

Chapter 1

The city of Forthburgh, in Scotland.
September 1989

The woman's voice ran in a continuous, breathless stream.

"Oh... hello? Is that the police? I can hardly think straight... I'm ringing to report an awful thing... it was my Trudi that found it... in the woods... she wouldn't come back when I called, so of course I had to go scrambling after her up into the trees. I got all muddy. Bark, bark, bark! She just wouldn't come back. And I'm not surprised given what..."

"Could you give me your name, please?"

"Oh... of course... I'm Eleanor Brown. Mrs Eleanor Brown. Trudi's a basset ... they have the most remarkable sense of smell..."

"And your address and phone number please?"

"Oh... it's 44, Inverbeith Terrace... such a terrible..."

"In Forthburgh?"

"Yes."

"And what is your phone number?"

"It's 556133"

"And you're saying your dog found something, Mrs Brown?"

"Yes. Oh... such an awful..."

"What did your dog find?"

"Well, it almost looked like a giant hedgehog at first. Spiny things sticking out all over it! But then I saw the face. Oh... God help me, I'll never forget that face! And of course Trudi had to go licking it all over. I had to pull her off."

"What was it, Mrs Brown?"

"A body, of course! The body of a man. Naked, with these... these kind of thin sticks all sticking out of him. They looked like paint brushes, you know? Artists' paint brushes. Bristling like a hedgehog he was..."

"Where was this?"

"In the woods. Deil's Glen."

"Right. If we send officers out to your house now, can you take them to the location?"

"Oh... I don't want to see that again! I'll have nightmares as it is."

"You won't have to approach close enough to see. Just to point it out to the officers."

"Oh, all right. I see it's starting to rain. Have I time for a cup of tea? I'm all shivery."

"The officers will be there very soon. How long ago did you find the body?"

"Oh... I came straight back to the house, as fast as I could walk."

"Approximately at what time?"

"Let's see... it's ten to nine now. It must have been about eight thirty."

"Did you see anyone else nearby, or on your way back?"

"No. It was looking like rain. Sometimes there's other people walking their dogs, but it was looking like rain. And now it's started. It's coming on heavy now. Oh dear... that poor man's face!"

Inspector Coupar Cruickshank, thirty four years old, lean and boyish-looking, clicked the 'off' button on the cassette tape recorder and settled back in his chair. Both emitted a small groan.

The uniformed officers first attending the scene had done an indifferent job. Six out of ten, at best. Of course, the heavy rain hadn't helped. All sorts of possible evidence might have been washed away. No footprints or fingerprints to be found. Only one useful thing had survived the deluge. He had it on his desk in front of him now, dried out. A small piece of paper, rectangular, about three inches by two. It had been curled up into a tight tube, like a cigarette, and stuck into the dead man's nostril. The ink - red ink - had run in the rain, but some of the block capital letters were still just legible; unfortunately not all of them. He had puzzled over it for half an hour. It looked like two separate words, one beginning with an 'A' and the other, possibly, with an 'I'.

Unless the dead man had stuck it up his own nose, this was likely to be some sort of message from the murderer, and as such a very useful clue. But the rain had buggered it up.

"The rain's buggered it all up!" was precisely what Detective Superintendent Dennis ("The Menace") Scott had remarked to him in the woods at Deil's Glen, fingering the bristling grey brush that he accommodated on his upper lip.

Dennis Scott had been called out at once and was the Senior Investigating Officer. Since he was already up to his oxters in another murder case - a strangled disc jockey - he was displeased at being summoned out into the rain at half past nine in the morning to contemplate an additional body. He eyed his deputy doubtfully. Coupar Cruickshank was new to his team, and just now looked like a boy scout who has lost his compass.

"You can get started without me, Coupar. You've done murders before, haven't you? Before you were transferred to Forthburgh?"

"Two."

"Solved?"

"No."

"What, neither of them?"

"I was only the deputy. Like now. The files have been passed on to a new D.S.I.O."

"Chance to improve your score then, Coupar. One out of three wouldn't be bad. Get cracking and report back to me this afternoon."

Then Senior Investigating Officer 'The Menace' gave a final tug to his scrubbing brush moustache and lumbered heavily away under his stripy golf umbrella, probably to have his second breakfast, Coupar thought.

Coupar trudged back up to the single track road that was the nearest vehicular access to the crime scene. The rain, and the coming and going of police vehicles had now obliterated any useful tyre tracks that might have been left there.

This was not going to be easy.

Back at the station, where an incident room was being noisily set up next door to his own office by Detective Constables Price and Waterhouse, consequently displacing the station's much loved ping-pong table, Coupar listened to the tape of Eleanor Brown again, and then jotted down his first thoughts:

Unknown male victim, appears to be in his mid or late thirties.

Bizarre state of the body suggests pre-meditation by the killer.

Some kind of nutcase by the looks of it.

Murdered elsewhere and then brought to the wood?

But no vehicle access close by so would have to be carried.

Someone strong therefore? Or more than one killer?

More likely murdered on the spot?

Most likely murdered by a man? Or two men? Or a woman? The murderer a powerful woman?

Or women?

So, unknown man murdered by unknown nutcase or nutcases.

Coupar Cruickshank ran his eye over these notes and sighed. The first task was to identify the body, and the other avenue to explore was the most salient evidence: the sharpened artists' paint brushes that had been thrust into the victim's flesh. Seventy five of them. At the scene he had thought they looked new. There were no paint marks on the wood or the bristles. Forensics hadn't finished with them yet, but he would be prepared to bet there'd be no fingerprints. He went out of his office and stuck his head through the doorway of the incident room.

"Waterhouse - check art shops to see if anyone's been buying paint brushes in unusual bulk."

Waterhouse, himself unusually bulky, looked at him with his blank walrus face.

"Art shops?"

"Yes. There must be art shops I suppose in Forthburgh."

Waterhouse shrugged.

"Use the telephone directory. Yellow Pages."

"Yes sir."

"And after that, if you don't turn anything up, take yourself off to Deil's Glen and spend a couple of hours talking to joggers and dog walkers or the like. See if anyone's seen anything odd lately."

"Yes sir."

"And Price, take the polaroid of the dead man's face to the art school and see if anyone there knows who he is."

Price scratched his right ear and then his left ear.

"What polaroid?"

"Go and find what's-his-name... the photographer."

"Larry?"

"If that's his name. He took plenty of photos. Get one of the face."

"Yes sir. Shall we stop setting up the room then, sir, to do this?"

There was always something about the way Price said sir that suggested insubordination. If Waterhouse was a walrus, Price was a weasel. Wiry and sly looking.

"Of course. The room can wait."

"We'd better take the table tennis bats and the ping-pong balls away - can they go in your office, sir?"

"Yes, yes. Give them to me."

Price and Waterhouse went off. He heard Price make some remark and then a low chortling sound from Waterhouse.

By the time Coupar was eating his lunchtime sandwich, Price had phoned him from the art school. It hadn't taken long, with the aid of the polaroid, to find someone who could identify the victim. The dead man was Steven Sidling, Head of the Department of Sculpture, recently re-named 'The Department of Ambient Interventions'.

That evening he went over to Lisa's flat. She opened the door to his ring, and pecked his cheek perfunctorily, like a hen without much appetite. She wasn't capable of looking unattractive, with her slim figure, luxuriant blonde hair, large eyes and regular features. However, she had done what she could by wearing shapeless tracksuit trousers and a baggy non-matching top, and refraining from hair-brushing or make-up. Following her into the living room he found the sofa strewn with laundry and an ironing board set up in the middle of the floor. She returned to it and took up the iron.

"Weren't you expecting me?" he queried.

She raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"You always come on a Thursday night."

"I just thought - you know... with the ironing..."

