

Chapter 18

Sebastian sat at the kitchen table the morning after Caroline's arrival contemplating his third cup of coffee when she arrived on the scene, noisily, as usual. He didn't have to ask but made her a strong coffee, the first of many, he decided, looking at her dark features.

'So, what now?' he said, dreading the answer.

'Can I stay here with you, just for a while?' she replied in her best *little girl* voice, the wheedling tone jarring Sebastian's nerves. He had listened to her petulant *little girl* act for too long, amazed at how she believed he would buy it every time.

He nodded in defeat. 'I suppose so, but what will you do? Have you left your job as well?'

She sipped her coffee, looking at him from under long eyelashes. 'Had to darling, I was his secretary. How could I possibly stay when he dismissed our relationship with a mere text message? And there is the wife. The bitch hates me. Can't think why? According to Jules, she never gave him any comfort; cold as ice, he said.'

Sebastian knew he shouldn't say it, but it was too hard to resist. 'Then why in heaven's name didn't he leave her for you?' he murmured.

Caroline raised herself up in her chair. 'Because all he ever thinks about is money and how much he would lose if he left her, that's why.'

Sebastian concentrated on his cup as he thought to himself that the same excuses were rolled out time and time again in these situations. It was always someone else's fault, never the illicit lover. His sister had been a bit of fun for the lawyer, but when push came to shove and he stood to lose everything, love flew quickly out the window to be replaced by hard reality. He would quickly find another, Sebastian assumed; men like that seldom mended their ways, they merely became more discreet and cunning.

But that wouldn't be any comfort to Caroline. The last thing she needed to hear was that by now her lover would have secured another interest and be enjoying the excitement of a new relationship. The wife would have assumed he would mend his ways after being caught out and dropped her guard.

Sebastian knew he wouldn't have the house to himself for some time and perhaps a little selfishly regretted his sister's arrival; just as he was about to ask Briony over. He hadn't seen her lately but had already decided to invite her for dinner or, at the very least, afternoon tea at the next opportunity.

Caroline perked up a little after the third cup of strong coffee and asked what he was planning for the day. Sebastian told her he was looking to expand the small pantry because, after taking measurements, something didn't quite add up. The wall between the cupboard and the next-door room seemed to be a very thick wall, too thick, in fact, and he was determined to investigate. The old wooden shelving would have to be removed and replaced after finding out if there was anything behind the wall.

Caroline said she would drive into Upper Marston and spy out the village. Sebastian assumed that would mean a surveillance of the men in the area for any likely prospects.

He was hard at work inside the old pantry when she left by the kitchen door with a wave of her hand. By the time he managed to disentangle himself from the ripped apart shelving and popped his head out, she had disappeared. He heard her car leave the yard, turn into the road, and accelerate towards the next village. He smiled to himself, saying aloud, 'Watch out, Marston; you're about to encounter a mini hurricane.'

The shelving was standing in a heap outside the kitchen door, and Sebastian kicked at it, sorry that he wouldn't be able to put it back. The timber was past its best and needed to be replaced. He considered what to do with it. The nearest rubbish dump was miles away, and it would take a considerable effort to load onto a trailer and unload it at the dump. He had an idea, and the thought excited him like it would a young boy. He would burn it in the old bakery oven. It was probably years since the oven had been used and he quickly gathered up the broken shelves, carrying them into the bakery. The door stood ajar as usual, and he grimaced at the thought that whatever he did, the bloody thing was always open.

