

Just One Evil Act

Also by Elizabeth George

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Write Away: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life

ELIZABETH GEORGE

Just One Evil Act

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To Susan Berner
wonderful friend,
outstanding role model,
and
twenty-five years superlative reader

The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, season'd with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil?

The Merchant of Venice

I 5 NOVEMBER

*Earls Court
London*

Sitting on a plastic chair inside Brompton Hall among a crowd of two hundred shouting individuals – all dressed in what had to be called alternative garb – was the last thing Thomas Lynley had ever expected to find himself doing. Edgy music was blasting from speakers the size of a tower block on Miami Beach. A food stall was doing a very brisk business in hot dogs, popcorn, lager, and soft drinks. A female announcer was periodically shrieking above the din to call out scores and name penalties. And ten helmeted women on roller skates were racing round a flat ring delineated with tape on the concrete floor.

It was supposed to be an exhibition match only: something to educate the populace in the finer points of women's flat track roller derby. But it was a case of tell-that-to-the-players, for the women engaged in the bout were deadly serious.

They had intriguing names. All of them were printed, along with suitably menacing photos, in the programmes that had been distributed as spectators took their seats. Lynley had chuckled as he'd read each nom de guerre. Vigour Mortis. The Grim Rita. Grievous Bodily Charm.

He was there because of one of the women, Kickarse Electra. She skated not with the local team – London's the Electric Magic – but rather with the team from Bristol, a savage-looking group of females who went by the alliterative collective Boadicea's Broads. Her actual name was Daidre Trahair, she was a large animal veterinarian employed at Bristol's zoo, and she had no idea that Lynley was among the howling mass of spectators. He wasn't sure if he was going to keep matters that way. He was, at this point, operating strictly by feel.

He had a companion with him, having lacked the courage to venture into this unknown world on his own. Charlie Denton had accepted his invitation to be enlightened, educated, and entertained at Earls Court

Exhibition Centre, and, at this moment, he was milling among the crowd at the snack stall.

He'd made the declaration of 'It's on me, m'lord . . . sir,' with that final word a hasty correction that one would think by now he'd not even have to make. For he'd been seven years in Lynley's employ, and when he wasn't addressing his passion for the stage through auditions for various theatrical events in Greater London, he served as manservant, cook, housekeeper, aide-de-camp, and general factotum in Lynley's life. He'd so far managed *Fortinbras* in a north London production, but the West End north London was not. So he soldiered on in his double life, determinedly believing that his Big Break was only round the next corner.

Now, he was amused. Lynley could see that in Denton's face as he made his way back across Brompton Hall to the array of chairs among which Lynley sat. He carried a cardboard food tray with him.

'Nachos,' Denton said as Lynley frowned down at something that looked like orange lava erupting from a mountain of fried tortilla. 'Your dog's got mustard, onions, and relish. The ketchup looked iffy so I gave it a pass, but the lager's nice. Have at it, sir.'

Denton said all this with a twinkle in his eye, although Lynley reckoned it could have been just the light shining on the lenses of his round-framed spectacles. He was daring Lynley to refuse the offered repast and instead come forth as he really was. He was also entertained by the sight of his employer sitting chummily next to a bloke whose potbelly overhung his baggy jeans and whose dreadlocks fell the length of his back. Lynley and Denton had come to depend upon this individual. His name was Steve-o, and what he didn't know about women's flat track roller derby did not, apparently, bear knowing at all.

He was attached to Flaming Aggro, he'd told them happily. Plus, his sister Soob was a member of the cheering squad. This latter group of individuals had taken up a position whose disturbing proximity to Lynley added to the general cacophony surrounding him. They wore black from head to toe with embellishments of hot pink in the form of tutus, hair decorations, knee socks, shoes, or waistcoats, and they had so far spent most of their time screaming 'Break 'em, baby!' and shaking pink and silver pompoms.

'Great sport, innit?' Steve-o kept saying as the Electric Magic piled the points onto the scoreboard. 'It's tha' Deadly Deedee-light does most of the scoring. Long's she don't rack up the penalties, we're in, mate.' And then onto his feet he leaped, shouting, 'Do it, Aggro!' as his girlfriend swept by in the midst of the pack.