"I thought you could pop out and get fish and chips? Or there's a frozen lasagne in the freezer. I've not had chance to do the ironing all week."

"Okay. Fish and chips. That's fine."

"You have a good day at work?"

"Depends how you look at it. They found a body this morning. A murder. The Menace has put me in the driving seat."

Lisa's lustreless mood was transformed. Her eyes shone. She put down the iron.

"A murder! That's your first one!"

"There's murders every week or two."

"Yes, but you don't get them, do you? Why have you got this one?"

Coupar shrugged.

"The D.I.s who usually do murders must be busy already. The Menace came straight to me."

"It'll be a chance to impress him then, eh?"

"Possibly. There's not a lot to go on yet, though."

"Early days, if the body only turned up this morning! Come on, I'll get us a glass of red and you can fill me in."

She switched off the iron at the plug.

"You know..." he started to warn her.

She bobbed her head up and down, a hen reinvigorated.

"I know! I know! You're not supposed to tell me anything. But you can trust me, Coopsie! I won't breathe a word to anyone! Move the laundry and make a space on the sofa and I'll get us that red wine!"

Chapter 2

August 1988- December 1988

ABOUT A YEAR EARLIER....

Steven Sidling gave himself a metaphorical pat on the back. This cushy number – Head of Sculpture at Forthburgh School of Art - was now his for life – or for as much of his future life as he chose to spend in Scotland. Outside the three eleven week terms of the academic year he would in any case be free to pursue his own ends, wherever the fancy took him. But Forthburgh was where he wanted to be for now, anyway. The dust needed to settle in London before he showed his face down there again. London might be a big city, but, like most of its denizens, he only frequented a limited range of locales, and he had started to feel that his regular habits made him unsafe. The situation there was untenable, for now.

It had all started with an exhibition. Limited edition photographic prints of some of his ambient interventions had been on show at an up-and-coming gallery in Wapping. At least, the owner, Tiny Prodger, had described it as up-and-coming. However, the prints had been on the walls there for a couple of weeks with no sales. Then a buyer – a city slicker looking to diversify his investments and simultaneously tart up his penthouse apartment – had approached Steve privately. He wanted all the prints. Sixteen of them. Steve curtailed the arrangement with Tiny Prodger's gallery and then sold them privately to the slicker, avoiding the gallery commission. All would have ended well but for his own loud mouth. He'd boasted of his shrewd move to a blabbermouth, and word had got back to Tiny.

Tiny, six foot four and ugly as a manatee, was not your average art gallery owner. In his earlier days he had been a professional boxing trainer. He still kept his hand in at a boxing club he owned near the gallery. In a phone call to Steve he had let it be known that he had friends at the club with some rather disagreeable tendencies. One or two of them were inclined to play fast and loose with the law. One or two of them were bare knuckle fighters. These friends were unfortunately homophobic, and, if given to understand that Steve was a poofter as well as a cheat, would enjoy nothing better than to rearrange his facial features to their own preferences. Steve tried to persuade Tiny that the buyer had only appeared on the scene after the end of his show in the gallery. Tiny said he didn't buy that story about the buyer, and put the phone down with a final imprecation. Nothing had come of it, but still it preyed on Steve's mind as he walked along a quiet street in Fulham, or emerged from a club late at night in Kensington. Tiny might have thought putting the frighteners on him was a sufficient revenge – or he might just be biding his time.

He was under no illusions about why he had been offered the job here at Forthburgh School of Art. The Principal, a popinjay clad in primary colours named Edgar Peabody, who was chair of the interview panel, had clearly made up his mind before he even entered the room. He flattered himself that Peabody must have seen him as a catch, with his international reputation. Besides, from what he had seen of the other candidates, he didn't have strong competition. They had been left in a room together while waiting to be called in to the panel. There was a morose bearded fellow, the insider candidate who had been in the institution for years and quite possibly regarded himself as a shoo-in now that the incumbent had retired. He had barely spoken. Then there was a woman with purple dyed hair, an air of intense inner pain and an almost impenetrable accent. These attributes would surely count against her, in spite of her status as Hungary's premier exponent of post-communist works in rusted iron recovered from abandoned military hardware. His third rival for the post, a rotund fellow defiantly dressed in grubby jeans and a t-shirt, was plausible in conversation, but the glance at his portfolio that he had vouchsafed revealed his achievements to consist only of some gigantic wooden polo mints in a Derbyshire field and what looked like a malevolent concrete jelly baby glowering across a Midlands railway station concourse.

After the interview's positive conclusion, he went straight to a grimy phone box located just outside the art school and rang Derek. Derek McCafferty was the prime reason for applying for this particular job.

"So, did you get it?"

"Yep. I'm coming to live with you in Forthburgh!"

"Fantastic! Champagne tonight!"

"Mmm – sounds good! Well, you're stuck with me now!"

"That's what I wanted."

"That's what I wanted too. I'm over the moon."

"See you later darling!"

"See you later, gorgeous!"

A few weeks later, in early September, Sidling made his way to his future place of work so see how the land lay. Between the imposing columns and looming pediment of the main entrance, a wide man in a dark jacket was smoking. He observed Sidling's approach without expression. There was something toad-like about his general appearance; a giant smoking toad.

Sidling smiled politely and attempted to skirt around him.

"The buildings are closed. Vacation," the toad said, making a barrier with his arm.

"Ah. I'm Steven Sidling, the new Head of Sculpture. I was told that staff could access the school outside term time."

The large man took a drag from his cigarette and blew it not so very far from Sidling's face.

"Got any ID?" he grunted.

Luckily Sidling's driving licence was in his wallet. The man looked at it suspiciously and handed it back.

"Are you...," Sidling hesitated. What might this surly brute's position be?

"... are you a janitor?"

"I'm the head janitor."

"Ah, good."

It was not good, but Sidling was determined to make the best of it. He held out a hand.

"Pleased to meet you."

The man looked at his hand as if it might be carrying some unknown virus. Then he shook it as briefly as he could.

"And your name is...?" Sidling suggested.

"Miggs."

"Good. Pleased to meet you Mr Miggs."

"It's just 'Miggs'".

"Okay. Pleased to meet you, Miggs. I wonder if you could tell me where my office is located?"

Miggs sighed, as if imparting this kind of information was outside his remit.

"Go into the entrance hall and turn left. Ground floor. You'll see signs to Sculpture. In the first studio there's a wooden staircase going up. It's at the top of that."

"Excellent, thank you!"

Half way along the broad corridor leading from the entrance hall, something occurred to Sidling. He retraced his steps. Miggs was just re-entering the building, exhaling his final lungful of smoke.

"Er... is the office kept locked?"

"Aye."

"Could I have the key then, please."

Miggs passed wordlessly behind a counter and entered a room on the other side, visible through a glass partition commanding a view of the entrance hall. Sidling observed him opening a narrow cabinet and running his hand along a row of keys suspended from hooks. He returned with one, which he gave to Sidling with an air of reluctance.

"You keep this one. We've only one spare, so don't lose it. Change of lock due to lost key is charged to whoever lost the key."

"Thank you," Sidling replied, forcing a smile with difficulty, and set off once more along the corridor.

On arrival, he surveyed his new office with dissatisfaction. He had already discovered, on the occasion of his job interview, that Forthburgh Art School's 'old' building, outwardly a gracious and imposing edifice in the Beaux Arts style of the nineteenth century, was inwardly a guddle of half-arsed adaptations to its modern usage. This particular office seemed to have been jammed as an afterthought into what was intended as an internal roof space. The exterior window vanished into the floor as if it had slipped down at some point in the past and never recovered itself. Presumably it was only the upper portion of a much larger window. The top of his share of the window was approximately on a level with his stomach, so only when seated could he see through it to the vista of spires and steep-pitched roofs that surrounded the art school like the set of a gothic horror film.