When all the wood was stacked in front of the oven door, he opened it, squealing in protest on rusty hinges. He peered into the gloom of the interior, seeing only the charred remains of the last fire, and pushed in an old newspaper, crumpled into loose balls, followed by some shelving. The wood was dry with age and would soon catch. He struck a match and applied it to the paper, standing back to review the results. Disappointment etched his features as smoke poured out of the door into the room. The wrong direction, he thought, beginning to cough. Looking up to the top of the oven, he spied an old iron rod, which had a bend at the end and then disappeared over the top. He thought it might be a damper and reaching up he pulled it hard, feeling a little movement. Then, taking it in both hands and jerking it as hard as he could, he was rewarded with a muffled clang as the rod reached the end of its travel. The smoke immediately reversed its course and was sucked back into the oven fire pit. The shelving caught and soon there was a blazing fire. Sebastian fed it with the rest of the shelving and stood back to survey his handiwork, beaming like a naughty child. He heard the timber crackle as it bent and twisted in the fiery inferno. And something else. Sebastian cupped a hand to his ear when he thought he heard another, far more frightening sound. The soft crying turned into screaming as the fire roared and soon, he was deafened by a last shriek, which appeared to come from the fire door, still wide open. He jumped back in fright as a thin line of dark smoke emerged from the oven door. It swirled in front of his eyes, taking on a shape, and he thought it resembled a human form. Then it turned once more into a line of smoke and disappeared through the open door.

Sebastian sank to his knees, looking at the flames as they calmed. He had turned pale and found he couldn't put his thoughts together in any meaningful way, resting back on his haunches and looking into the fire.

Trudging wearily back to the comfort of the kitchen, he sat down heavily on a kitchen chair. His mind was still in a whirl, and he felt emotionally drained but rose to get the bottle of Scotch and pouring himself a good measure downed it in one, feeling the familiar warmth as the amber liquid trickled down his throat. He felt drained, his eyelids drooping, and he had to struggle to get up from his seat.

With an enormous effort, he climbed the stairs and sank gratefully onto his bed, still fully clothed. Sebastian fell at once into a deep sleep and plunged into a lurid dream. He saw himself standing in the bakery in front of the oven with the fire door closed. Coming from inside, he heard loud clicks like twigs snapping. Feeling as if there was someone else present, he turned but saw no one. As he turned again, he felt the presence once more; it was as if someone or something was turning in time with him but always remaining behind, out of sight. He cried out, 'Who's there?'

Each time he shouted, he became louder and more desperate; turning faster now, he seemed to spin like a top.

With a start, he woke up with beads of perspiration on his brow.

Lying on his back, he stared at the ceiling, reliving the dream over and over, then shivered as footsteps sounded on the stairs. Frozen with fear, he turned his head to look at the open doorway.

Caroline bounced into the room full of joie de vivre and exclaimed loudly that her poor brother must be feeling his age. Fancy needing an afternoon nap!

'Just look at the time Seb, it's gone five o'clock. How long have you been lying here?'

Sebastian couldn't even raise a smile; he had been on the bed for almost the entire day, but still felt unnaturally tired.

Caroline was having none of it, though. 'Come on lazy bones, up you get and make yourself decent. You can take me to dinner somewhere.'

He struggled to get off the bed, but once up, his energy seemed to return.

They drove off about an hour later, heading for Marston and the all too familiar pub. There wasn't much choice for dinner, and even though he had offered to cook, Caroline was having none of it, insisting that she pay. Sebastian thought he might as well take advantage of his sister's generosity because he knew before long, he would be footing the bills for everything.

Seated in the dining room at the pub, Sebastian was feeling very much better. The meal proved to excellent, washed down with a bottle of reasonable red wine, and they were relaxing when Caroline suddenly sat up straight, almost visibly preening herself and looking over Sebastian's shoulder. He felt his skin crawl as whoever it was made their way over to their table. Caroline's smile broadened to an almost impossible width as the presence manifested itself in front of them.

Sebastian groaned inwardly. It was James, and he could tell by the look in his sister's eyes that her hitherto broken heart was by some miracle now repaired.

James looked down, catching Sebastian's eye.

'Won't disturb you old boy, but happy to see you in here again. You never mentioned you had a gorgeous girlfriend.'

The wink he gave Caroline was not lost on Sebastian, and he cringed inwardly at this latest unfortunate turn of events.