Lynley was loath to tell Steve-o that he was a supporter of Boadicea's Broads. It was a matter of chance that he and Denton had placed themselves among the Electric Magic fans. The Boadicea's Broads crowd was on the other side of the taped-off ring, being led into a frenzy of synchronised shouting by their own squad of cheerleaders who, like those supporting the Electric Magic, were dressed in black but with touches of red. They appeared to have more experience in the arena of cheerleading. They executed vague dance moves with accompanying leg kicks that were most impressive.

It was the sort of event that should have appalled Lynley. Had his father been there – doubtless dressed to the nines with one or two touches of ermine and red velvet lest someone doubt his position in society – he would have lasted less than five minutes. The sight of the women on roller skates might have given him a coronary, and listening to Steve-o drop his t's and ignore his h's would have made the poor man's blood run cold. But Lynley's father was long in his grave, and Lynley himself had spent most of the evening grinning so much that his cheeks were actually beginning to hurt.

He'd learned far more than he'd ever have imagined possible upon having made the decision to accept the invitation that had been printed on a handbill he'd found among his post a few days earlier. He'd discovered they were meant to keep their eyes on the jammer, identified by the star cap that stretched across her helmet. This wasn't a permanent position for a skater, as the star cap was passed round amongst the women. But the jammer was the team's scoring position, and the ultimate scoring came during a power jam when the opposing team's jammer had to sit in the penalty box. He'd learned the purpose of the pack and, thanks to Steve-o, what it meant when the lead jammer rose from her crouched position to place her hands on her hips. He was still rather vague on the purpose of the pivot – although he knew who she was by the striped cap she wore stretched over her helmet – but he was definitely getting the idea that roller derby was a sport of strategy as well as skill.

Mostly, he'd kept his eyes on Kickarse Electra throughout the match-up between London and Bristol. She, he discovered, was quite a jammer. She skated aggressively, like a woman to the roller skates born. Lynley wouldn't have thought it possible of the quiet, thoughtful veterinarian he'd met seven months earlier on the coast of Cornwall. He knew she was practically unbeatable at darts. But this . . .? He never would have guessed it.

His pleasure in the wild sport had been interrupted only once, in

the middle of a power jam. He'd felt his mobile vibrate in his pocket, and he'd dug it out to see who was ringing him. His first thought was that the Met was calling him back to work. For the caller was his usual partner, Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers. Still, she was ringing from her home phone and not from her mobile so perhaps, he thought, he was in luck and nothing had occurred that wanted his attention.

He'd answered, but he'd not been able to hear her. The noise was far too intense. He'd shouted that he would ring her back as soon as he was able to do so, and he'd shoved the mobile back into his pocket and forgotten about the matter.

The Electric Magic won the bout twenty minutes later. The two groups of skaters congratulated each other. Athletes mingled with spectators then, cheerleaders mingled with athletes, referees mingled with each other. No one was in a hurry to leave, which was all to the good since Lynley intended to do a little mingling himself.

He turned to Denton. 'I'm not sir.'

Denton said, 'Pardon?'

'We're here as friends. Make it school chums. You can do that, can't you?'

'What, me? Eton?'

'It's well within your skill set, Charlie. And call me either Thomas or Tommy. It doesn't matter which.'

Denton's round eyes got even rounder behind his spectacles. He said, 'You want me to . . . I'll probably choke if I try to say it.'

'Charlie, you're an actor, yes?' Lynley said. 'This is your BAFTA moment. I'm not your employer, you're not my employee. We're going to talk to someone, and you're going to pose as my friend. It's . . .' He sought the correct term. 'It's improv.'

Charlie's face brightened. 'C'n I do the Voice?'

'If you must. Come with me.'

Together, then, they approached Kickarse Electra. She was in conversation with London's Leaning Tower of Lisa, an impressive Amazonian who stood at least six feet five inches tall in her roller skates. She would have been an imposing presence anywhere, and she was particularly striking next to Kickarse Electra, who, even in her skates, was some seven inches shorter.

Leaning Tower of Lisa first saw Lynley and Denton. She said, 'You two look like trouble of the very best kind. I claim the smaller one.' And she rolled over to Denton and put her arm round his shoulders. She kissed his temple. He became the colour of pomegranate seeds.

Daidre Trahair turned. She'd taken off her helmet and she'd

raised a pair of plastic goggles to the top of her head. They now held back wisps of her sandy hair, which had escaped from the French braid that contained it. She was wearing her spectacles beneath her goggles, but they were badly smudged. She could see through them perfectly well, though, a fact Lynley ascertained by the colour that her skin took on when she looked at him. He could only just see this colour through her make-up, however. Like the other skaters, she was heavily painted, with an emphasis on glitter and lightning bolts.