This unsatisfactory office would have to be dealt with, in due course.

He re-locked the door and descended the rickety staircase that connected this eyrie to the rest of the sculpture department and embarked on an exploratory stroll around his new domain, which he'd only briefly taken in when he attended his job interview. He found a linked series of airy high-ceilinged studios, some cleared out after the departure of the graduating students, others filled with the untidy detritus of the second and third year students who would be returning at the end of September. Apparently, a Scottish art degree required four years of study. First year students attended a general course in a different building with different staff, and would not be his concern. He noted a number of half-finished works that the general public would have no difficulty in identifying as 'sculpture'. That would all have to change.

A sound of hammering started up somewhere. That was odd. In all the vacation-becalmed studios and corridors he hadn't seen a soul. He followed the sound to its source, a small studio with a north-facing window looking towards the soaring bulk of the city's castle. The door was wide open, and he went to the threshold and peered in. Because he was wearing soft-soled moccasins, his approach was a silent one.

It was the big bearded fellow who had been the internal candidate for the job. His name came back to him... Duncan McBane. He had his back to the door, and he was driving a metal wedge into a great lump of stone with a sledge hammer. How the heck had that stone been manoeuvred into this space? As Sidling stood there, the man delivered a final mighty blow and the stone split in two. The two halves - each the size of a refrigerator - peeled away from each other and the metal wedge clattered onto the wooden floor. McBane stepped back quickly to save his toes from being crushed, set down the sledgehammer, and wiped his brow with the back of a hairy arm. Sidling cleared his throat to announce his presence, and McBane swivelled around swiftly and eyeballed his new boss.

"Hi there!" Sidling said, raising a friendly hand in the air.

McBane's features maintained their granite impassiveness, but his lips, almost invisible beneath their hirsute curtaining, twitched a little.

"Ah... Mr Sidling."

"Steve please! We're in an art school, let's have no formality! I see you're at work on something, Duncan?"

McBane's eyes drifted to the two substantial pieces of stone at his feet.

"Aye."

"Something for yourself? Or a commission?"

"It's to be for Shobbs."

Did McBane have a cold?

"Shops?"

"Shobbs Prison."

"Oh?" Sidling said encouragingly, and waited for more.

But nothing more came. Sidling realised he was dealing with that breed of Scot who allowed only the minimum amount of personal information to escape into the world at large. He girded his loins, mentally.

"How interesting. What will it be?"

Now McBane couldn't escape that question. Not unless he was prepared to be outright rude. Sidling observed the man's dark eyebrows lowering a little, like furry animals trapped in a corner, crouching.

"I'm doing two heads."

"Heads? What sort of heads?"

"A prisoner and a warder."

"Where is it... are they... to go?"

"One on either side of the new entrance gates. On top of pillars."

"How will people know which is the prisoner and which is the warder?"

McBane shot him a look of disdain.

"The warder will have a cap on his head."

"Ah."

He waited a little, to see if McBane would come up with a conversational topic of his own. A deep silence pervaded the art school around them. Outside, a church bell began to toll.

"Well, I'll let you get on," Sidling said at last, admitting defeat.

McBane nodded.

"See you later!" Sidling added, with a pleasant smile. Let this hairy brute see what good manners were!

There was no reply, only another small twitch under the beard. It might have been a smile, or it might have been a grimace of pain. Sidling turned and walked away down the corridor. Clearly McBane had attended the same charm school as Miggs. Pray God all his future colleagues were not cast in the same mould as these two! Behind him, he heard a grunt, and a grating sound made, he assumed, by a very large piece of stone being dragged over wooden floorboards.

A few weeks later, entering the staff canteen and surveying the faces that were becoming familiar, Sidling was just beginning to feel at home at Forthburgh Art School. After queuing for his coffee and Kit-Kat he made for the corner table where Arabella Wood from the Fashion Department was just about to sit down on her own. She didn't get on with her boss, Leonora Hunt, the Head of Fashion, and so she and Leonora always took their coffee breaks at different times. He had made her acquaintance during the first week of term when he had ventured a compliment on one of her outfits - and they had hit it off immediately. Today, her slender figure was clothed in a mini-dress with alternating bands of gold and black material. Her earrings sported antennae that poked upwards and forwards through her long curly dark hair. As he joined her, it occurred to Sidling that this waspish appearance accorded well with her sting-in-the-tail sense of humour. He was not averse to sitting with the other sculpture staff, or going into the student canteen with some of his students - after all, he had new loyalties to work on in both camps. But his preference was for half an hour of scurrilous gossip and badinage with Arabella, who was a woman after his own heart. Like him, she had bold, revolutionary ideas for her department. But unlike him, she didn't have the power to implement them. She looked up with a grin as he sat down opposite her.

"Hi Steve!"

"You're looking pleased with yourself."

"Am I?"

"Like the Cheshire Cat," he suggested.

"Oh dear, is it so obvious?"

"Good night in the sack, was it?"

"No. David's in Bristol for a conference."

"A dentist's conference?"

"Apparently they have them."

"Well - one can amuse oneself, Arabella."

"Well, amusing oneself might count as a good night in the sack for you, but I prefer company."

Sidling chortled.

"Well, there's something making you look cheerful, admit it."

Arabella smirked.

"Oh, it's nothing. I just got one over on Leonora, that's all."

"How?"

"Long story, but in a nutshell, she'd got one of our best final year students all geared up to create a Forties style collection for her degree show. Leonora can't get enough Forties revivalism. But I had a long chat with Gwendolyn this morning and she's going to change tack. We talked about a collection of outfits for the robots manning a spaceship in the thirtieth century."

"Quite a shift."

"Gwendolyn is malleable. The Forties thing was only because she couldn't come up with a good idea of her own and had fallen prey to Leonora. It was an idea off the top of my head. I told her not to mention it to Leonora until she'd done some preliminary sketches and so on. I don't want her being talked out of it."

"You're a devious type."

Arabella shrieked with delight. Out of the corner of his eye, Sidling caught one or two heads turning. But Arabella's noisy outbursts were part of the fabric of life in the staff canteen, and the heads quickly returned to their previous business.

"You're not so undevious yourself," she replied, reducing the decibels somewhat.

"There's no such word."

"You know what I mean. How are the Ambient Interventions going?"

"It's early days. I've started sowing the seeds among the students."

"Not the only seeds you've been sowing?"

Sidling adopted a blank look.

"I don't know what you mean, Arabella."

"Nothing, nothing. I just wondered about that hunky, dark-haired boy from... where is it? Latvia?"

"Artjoms?"

"Is that his name? I like it. Artjoms. Good name for an artist."

"He's Estonian. What about him?"

"Don't try to look so innocent. I've seen you chatting him up around the place!"

"I'm not chatting him up. Or only about ambient interventions."

"So far."

Sidling was unable to suppress a grin.

"So far," he agreed.

"You'd better be careful. Staff/student relationships... murky waters."

"It's an art school for God's sake. Aren't we expected to be lechers and deviants?"

"You're mixing it up with being an artist. An art lecturer"

"Lecherer?"

"Pay attention! An art lecturer has to be a pillar of respectability and a model citizen. Like me."

Their eyes met and then they both burst out into their characteristic noises of hilarity: Arabella a seagull who has just found an abandoned chip wrapper and Sidling a raccoon calling for a mate.

Heads turned again, among them that of Duncan McBane, seated at the far end of the canteen with his usual coffee mate Angus Campbell from the Painting and Fine Art Department. Angus had just returned to work after a heavy cold, and so was not familiar with the newcomer. He turned his circular-framed spectacles on Duncan.

"Who in Christ's name is that?" he enquired, his ruddy, whisky-veined nose wrinkling in disgust.

"Fucking Sidling," Duncan replied.

"Oh, aye - your new boss, eh?"