Sebastian looked up without smiling. 'Caroline is my sister, actually.'

'Oh, how lovely, how perfectly splendid,' said James.

He moved off and sat at the bar, still glancing over at their table now and again. Each time he caught her eye, Caroline smiled back, colouring up.

Sebastian, annoyed with all the goings on, paid the bill and they left. He later reflected that his sister had not bothered to correct him as to who was supposed to pay for dinner, neither did she offer to reimburse him. Chalk another one up to James, he thought, with a grim smile.

Later, in bed, he went over the evening with the realisation that his sister was probably on the verge of a relationship with James, the man who Sebastian firmly believed had attempted to run him down not so long ago.

He worried that any attempt on his part to throw a spanner in the works would simply not wash with Caroline. It would only make James more irresistible in her eyes.

Sleep was eluding him when the thought struck him that if James was to become involved with Caroline, then perhaps he would not pay so much attention to Briony, allowing himself the opportunity he so very much desired. Perhaps then maybe Briony could be persuaded to become more open in their developing relationship.

He slept a dreamless sleep and when morning came awoke feeling refreshed and eager to get back to the work of renovating his new home.

Downstairs, Caroline was already up and had coffee brewing. She was even humming a little tune, and Sebastian knew the tide had already turned. She was once again smitten, but at least James wasn't a married man, as far as he knew.

Breakfast over, Caroline tripped back upstairs to make herself beautiful while Sebastian prepared to attack the back wall of the pantry. Empty of shelving, it still wasn't very wide, and he had only a little space in which to work. He prepared the power hammer drill and fitted it with a spade tip. That should make quick work of the old masonry wall. Measuring the floor above, he was sure it was not a supporting wall. It looked as if it had been added after the original construction.

He was about to start when Caroline came downstairs and yelled at him to not even think of making any dust. She strutted across the floor towards the door with Sebastian looking on in amazement, his sister was done up like a dog's dinner, and he merely shook his head slowly from side to side.

She rounded on him. 'What?' she said, 'just because you don't dress up anymore doesn't mean to say I can't.'

'No, of course not, have a nice day; seeing James, I suppose?'

She didn't answer, giving him a little smile, and walked out to her car. He heard the engine start and dropped his shoulders with a sigh; she's off again, he thought.

As the sound of the BMW faded, Sebastian set to with the drill. He had thought to buy a face mask and was grateful as the old, whitewashed plaster began to flake off, creating a veritable dust storm in the confined space. Gradually, he removed the bricks; the mortar changing into a white powder as the vibrating power tool did its

job. It soon became apparent that the wall was quite thick because as he removed one skin of bricks, another remained behind it. He removed one at a time and cleared away the rubble as it built up around his feet.

Sebastian looked like a snowman as he sat down to a welcome cup of coffee. One skin of the wall had been removed, and the resulting bricks were stacked beside the bakery. He felt a sensation of satisfaction, as his very own renovations had at last begun in earnest. As he sipped his coffee, his nose wrinkled when he caught the scent of pipe tobacco. It was the same smell as before and seemed to emanate from near the old kitchen range. He walked over to the spot and the smell became stronger. It was very puzzling, and once again he inspected the old chimney, but as he got closer, the smell decreased. It seemed to be strongest in one spot and Sebastian supposed that at one time a chair would have been there, perhaps several as the occupants gathered around the range in an effort to stave off the winter cold outside.

Deciding it must have been blown in by the wind, he finished his coffee and went back to work in the cupboard. The dust had settled, and he could at least see what he was doing.

He prised out the bricks one by one, and soon a reasonable gap was exposed but revealed only blackness. Sebastian retreated to the kitchen to look for a torch and walked back into the cupboard behind the bright white beam.

What he saw chilled him to the marrow. He couldn't believe it at first and went even closer to the exposed hole.

The torchlight revealed a skull looking straight out at him. It had long dark hair and the sight, when it finally registered, caused him to step back violently. He stood in the kitchen, staring at the hole in the pantry with disbelief.

