeup as well . . . I don’t quite know what to say about it. It’s unexpected. You were always so natural.”

“Indeed. I was.” India didn’t add what she could have. That her natural look had been manufactured, at Charlie’s insistence and to please his mother. Caroline Goldacre didn’t like to see young women who—as she put it—felt the need to alter their “native” looks. What Charlie had never been able to explain was why his mother felt like that when she herself was so thoroughly dyed and painted. But she’d cooperated with Charlie—had India—even to the extreme of going *au naturel* on her wedding day. What on earth had she been thinking? India asked herself now.

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