"Unfortunately."

"From down south, isn't he?"

"Aye."

Angus ran his fingers through his lush ginger beard, a sure sign that some notion was struggling towards the light in his brain.

"He'll be back off to London within a year or two, will he no?" he suggested after a few seconds.

"I wouldn't be so sure. I think he's got personal reasons for being here."

"Oh aye? Scottish wife?"

"He's not married. But I've heard him talk about his partner, and I happened to see him last week prancing down the Regal Mile with a fellow in a pink Pringle jumper."

"A poof, then?"

"I'd say it's more or less certain."

"So he's probably not trying to get into that Fashion lassie's knickers."

"No way."

"She's no bad looking, that Arabella - in spite of her weird outfits."

"Aye, she's a bonnie lass," McBane concurred. "A bit noisy though."

Angus Campbell leered like a satyr.

"You'd know about it when she cums, eh?"

McBane snorted.

"Aye! And so would the neighbours!"

They sipped their coffees, mulling over that.

"Have you no had a beer with him yet then, or anything?" Angus said after a few moments.

"Who? Sidling?"

"Aye. A bit of personal chat, eh?"

McBane shook his head and shrugged.

"I wouldn't want to."

"Have you never heard the expression know your enemy?"

"He's not my enemy."

Angus Campbell nodded seriously for a moment or two, running his fingers through his ginger beard. Duncan waited patiently for his friend's train of thought to arrive at the station. Finally, Angus winked.

"But you hate his guts anyway, eh?"

Mc Bane leaned back in mock horror, and then they both laughed. Low secretive chuckles. From the other end of the canteen, another bout of shrieking hilarity reached their ears.

Angus looked at his friend for his cue, and they mouthed the words together.

"Fucking Sidling!"

They chuckled again.

As Sidling's first term as Head of Sculpture progressed, he found himself drawn more and more to the student Arabella had teased him about. Artjoms Ubags. The Estonian was a fine physical specimen, around six feet tall and muscular without being overly bulky. He had jet black hair worn quite long, with an unruly lock that flopped forward regularly over one of his eyes. Sidling was charmed by the casual sweep of the hand with which Artjoms cleared this obstruction from his vision every few minutes. He observed that he seemed quite influential among his peers, in spite of being somewhat aloof and enigmatic. Leafing curiously through his file, Sidling saw that he was twenty five years old, a little older than most of the other students in his year group, and that he had worked as a lumberjack in his native country after finishing secondary school. Hence the fine musculature, perhaps.

Artjoms reacted very positively to Sidling's ideas of taking sculpture out of the studio, the gallery and the usual kinds of public space into less obvious environments, where it could surprise and disrupt. Ambient interventions, in a word... or two words. 'The Department of Ambient Interventions.' That would be something! Sidling was itching to make his mark on this stuffy old institution, and getting rid of the boringly obvious Department of Sculpture label would be a fine symbolic stroke. Maybe it could be achieved in time for the next academic year, if he could only gain sufficient traction. Artjoms - talented, influential, and delightfully handsome - was a good place to start.

The trouble was, that after some long talks in the studio, and an evening drinking bout that somehow ended up in Artjoms's flat with one empty bottle of Scotch and two full condoms, it was becoming apparent that Artjoms was a very complicated young man indeed and was developing an excessive interest in Sidling himself. On two murky evenings in late November, walking home from the art school to the Victorian suburb where Derek had his flat, Sidling had experienced a prickling sensation at the back of his neck, and turned around to look behind him. Both times, a shadowy figure that might or might not have been Artjoms was a hundred yards or so away, stopped dead in its tracks like a statue. Was he following him home, to find out where he lived? Did he already know? Did he also know about his partner, Derek? Could he be jealous? This was all worrying.

In the light - or dark - of these troubling episodes, Sidling decided that the drunken sexual encounter with Artjoms would most definitely have to be a one-off. Admittedly, he wasn't averse to one-night stands when Derek was away on business, but the one-night rule was a rigid one, in every respect. After all, wasn't it primarily to be with Derek that he'd applied speculatively for the job at the art school? Their relationship, which had started with occasional meetings when Derek was visiting London for work reasons, had evolved into the most stable partnership he'd ever experienced. He'd never shared a home with anyone until now. The free-wheeling life of an internationally acclaimed artist (the phrase was not uncommon in gallery catalogues and press reviews, and it always gave him a smug little thrill) had previously suited him well. He was un citoyen du monde. He'd long since lost count of the men he'd shagged in various corners of the globe, although some encounters - like that with the Vatican priest in a discreet corner of Saint Peter's, or the vertiginous rogering by a Polish crane operator - were particularly fond memories. While habitually sceptical about the concept of 'being in love', he recognised that his feelings for Derek were different from those he'd felt for any previous lover. There was an innate gentleness about Derek that contrasted with the rougher sexual partners that had always previously appealed to Sidling. But he had succeeded in developing in Derek a taste for the kind of role-play that he himself found stimulating. What was completely new though was the calm and satisfying domesticity of his new life with Derek in Forthburgh. Perhaps, at thirty five years old, he was 'settling down'?

Anyway, this was one apple cart that he didn't want to upset. Derek didn't know about his one night stands, and he certainly didn't want him to know about Artjoms. Artjoms had now to be kept at arm's length emotionally and physically, but cultivated and influenced nonetheless as a useful ally in his quietly germinating plan to supplant Sculpture with Ambient Interventions.

"You know, Steve..." Artjoms addressed him one day when they were alone in the studio where Artjoms was nominally based, "... you know, I think I have new inspiration to share with you! I think I see connect between your ideas of sculpture as intervention, and folklore of Estonia and other Baltic countries."

"Oh?" Steve replied.

"Yes. For example your hedgehog building that you once made. The building you cover with spines – or spikes you would say?"

"The German town hall project?"

"Yes. The hedgehog is in some Baltic folklore a symbol. Is symbol of... what do you say... regeneration?"

"Regeneration?"

"Yes, 'regeneration' and fertility. Just like you are regeneranating... sorry... regenerating... in this art school the idea of sculpture. You are fertilising it with seed of new thoughts, new ideas."

"Ah, yes," Steve replied.

"So, yes. The hedgehog..." Artjoms continued, warming to his theme, "... so in Latvia, for instance, in wedding songs, they might call the bride the she-hedgehog, and they might call the married women there the mothers of hedgehogs."

Artjoms was to be cultivated and humoured, but sometimes he went off on some baffling tangent. Where was he headed now?

"Really? I had no idea," Sidling said. It sounded downright perverse to him. What bride would enjoy being compared with a hedgehog?

"So – my idea is to make marriage this concept of the she-hedgehog with other folklore idea from my own country Estonia, Steve. This is the idea that we can go to a crossroads at midnight and call up the Devil."

Artjoms looked expectantly at Sidling as if he might burst into applause at this brilliant juxtaposition. Sidling considered his response carefully.

"Interesting..." he said, as a holding position.

"Yes. It is interesting. So... probably you hear of our Estonian folklore idea of kratts?"

"Er... no, I don't think so Artjoms. Have you mentioned them before to me?"

"I don't know if I mention it, but is a very well-known thing in Estonia. The kratt we can say is kind of supernatural servant. We can get one by going to the crossroads at midnight to call up the Devil. Then with only three drops of our blood we can get the kratt."

"That's a very reasonable price."

Artjoms didn't spot the humour.

"Yes, it is good price. But on other hand the Devil... well, he gets to keep your soul when you die. And this is my idea: that I make some kratts and put them at the different crossroads in places in Forthburgh. What do you think? Is a good idea, no?"

"Interesting... er, what will these kratts look like? Hedgehogs?"

"No, no. That is just where idea comes from to me. This is beauty of idea: each kratt will have different features, but they will all have common features also. The kratts will be inspire by different people who have sold their souls."