‘My God,’ she said.

‘I’ve been called worse.’ He held up the handbill advertising this event. ‘We thought to take up the offer. Brilliant, by the way. We quite enjoyed it.’

Leaning Tower of Lisa said, ‘This your first?’

‘It is,’ Lynley told her. And then to Daidre, ‘You’re far more skilled than you let on when we first met. You do this as well as you throw darts, I see.’

Daidre’s colour deepened. Leaning Tower of Lisa said to her, ‘You *know* these blokes?’

Daidre said inarticulately, ‘Him. I know him.’

Lynley extended his hand to the other skater. ‘Thomas Lynley,’ he told her. ‘You’ve got your arm round my friend Charlie Denton.’

‘Charlie, is it?’ Leaning Tower said. ‘He’s awfully sweet-looking. Are you sweet in character as well as in looks, Charlie?’

‘I believe he is,’ Lynley told her.

‘Does he like big women, then?’

‘I expect he takes them as they come.’

‘He doesn’t talk much, does he?’

‘You might be an overpowering presence.’

‘Isn’t that always the case?’ Leaning Tower released Denton with a laugh and another solid kiss on his temple. ‘You change your mind, you know where to find me,’ she said to him as she rolled away to join her mates.

Daidre Trahair had apparently used the duration of this exchange to come to her wits. She said, ‘Thomas. You’re the last person I would have thought to see at a roller derby match.’ Then she turned to Denton and extended her hand, saying, ‘Charlie, I’m Daidre Trahair. How’d you like the match?’ She offered this question to them both.

‘I’d no idea women could be so ruthless,’ Lynley said.

‘There’s Lady Macbeth,’ Denton pointed out.

‘There is that.’

Lynley’s mobile vibrated in his pocket. He took it out and gave it a glance as before. As before, the caller was Barbara Havers. He let it go to message as Daidre said, ‘Work?’ Before he could reply, she added, ‘You *are* back at it, aren’t you?’

‘I am,’ he told her. ‘But not tonight. Tonight Charlie and I would like you to join us for a postgame . . . whatever. If you’ve a mind for it.’

‘Oh.’ She looked from him to the milling skaters. She said, ‘It’s only that . . . the team usually go out. It’s rather a tradition. Would you like to join us? Apparently this group’ – with a nod at the Electric Magic – ‘go to Famous Three Kings on North End Road. Everyone’s invited. It’ll be a bit of a crowd scene.’

‘Ah,’ Lynley said. ‘I was rather hoping – *we* were hoping – for something more conducive to conversation. Can you possibly break with this tradition for once?’

She said regretfully, ‘I do wish . . . It’s only that we’ve come by coach, you see. It would be rather difficult. I have to return to Bristol.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Well, no. We’re in a hotel for the night.’

‘We can take you there whenever you’re ready,’ he offered. And when she still hesitated, he added, ‘We’re actually quite harmless, Charlie and I.’

Daidre looked from him to Denton and back to him. She fingered back some of the hair that had come undone from the braid. She said, ‘I’m afraid I have nothing special . . . I mean, we don’t generally dress for going out.’

‘We shall find a place entirely suitable for whatever state of dishabille you demonstrate,’ Lynley told her. ‘Do say yes, Daidre,’ he added in a quiet voice.

Perhaps it was the use of her name. Perhaps it was the change in his tone. She thought for a moment and then said all right. But she would have to change and perhaps she ought to get rid of the glitter and the lightning bolts as well?

‘I find them rather compelling,’ Lynley told her. ‘What about you, Charlie?’

‘It all makes a certain statement,’ Denton said.

Daidre laughed. ‘Don’t tell me what that statement is. I’ll be a few minutes. Where shall I meet you?’

‘We’ll be just outside. I’ll pull my car round the front.’

'How will I know . . .?'

'Oh, you'll know,' Denton told her.

*Chelsea
London*

'I see what he meant,' were Daidre's first words to Lynley when he got out of the car at her approach. 'What is this exactly? How old is it?'

'Healey Elliott,' he told her. He opened the door for her. 'Nineteen forty-eight.'

'Love of his life,' Denton added from the back as she slid within. 'I'm hoping he leaves it to me in his will.'

'Small chance of that,' Lynley told him. 'I plan to outlive you by several decades.' He pulled away from the building and headed towards the car park's exit.

'How do you two know each other?' Daidre asked.