Sebastian was still sitting at the kitchen table when the police arrived and merely pointed in the pantry's direction. The two uniformed police approached the spot cautiously. Sebastian had telephoned to report the discovery and had been told to touch nothing. The officers would deal with it when they arrived. Just how they would deal with it, he couldn't imagine, but was content to let someone else take over.

The police officers themselves did absolutely nothing. They reported back to headquarters and were instructed to maintain a guard on the skeleton until the experts arrived.

Three hours later, the yard was full of vehicles, most marked with police signs. The kitchen was full of officials discussing the best plan of attack. They had deemed the house a crime scene, which meant that Sebastian would have to find somewhere else to stay, but he told them he had to wait for the return of his sister. She was bound to be upset and would also need to stay elsewhere for at least one night.

Caroline arrived at last, and Sebastian explained what had happened. She was about to batter his ears with her day's events, but for once was left speechless as he told her what he had discovered behind the wall.

They stood just inside the door as the scenes of crimes officers carefully removed the remaining bricks and revealed the interior space. When the dust had settled, it revealed something even more horrific.

The skeleton was standing up because the wrists were fastened in old manacles, as were the feet. The skull, balanced on the body, appeared to be very fragile and looked as though it might crash to the floor if disturbed too much. Next came the pathologist, who made a cursory examination. In his opinion, the remains had been there, undisturbed for years, probably hundreds of years.

It was getting late, and the authorities decided it would be best to remove the body in the morning. They requested Sebastian and Caroline pack an overnight bag and maybe seek a room at the pub in Marston. They would guard the house, so there was no need to worry about security.

It was a somewhat glum couple who sat down to dinner in the pub later on. Neither could think of much to say. Surely, a discovery of that kind was something that only happened to other people.

Halfway through their meal, James walked in. He approached the pair with his big smile firmly in place.

‘What’s this, out again? You two are more like a married couple than brother and sister,’ he said, never taking his eyes from Caroline. She smiled back, but Sebastian remained aloof. ‘Sorry James, not in the mood tonight, something bad happened at the house.’

James pulled up a chair without being invited and became serious. ‘What do you mean, what’s happened?’

Sebastian looked him straight in the eye. ‘You mean apart from a man running from there and ending up hanging in the woods?’

James dropped his eyes. ‘Yes, I know about that, and it’s a damn shame, but what else has happened?’

Sebastian explained about his discovery that morning and James drew back surprised; unable to speak. Caroline went to say something and then noticed James’ face was chalky white.

‘Are you all right, James?’ she asked.

James stared ahead into space. ‘Yes, quite all right, thank you. Maybe I should leave you two to talk.’

With that, he left without another word.

‘How strange,’ murmured Caroline, ‘he was normal this afternoon, in fact, more than normal, if you know what I mean?’

Sebastian groaned, ‘What, already, you mean to tell me you and that man have had sex?’

Caroline’s head snapped to attention. ‘So, what if we did? It’s none of your business!’

‘So, why tell me then?’ Sebastian replied.

Caroline bent to finish her meal, which was cold now, but anything was better than her brother’s stare.

Sebastian didn’t want to know, but curiosity got the better of him.

‘Where did it happen and while we’re on the subject, is he married?’

Caroline allowed a trace of a smile to cross her face. ‘Knew you would want to know. We had lunch here and afterwards went back to his office. He’s got a nice little setup out back, very comfy.’

‘You still didn’t say if he was married,’ Sebastian insisted.

Caroline smirked. ‘No, and he never has been. I’ve actually found a bachelor.’

‘Well, at least that’s something, but I have to tell you, dear sister, that I really don’t like the fellow and wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.’

‘Why ever not?’ she almost shouted.

‘Because the crazy bastard nearly ran me over, that’s why!’ he shouted back.

Caroline got up from the table and stormed off. Sebastian calling after her. ‘I’ll pay then, shall I?’