"Politicians, for example?"

"Yes, I think politicians very suitable. Perhaps Margaret Thatcher will be one. She has sold her soul for this poll tax, no? The tax that everyone here in Scotland is protest about?"

"So your work will be quite political?"

"Not only. Some will be more positive things. I will make one special for you, Steve, even though you haven't sold your soul. In fact, you are a man with great soul."

Artjoms fixed his deep brown eyes on Sidling's, and a tentative smile illuminated his handsome, habitually serious features. Sidling repressed a strong impulse to take him in his arms, here in this deserted studio. That would be a very bad idea.

Back in his cramped and unsatisfactory office, Sidling was still dwelling on the agreeable Artjoms. What if he had given in to temptation and invited him up here to this private place, and locked the door? He was just starting to experience a stirring sensation in his trousers when his telephone rang.

"Yes?"

"Steve?"

"Yes, who's that?"

"You don't recognize your old pal's voice?"

A nasty feeling like a heavy stone falling into the pit of his stomach made Sidling shudder.

"Is that Tiny?"

"Well done mate! Indeed it is me! Tiny Prodger. Art dealer and boxing gym owner. How are you doing there? Scotland suiting you is it?"

Sidling didn't reply. He felt his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, which had suddenly gone dry. His hitherto tumescent cock was shrinking like a snail pulling in its horns.

"Nothing to say? I'm sorry, mate. We used to have lovely chats, didn't we - you and me - when we was in business together. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I've kept tabs on you. Just in case you thought you'd been forgotten. Do the words 'twenty per cent' mean anything to you?"

"Listen, Tiny..."

"No. You listen! Twenty per cent was what you owed me when you sold them photos. But you know how it is. Inflation and all that. Now that twenty per cent seems to have turned into fifty per cent. I'm guessing you got about ten grand for them. So the two grand you could have given me then has turned into five now. That's capitalism, that is. Wonderful thing, in its way."

Sidling found his voice.

"I told you, Tiny. I sold those prints well after our arrangement came to an end."

"Well, we don't quite see eye to eye then. Pity. Anyway, thought I'd just let you know that I know where you are. Might pop up to Forthburgh one of these days. Beautiful city I believe. Never been there. You know how to get in touch, Steve. A cheque for five grand, that'll sort all this out. Cheerio now!"

The phone went dead. Sidling stared at the fanciful gothic spires and turrets outside his window, receding down the slope towards the Brassmarket. A "beautiful city..." There would be nothing beautiful about it with Tiny Prodger prowling its streets.

He'd been a fool to let this thing stay unresolved! And now the bill for his folly had escalated. Perhaps he could borrow five thousand off Derek? If he could spin a story to Derek that didn't reveal his own embarrassing duplicity in the affair, then perhaps the best thing would be to finish this business once and for all. Could he come up with a convincing story? Should he come clean, and risk diminishing himself in Derek's eyes? Perhaps if he could raise the original two thousand that would be enough to keep Tiny away. He had to do something! He had felt safe until now here in Forthburgh, but he couldn't go on living with this sword of Damocles suspended over his head.

Chapter 3

September 1989

Coupar made a quick assessment of the man entering the interview room at the police station, the first interviewee on his list. The man who shared the victim's address.

Mid-forties, but pulling out all the stops in an attempt to hide it. The hair was recently cut and styled, its rich coppery tint forming an incongruous topping to the lined skin of neck and face. A bulging belly was held unwillingly in custody by the waistband of designer jeans. Dark bluish shadows under the man's bloodshot eyes suggested sleeplessness. Perhaps he'd been crying.

The bulky figure of Constable Waterhouse waddled into the room behind the man, shut the door, and eased down onto a chair beside it. He glowered suspiciously at his charge, like a bull walrus guarding his harem.

"Mr McCafferty?" Coupar verified.

"Yes."

"I'm Inspector Coupar Cruickshank. I'm the deputy chief investigating officer in the matter of the murder of Steven Sidling."

"I see."

"Please sit down."

Surprisingly, the tight jeans permitted this manoeuvre.

"I'll be tape-recording this interview, Mr McCafferty. I take it you have no objection?"

"No... no, of course not."

Coupar pressed the record button on the cassette player on his desk, and adjusted the position of the little microphone so that it pointed squarely between them to pick up both voices. He spoke slowly.

"Investigation into the death of Steven Sidling. Interview One. Interviewee Derek McCafferty. Twenty first of September Nineteen Eighty Nine. Interview conducted by Detective Inspector Coupar Cruickshank, in the presence of Detective Constable Neville Waterhouse."

He sat back slightly, and went on in a more conversational tone of voice.

"Mr McCafferty, could you confirm for me if Steven Sidling was a paying tenant at your address, or if he was a friend?"

"A... friend, yes. We shared the household bills. There was no tenancy."

"Can you tell me about what you were doing two days ago, on the day he was killed?"

"I was at work as usual all day."

"And in the evening?"

"I was at home."

"Were you expecting him to be with you?"

"Absolutely. I was surprised when he wasn't at home after I returned from work. But I was seriously worried when he still hadn't appeared by bedtime."

"That was unusual?"

"He would normally phone if he was going to be late."

"Did you do anything to find him, when he hadn't come home later?"

"There was nothing I could do. I thought of ringing one or two mutual friends, but I didn't want to start a panic. Or set stupid rumours flying. It wasn't... well... it was unusual, but not entirely unknown..."

"What? That he would stay elsewhere overnight?"

Derek McCafferty ran a hand down the side of his head, as if wiping something away.

"It happened one or two times."

"Mr McCafferty, it will assist me greatly if you can be frank in this matter. Were you and Steven Sidling in a relationship?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. Somehow I thought you'd know that, or assume that."

"We try not to make assumptions, Mr McCafferty. Facts are what we're after, in a situation like this. Hard facts. So, you were alone all that evening?"

"Yes."

"And you came straight home from work?"

"Yes."

"What time did you leave work?"

"About six thirty."

"What is your place of work?"

"I'm with Granville and Barker."

"Investment management?"

"Yes. On Drumsleuch Terrace."

"Were there others there at six thirty, when you left?"

"I left at the same time as one of the other fund managers. We walked along the street a little way before parting."

"And after that time, did you see anyone else?"

"No... well... I did go out at about nine o'clock. To get fish and chips. Steve had said he was cooking supper, so I'd waited and by then I was starving."

"You must have been a little angry?"

"More worried than angry."

"Do they know you at the fish and chip place?"

"No. I hardly ever go there."

"Did you speak to the staff? Anything that they might remember?"

"It was a big woman who served me. A big woman with black hair. I had the exact change and she said that was helpful."

"And the rest of the night you were at home, on your own?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Not really. I was worried. I heard a downpour of rain."

"But you stayed in?"

"Of course I did. I looked out of the window at some point, and it was sheeting down."

"Otherwise you might have gone somewhere to look for Steve?"

"No. I wouldn't have any idea where to look."

"But you looked out of the window to check the weather?"

"It was just because the rain was coming down so hard. I wanted to see. I think I fell asleep more soundly after that, at least for a spell."

"What do you know about how Steven's body was found?"

"What I read in the papers. It was horrible."

"We were too slow to stop some of the details getting out. It isn't helpful for us."

Without warning, Derek McCafferty's face crumpled up. He groped in a pocket for a handkerchief, and sobbed into it. It sounded like a gasping for air, interspersed with desolate whimpering. Coupar exchanged a look with Waterhouse, who gave a slight nod. Coupar interpreted that as confirming his own thought: this was not a piece of play-acting.

On the other hand, you might murder someone and still be racked with grief.

After a long minute, the sobs subsided. Derek McCafferty wiped his face with the handkerchief. His eyes were redder than ever.

"I'm sorry, Inspector. Please go on."