Lynley didn't reply till they were on Brompton Road, motoring past the cemetery. 'School together,' was what he said.

'With my older brother,' Denton added.

Daidre glanced over her shoulder at him, then looked at Lynley. Her eyebrows drew together as she said, 'I see,' and Lynley had a feeling that she saw more than he really wanted her to.

He said, 'He's ten years older than Charlie,' and with a glance at the rear-view mirror, 'That's right, isn't it?'

'Close enough,' Denton said. 'But listen, Tom, would you mind if I begged off all this? It's been a deucedly long day and if you'll drop me in Sloane Square, I can walk the rest of the way. Early hours at the bank tomorrow. Board meeting. Chairman all in a dither about a Chinese acquisition. You know.'

Deucedly? Lynley mouthed. *Tom? Bank? Board meeting?* He half expected Denton to lean forward and give him a wink-wink, nudge-nudge next. He said, 'You're sure, Charlie?'

'Couldn't be more so. Long day for me today, longer one tomorrow.' To Daidre he added, 'Blasted worst employer on earth. Duty calls and all that.'

She said, 'Of course. And what about you, Thomas? It's late and if you'd rather—'

'I'd rather spend an hour or so with you,' he said. 'Sloane Square it is, Charlie. You're sure about the walk?'

'Brilliant night for it,' Denton said. He said nothing more – thank God, Lynley thought – till they reached Sloane Square, where Lynley dropped him in front of Peter Jones. Then it was, 'Cheerio, then,' to which Lynley rolled his eyes. He reckoned he was lucky Denton hadn't added 'Pip-pip' to his farewell. He was definitely going to have to speak to him. The Voice was bad enough. The vocabulary was worse.

'He's rather sweet,' Daidre said as Denton crossed over into the square and made for the Venus fountain in its centre. From there it was a short stroll to Lynley's home in Eaton Terrace. Denton seemed to bounce as he walked. He was, Lynley reckoned, entertained by his own performance.

'*Sweet* wouldn't quite be my word of choice,' Lynley said to Daidre. 'He's a lodger with me, actually. It's a favour to his brother.'

Their own destination wasn't far from Sloane Square. A wine bar on Wilbraham Place stood three doors away from a pricey boutique on the corner. The only table available was one by the door, which wasn't what he would have wished for considering the cold, but it would have to do.

They ordered wine. Something to eat? Lynley offered Daidre. She demurred. He said he would do likewise. There was, he told her, something to be said for the staying power of nachos and hot dogs.

She laughed and fingered the stem of a single rose that was vased on the table. She had the hands one would expect of a doctor, he thought. Her nails were clipped short, to the end of her fingers, and her fingers were strong-looking and not at all slender. He knew what she would call them. Peasant hands, she would say. Or gypsy hands. Or tin-streamer hands. But not the hands one would expect of an aristo, which she most definitely was not.

Suddenly it seemed there was nothing to say after all the time that had passed since last they'd met. He looked at her. She looked at him. He said, 'Well,' and then he thought what an idiot he was. He had wanted to see her again and here she was and the only thing he could think of was to tell her that he never could quite make out if her eyes were hazel or brown or green. His own were brown, very dark brown in complete contrast to his hair, which was blond in the height of summer but which now, in mid-autumn, was washed-out brown.

She smiled at him and said, 'You're looking quite well, Thomas. Very different from the night you and I met.'

How true that was, he realised. For the night they'd met was the night he'd broken into her cottage, the only structure on Polcare Cove in Cornwall where an eighteen-year-old cliff climber had fallen to his death.

Lynley had been looking for a phone. Daidre had been arriving for a few days' respite from her job. He remembered her outrage at finding him there inside her cottage. He remembered how quickly that outrage had changed to concern for him from something she had read upon his face.

He said, 'I *am* well. Good days and bad days, of course. But most of them are good now.'

'I'm glad of it,' she said.

They fell into silence again. There were things that could have been said. Such as, 'And you, Daidre? And what about your parents?' But he couldn't say them, for she had two sets of parents and it would be cruel to force her to talk about one of them. He'd never met her adoptive parents. Her natural parents, on the other hand, he'd seen: at their ramshackle caravan by a stream in Cornwall. Her mother had been dying but hoping for a miracle. She may have passed at this point, but he knew better than to ask.

She said suddenly, 'So how long have you been back?'

'At work?' he said. 'Since the summer.'

'And how do you find it?'