"Do you have any thoughts on who might have wanted to kill Steven, Mr McCafferty?"

McCafferty shook his head.

"That's what I've been dwelling on. Who could do a thing like this? And the only thing I can think of is that he was frightened of someone in London."

"Who?"

"He didn't give me a name. It was something he didn't want to talk about."

"Why was he frightened?"

"I can only guess. I think he'd done something he was a bit ashamed of, and he didn't want me to know about it."

"But what sort of thing?"

"I think it must have been to do with money. He once said that he'd done nothing illegal, but that from a certain point of view he'd not acted as he should have done."

"But you think he'd made an enemy of someone?"

"Definitely. He made a bit of a joke of it once or twice. Called the person my London enemy. I tried once to get the whole story, but like I said, I think he was embarrassed about what he'd done."

Coupar jotted down London enemy? on his notepad.

"Have you any other information you think might help us, Mr McCafferty?"

"He was a great guy..."

Derek McCafferty's face began to crumple again.

"... a great guy. So full of life... I can't believe he's gone..."

Coupar flicked off the cassette player.

"We'll probably have to interview you again, Mr McCafferty. Obviously you'll want to help us find out who did this?"

"Of course. Of course. What kind of maniac...?"

His voice faltered, and a tear appeared at the corner of an eye. He pulled out the handkerchief once more.

"Would you have any objection to me coming over to your flat and taking a look at Steven's personal possessions? No uniformed officers will come. Quite informal - I'm not applying for a search warrant."

Derek McCafferty dabbed at his eyes.

"You can do that, of course. Anything that will help."

"And... just one more little thing before you go. Would you mind writing something down for me on this sheet of paper? Just a couple of words, in block capitals?"

"What do you want me to write?"

"Just write amplify independence."

"What?"

"Amplify independence."

"In block capitals?"

"Yes, please. It will be helpful."

Coupar spent that night at Lisa's. He was surprised when she phoned and invited him around. It wasn't one of their regular nights. They had been in a relationship for over a year now, but there had been no talk of shared accommodation. They had a well-trodden routine for togetherness. He spent two nights a week at her place, and on one other night they'd go out together to the cinema or to a restaurant. On those nights they'd kiss goodnight at a bus stop. It kept the relationship 'fresh', as Lisa said. Coupar wasn't so sure. He never felt entirely certain about Lisa's commitment. She was nearly ten years younger than him, and very attractive. Working as a receptionist at the sports centre, she would be in daily contact with all kinds of athletic young men who might try to chat her up. And the demands of his job sometimes meant that the thrice weekly routine was diminished. Sometimes he only saw her once a week.

There was no mistaking her pleasure in seeing him this evening though. She opened the door with a glass of wine in hand and a big smile on her face. She was wearing the low-cut spangly top that was generally a reliable clue that seduction was on her agenda.

"Hi Coopsie!" she said, planting a wine-flavoured kiss on his lips. "Come in and tell me how it's going!"

"How what's going?" he said, following her into the living room. The main light was off, and only a couple of lamps illuminated the space.

"Don't be silly," she giggled, pouring him a glass of wine. "The case, of course! I've been reading about it again in today's paper. They've called it the hedgehog murder!"

"I know they've called it that. It's a real nuisance."

"What is?"

"Details like that getting out. At least they don't know about the note."

Lisa sat down next to him on the sofa, and snuggled up close.

"Note? What note?"

Coupar cursed inwardly. He'd forgotten that he hadn't mentioned the note to Lisa.

"I shouldn't say."

She pulled away slightly.

"You don't trust me?"

"Of course I do. But I really shouldn't..."

"What did the note say? Where was it?"

"It was..."

He hesitated. Lisa rested a hand on his thigh.

"Go on!"

"...it was in the victim's nostril."

Lisa's eyes widened.

"God! That's creepy! And what did it say?"

"It was wet, with the rain. There were two words, in capitals. But I couldn't make them out."

"Not at all?"

"No. Impossible to read."

He was fairly sure that one word began with 'A' and the other with either 'I' or 'L'. But he'd blabbed enough already.

She nodded. The hand on his thigh gave a little squeeze.

"Do you mind if I tell Dan?"

Coupar looked at her, surprised.

"Dan?"

"At the sports centre. He's one of the tennis coaches. He's writing a crime novel. He loves details like that."

"Of course you can't tell him!"

She looked a little pouty.

"I told you, it's important to keep some details from the public," he explained. "There's always a chance that the killer will reveal himself by mentioning something that isn't widely known."

"Or herself?" Lisa suggested.

"In theory. But I think we're dealing with a man."

"Or a transsexual?"

Sometimes, Coupar thought, Lisa's thought processes were just baffling. She looked at him expectantly. No, she definitely wasn't making a joke. He sighed.

“Yes, in theory, we could be looking for a murderous transsexual.”

Chapter 4

October 1988 – February 1989

Duncan McBane was in the little room designated as ‘the Sculpture library’. It was more often used as an informal coffee and farting station by the department’s technical assistant, Rory Coggs, a rosy, rotund young man with curly hair who looked like a cherub who had fluttered out of a Raphael painting. But it did contain an untidily stacked bookcase, as well as a low table, and three wonky plastic chairs, on one of which Duncan perched as he thumbed through the library’s latest addition – a book about Steven Sidling written by some pretentious London dickhead, and donated to the library – with a flamboyant signature on the title page – by Steve Sidling himself.

Duncan would not have liked anyone to see him showing an interest in this book. He was disgusted that someone like Steve Sidling would have a book dedicated to him at all. But he was looking at the photographs it contained of Sidling’s work on a know your enemy basis. It was his pal Angus Campbell who had put that idea into his head. If he was to orchestrate resistance to the kinds of change that Sidling had started to talk about, then Angus said it was necessary to know what he was up against. Occasionally even slow-witted Angus could come up with a good idea.

The first few illustrations – poor quality black and white photographs – revealed that Sidling’s earliest works were graffiti perpetrated during his sixth form schoolboy years in Sheffield. One of these featured on the cover of a Sunday Times magazine in 1972, having been ‘discovered’ by an influential art critic and gallery owner who was prospecting for talent ‘up north’. The graffiti was on the side of a large brick building, and featured a gigantic cartoonish hedgehog with a speech bubble saying ‘fuck off!’ Sidling’s meteoric rise to art world success proceeded apace through his art college years, when he developed his ‘ambient interventions’. As far as Duncan could make out from the photographs, these always consisted of inserting something ugly and incongruous into an otherwise inoffensive setting. For his degree show he dressed down a bunch of out of work actors and created a ‘homeless village’ of cardboard boxes photographed at dawn in front of Buckingham Palace. The press loved it.

For the next thirteen years he was a darling of the art world as he travelled Europe and America ‘intervening’. He was lavished with Arts Council and private funding. The book concluded with a double page spread of his biggest project, executed a year or so ago, in which the town hall of some unfortunate German city had been wrapped in brown sacking and furnished with hundreds of protruding spikes. It was a return to the hedgehog of early days, as noted by the London dickhead in the caption beneath the picture.

Duncan closed the book with an irritated snap and threw it back on the table where it had been artlessly left on display, no doubt by the arch interventionist himself. He fell into a dark reverie. This Sidling had floated effortlessly into prominence like a puffed up balloon, in galling contrast with his own more modest artistic success, chipped splinter by splinter out of the hard unyielding stone of his medium. It was relentless dedication to his craft that had pulled him free of the violence and self-loathing of his early years; a long, hard road to travel. Like Bunyan’s pilgrim he had escaped from a Slough of Despond. Now he felt as if his feet were sinking once more in that swampy ground. Why on earth had Principal Peabody and the rest of the interview panel delivered Forthburgh School of Art’s Sculpture Department into the hands of such an iconoclast? Were they mad? Did his own proud roll call of eminent Scottish figures standing in monumental splendour in town squares and parks throughout the land count for nothing? They had received a slap in the face, these eminent Scots, just like him. They had all been spurned in favour of an upstart southern meddler whose misguided travesties didn’t warrant the label of ‘art’, let alone the even higher distinction of ‘sculpture’!

Such were the brooding thoughts that Duncan shared with his pal Angus Campbell in the pub that evening. They were in the Tap of Poverty, the nearest drinking hole to the art school, and consequently a frequent haunt of staff and students alike, despite its charmless décor and bar staff. On Fridays he and Angus would generally down a few bevies there after work, neither having a home to go to, to speak of, or a woman to go home to either.

"Well, we've got a prick in charge of Fine Art as well," Angus remarked, wiping the foam from his third pint of heavy from the ginger shrubbery around his mouth. "Peabody's filling the place with his own kind."

Duncan snorted.

"It's always the pricks that get the plum jobs," he replied.

Angus nodded. His fingers went foraging in his beard. Presumably his beery thoughts were off on a new track.

"Speaking of pricks, are you absolutely sure that Steven Sidling of yours isn't banging that Arabella Wood?" he said at length.

Duncan shook his head.

"He's definitely not shagging any woman."

"I know you think he's a poof, but..."

"He's definitely a poof."

"... but I've observed them, you know? They seem pretty close, him and her - and the noise they make!"

"Just pals, that's all, I guarantee it."

Angus gave him a wink.

"Bet you wouldn't mind giving her one!"

Duncan took a sip of his beer.

"Eh?" Angus prompted slyly, his eyes narrowing behind his round spectacle lenses. "You've told me before that you quite fancied her!"

"Maybe a little. But it's never going to happen."

He took a longer draught of his beer. Angus ran his fingers through his beard again.

"She's a big pal as well of that Hermione Cutter."

"What?"

"Pals. Her and Hermione Cutter."

"Who?"

"Arabella Wood."

"No, numpty! I mean who's Hermione Cutter?"

"Hermione Cutter? Ach... you'll know her face. She comes in three days a week, I think it is. Takes drawing classes."

"Oh aye. I think I've spoken to her once or twice. Tall, thin woman, greyish blonde hair, a bit nervy looking?"

"That's the one. Her and Arabella are like that."

He wrapped his two forefingers together as a demonstration of their closeness.

"You're not saying...?" Duncan looked at him, surprised.

"Ach no, Hermione's married. And I don't think Arabella Wood is that way inclined either."

"How do you know all this about who's friends with who?"

Angus tapped the side of his nose.

"I just keep my eyes open, Duncan. Besides, I get on all right with Hermione. She's a pharmacist, apparently."

"A pharmacist?"

"Aye - or used to be before she took up painting. Unusual, eh?"

"I suppose so... but then you used to be a rent boy before you started painting."

Angus roared, and slapped his hand on the table.

"Fuck off, McBane!" he said amiably.

When they'd finished their fourth pints, Angus made his way off to continue the evening at his local, which was on the other side of town from Duncan's abode. Duncan decided to call in at The Bull's Tail on his way home. This was a bit of a posh pub, and he didn't take to the clientele, nor they to him. But it was on his walking route, and they had a fine collection of single malts. A nice single malt was what he fancied before he took himself on to his own local for the rest of the evening. An evening that would most likely end with a craving for a carry-out curry, to be consumed in the squalor of his flat, like most Friday nights.

As he sat nursing his Talisker and mulling over the general unfairness of the universe, he was startled by a familiar noise nearby, as if a seagull had got trapped in the pub and was screeching for the exit. It was the subject of his recent conversation, Arabella Wood. She must have already been

sitting in the adjacent booth when he came in. He hadn't seen her, and the pub's music and chatter had until now masked her voice. But now that distinctive voice was rising to a pitch of indignation.

"You're selfish! That's all! And you don't give a damn about my feelings!"

A low murmuring male voice could be heard in reply. Not a voice that Duncan recognised. Arabella's tirade continued.

"If you'd said that right at the start, it would have been different. But you let me just go on in the dark, didn't you!"

The male voice rose a little in volume in protest, but the words were still indistinguishable.

"Well that's it, then! Just go! Just go!" Arabella shrieked.

Duncan heard a muttered male voice saying "Fuck!" and then a well-dressed man with thick black hair made his way swiftly across his range of vision, moving away from the booth and out of the door of the pub. Not anyone he'd ever seen before. After a pause he thought he heard sobbing. Yes, it was Arabella sobbing.

He swirled his whisky around in the glass and took a thoughtful sip. Should he do anything? It would be very awkward if she chanced to see him sitting here, within earshot of that dust-up.

He slid silently and unobserved out of his own seat. He felt sorry for her. Perhaps it was the drink talking, but he felt he could comfort her. And, in spite of her unfortunate voice, and her ill-judged friendship with Steven Sidling, he did fancy her! Indecisively at first, but then making up his mind, he traced a circuitous route around the far side of the bar and then approached Arabella's booth from a new direction, as if he had just come from buying his drink and spotted her there.

"Arabella!" he said, expressing surprise and pleasure. Then, as if noticing her distress for the first time, he added a note of concern. "Are you okay?"

She dabbed at her eyes with the tissue already in her hand and mustered a faint smile.

"Oh... hello Duncan! I'm sorry... just had an upsetting moment."

"Would you rather be on your own?"

She continued dabbing for a moment, and then shook her head.

"No, no. Have a seat Duncan. It'll do me good."

He observed that her wine glass was empty.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"Oh... yes, thanks. A sauvignon blanc please. The New Zealand one."

Duncan went to the bar and bought a large glass of the wine and another single malt for himself. When he returned, Arabella had clearly made an effort to pull herself together. The slight smears of running mascara had been wiped away, and fresh lipstick applied. She received her drink with a smile, and immediately took a big gulp from it.

"I've just broken up with my boyfriend," she said.

Duncan arranged his features into a look of sympathetic interest. His eyes flickered to the plunging neckline of her red blouse, and back up to her face. Circumstances might be propitious, he thought, depending on her mood and alcohol intake. It wasn't as if they needed to get to know each other. That spadework was already done, although they hadn't ever gone beyond superficial conversations.

"Do you want to tell me about it Arabella?" he said, assuming the most sympathetic tone available to him. It sounded more or less okay to his ears.

Arabella shook her head slightly.

"I don't want to bore you."

Duncan thought he detected an interrogatory glance at him.

"You won't," he assured her.

"Well, I'll keep it short. His name was... well it doesn't matter. He's a dentist."

"Is that how you met?"

She snorted and smiled at him. Duncan felt this was already going well.

"No. He's not my dentist. We met at a party in the Georgian Quarter."

"How long ago?"

"Only three months ago. And it's all been a lot of fun, until I got wind of something a couple of days ago. Someone mentioned that he'd bought a house in Bristol."

"Bristol?"

"Yes. So I tackled him about it tonight. Turns out he's moving to a dental practice down there. It's been lined up for nearly a year. Someone retiring. And he never said a dicky bird to me about it.

He was just going to slope off without a care in the world. I was just a fling, right from the start, and I didn't get it. I thought we were building something together."

"A house somewhere?"

Arabella snorted again and then laughed.

"No, you idiot! Not a house. A relationship. A long term one."

Duncan nodded. She'd called him an idiot in an affectionate way. That was extremely positive, wasn't it?

"I suppose I was half prepared for tonight," she went on. "Knowing about the house in Bristol. That was the worst moment, when I first heard of that. I came here more or less expecting we'd break up. The bastard never even tried to suggest I should go to Bristol with him!"

She put on a face of brisk cheerfulness and took another glug of her wine.

"I think I'm ready to move on already!"

Duncan glanced again at her neckline. If she needed help moving on immediately, he was her man. He smiled at her, and they clinked glasses and drained the contents.

"Another one?" he said.

The next morning, prodding her gently awake and putting a mug of tea down next to her on the bedside table, Duncan observed a look of bewilderment on Arabella's face as she raised her head slightly. Her eyes roamed, unfocussed, across the peeling ceiling of his bedroom and she emitted a long, low groan before she spoke.

"Where am I?" she said, in a voice about an octave lower than her normal pitch.

"My place," he confirmed quietly, taking a sip of his own tea. She winced and shut her eyes again, laying her head back on the pillow as if it were an eggshell that she might shatter. Duncan stretched out again on the bed beside her. He had a banging hangover himself.

"Oh, God!" he thought he heard her mutter under her breath. He hoped she was referring to her hangover rather than the locale or the company.

"Good night, last night, eh?" he said. From his point of view it had been a very good night indeed. He'd been celibate for about two years; wasting time making sporadic attempts to get his wife back, until a year or so ago. But last night proved he hadn't forgotten how to do it.

"What, breaking up with my boyfriend?" she croaked, and reached over to get hold of the mug of tea.

"No. I'm sorry about that," he lied. "I mean later on. I'm glad we got together. I've always liked you."

Leaning on her elbow, she looked at him now for the first time. It was a hard look to read, at least for him. Her eyes took a journey down his torso. He was in good shape, he knew, in spite of his intake of beer and whisky. That was mostly only at weekends. He worked out at the gym, from time to time, and hewing stone kept the muscles in trim. To his surprise, and relief, she put down the cup of tea and turned over onto her side to nestle against him with her head on his shoulder.

"You're nice," she said.

About a minute later she was asleep again, snoring deeply.

The next two weeks were a blur of lust, as Duncan made up for his long drought and Arabella expunged the dentist from her memories. They slept together every night, either at his flat or hers. At the art school, she continued to associate noisily with the odious Sidling, but Duncan let it ride. He didn't want to bring up a bone of contention. He just made sure that his true feelings about his Head of Department never came out into the open when he was with Arabella.

To his own surprise, over the following weeks Duncan found his feelings for this intoxicating woman growing beyond his control, like ivy climbing up a sturdy oak tree and smothering it. He suspected that, like ivy, Arabella was really using him as a convenient prop, to give her exposure to the sunlight. She liked having his arm to the round of exhibition openings, fashion shows and parties that made up her world, and demonstrating to any dentist or other previously unsatisfactory partner (Duncan identified two without difficulty by observation of body language, and suspected many others) that she had 'moved on' and was perfectly contented with her lot. He had a foreboding that it would be wise to cut off this clinging addition to his life at the root, but he was powerless to do so. Swept along in the updraft of an alien social whirlwind, and helpless prey to surges of jealousy, affection, obsession and lust, Duncan found that he was falling in love. And yet he couldn't help observing that Arabella was flighty, flirting with any presentable man who came her way.

He didn't shine very brightly himself at these social gatherings that came thick and fast, and she was increasingly inclined to tick him off for what she described as his 'gloomy Scottish outlook on life'. He objected that this was racist stereotyping. She retorted that she was Scottish herself, and therefore licensed to make observations about her fellow countrymen. The great saving grace of their relationship was the sex, which was inventive and enthusiastic, as Arabella introduced him to a number of hitherto unexplored practices. He'd never read the Kama Sutra – he'd only heard of it – but he imagined Arabella would be able to write a chapter or two of her own.

As well as bringing his sex life up to speed, she also took him in hand sartorially. Dissatisfied with the drab corduroys and faded fleeces that were his habitual garb, she led him, sheepish and only half-willing, into expensive shops whose existence he had never previously noticed on Regency Street. There, in a matter of hours, he parted with more money than he had spent on clothes in the previous two decades in order to fit the bill as Arabella's man about town.

All this was destined only to last for less than four months.

In February, they attended a private view of work by Hermione Cutter, the pharmacist-turned-painter who worked part-time at the art school and was an old friend of Arabella's. When Arabella wasn't with Duncan, she was frequently spending time with Hermione. Hermione was only a few years older than her – in her late forties – and they shared a lot of common ground. Apparently, they met up at least once a week at Arabella's flat over a bottle of wine. Although Hermione was married, her husband was often away on business, and their only child, Roland, was away at university. So she was always up for an evening of booze, gossip, and art talk. At the art school, once or twice, Duncan fell in with Arabella and Hermione briefly, but he never conversed with Hermione on his own.

Hermione was primarily a portrait artist, turning out ugly misshapen images reminiscent of the twisted angst of certain works by Francis Bacon. Her wealthier sitters sometimes purchased their likenesses, but they were more often snapped up by collectors who saw her unusual style as an investment opportunity, especially as her output was sparse. The private view encompassed around thirty works that had taken her five years to produce.

The show was hosted by a private gallery in the Georgian Quarter called The Blinking Eye, and all the staff of the art school had received an invitation as a matter of course. Arabella had pointed out to Duncan that there would be free prosecco, and suggested they might go on for dinner afterwards at the excellent Thai restaurant around the corner. She would meet him at the gallery, as she was going to go early to help Hermione 'relax' before the event. Duncan took this to mean drink before the event.

When Duncan entered the gallery it was already ringing with the chatter and laughter of a crowd well lubricated by free alcohol, few of whom were paying any attention to the paintings on the wall. He peered into the first room, looking for Arabella. Edgar Peabody, clad in sky blue jacket and tartan trousers, was holding forth in there to a cluster of bored looking individuals. He also observed Arabella's head of department, Leonora Hunt, who was languidly posing amidst another grouping in her forties garb looking, or trying to look, like Lauren Bacall waiting for her camera call.

He advanced to the next room, where he was accosted by Hermione Cutter herself, who, he quickly realised, was indeed half-cut.

"Duncan!" she exclaimed, in a tone of enthusiasm that he had never before called forth from her. In fact, he was slightly surprised that she knew his name. Perhaps Arabella mentioned him frequently. Quite tall already, she was wobbling now on high heels that brought her face to face with him. Her rather thin lips were fleshed out with abundant rouge, and her hair had been modelled into a flawless dyed blond curtain that rested triumphantly on her bare shoulders. "How lovely that you could come! You don't have a drink!"

She turned and waved a peremptory hand at a young person nearby with a tray of glasses.

"Here, Ariadne! A glass of wine for our eminent sculptor Mr McBane!"

Duncan received his glass and raised it to his hostess.

"Congratulations, Hermione! Quite a show!"

He hadn't so much as glanced at a painting yet, but there was no need to admit to that.

She fixed him with a grateful smile. Not only her lips, but her eyes too had been artificially enlarged by abundant make-up.

"Do you think so?"

He was going to have to offer more, he realised. These glasses of prosecco came at a price.

"Yes. Eh... I like the boldness of form and colour you use..."

He could see one of the portraits over her shoulder. It looked like a lump of uncooked meat balancing precariously on top of a man's jacket. He also spotted Arabella now, just to the right of the painting, nodding enthusiastically to some remark by her companion, a handsome man in a suit and tie, probably in his late forties. He felt a qualm of unease.

Hermione was looking at him out of her mask of mascara and rouge, waiting for more.

"I particularly like that one," he said, indicating with a nod the picture behind her. She half turned.

"The one beside Arabella and my husband?"

So that was who it was! Duncan experienced a sense of relief. He might reasonably expect that Arabella wouldn't be trying to get off with Hermione's husband right under her very nose.

"Yes..." Hermione went on. "That's the most recent picture here - I only finished it a week ago. I feel it may be the start of a new phase in my work. I'm freeing myself from the figurative, looking for a more... a more brutal... that might be the word... a more brutal style of portraying the human essence."