'Difficult at first,' he replied. 'But of course, it would be.'

'Of course,' she said.

Because of Helen went unsaid between them. Helen his wife, a victim of murder, and her husband, a detective employed by the Met. The facts of Helen didn't bear thinking about, much less commenting upon. Daidre wouldn't go near that topic of conversation. Nor would he.

He said, 'And yours?'

She frowned, obviously not knowing what he was referring to. Then she said, 'Oh! My job. It's quite fine. We have two of our female gorillas pregnant and a third not, so we're watching that. We're hoping it won't cause a problem.'

'Would it? Normally?'

'The third one lost a baby. Failure to thrive. So things could develop because of that.'

'Sounds sad,' he said. 'Failure to thrive.'

'It is, rather.'

They were silent again. He finally said, 'Your name was on the handbill. Your skating name. I saw it. Have you skated in London prior to this?'

'I have,' she said.

'I see.' He twirled his wineglass and watched the wine. 'I do wish you'd phoned me. You have my card still, don't you?'

'I do,' she told him, 'and I could have phoned but . . . It's just that it felt . . .'

'Oh, I know how it felt,' he said. 'Same as before, I dare say.'

She gazed at him. 'My sort don't say "I dare say", you see.'

'Ah,' he said.

She took a sip of wine. She looked at the glass and not at him. He thought of how different she was, how completely different to Helen. Daidre hadn't Helen's insouciant wit and carefree nature. But there was something compelling about her. Perhaps, he thought, it was everything that she kept hidden from people.

He said, 'Daidre,' as she said, 'Thomas.'

He let her go first. 'Perhaps you might drive me to my hotel?' she said.

*Bayswater
London*

Lynley wasn't stupid. He knew that driving her to her hotel meant exactly that. It was one of the things he liked about Daidre Trahair. She said exactly what she meant.

She directed him to Sussex Gardens, which lay to the north of Hyde Park in the midst of Bayswater. It was a busy thoroughfare, heavily trafficked both day and night, lined with hotels differentiated one from the other only by their names. These were displayed on the hideous plastic signs that had become so prevalent all over London. Cheap and lit from within, they were a depressing statement about the decline of individual neighbourhoods. These particular signs identified the sort of hotels that dwelled in the land between essentially all right and utterly horrible, with ubiquitous dingy white sheer curtains at the windows and ill-lit entries with brass fixtures in need of polishing. When Lynley pulled the Healey Elliott up to Daidre's hotel – which was called the Holly – he reckoned he knew which end of the spectrum between all right and horrible the place actually lay.

He cleared his throat.

She said, 'Not exactly up to your standards, I expect. But it's a bed, it's only for the night, there's an en suite bathroom, and the expense for the team is minimal. So . . . you know.'

He turned to look at her. She was backlit from a streetlamp near the car, and there was a nimbus of light round her hair, putting him in mind

of Renaissance paintings of martyred saints. Only the palm leaf was missing from her hand. He said, 'I rather hate to leave you here, Daidre.'

'It's a bit grim, but I'll survive. Believe me, this is far better than the last place we stayed. An entire cut above, it is.'

'That's not actually what I meant,' he said. 'At least not altogether.'

'I suppose I knew that.'

'What time do you leave in the morning?'

'Half past eight. Although we never quite manage to get off on time. Heavy partying the night before. I'm probably the first one back.'

'I've a spare room in my house,' he told her. 'Why not sleep there? You could have breakfast with me, and I'd have you back here in time to ride with your teammates to Bristol.'

'Thomas . . .'

'Charlie does the breakfasts, by the way. He's an exceptional cook.'

She let this one rest there for a minute before she said, 'He's your man, isn't he?'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Thomas . . .'

He looked away. On the pavement a short distance from them, a girl and boy began to have an argument. They'd been holding hands, but she tossed his away like the wrapper from a takeaway burger.

Daidre said, 'No one says *deucedly* any longer. At least not this side of a costume drama.'

Lynley sighed. 'He does get carried away.'

'So is he your man?'

'Oh no. He's definitely his own man. I've been trying to rein him in for years, but he enjoys acting the role of servant. I think he believes it's extraordinarily good training. He's probably right.'

'So he's not a servant?'

'Lord no. I mean, yes and no. He's an actor, or at least he would be if he had things his way. In the meantime, he works for me. I've no trouble with him going to auditions. He has no trouble with my failing to show up for a dinner he's slaved over for hours in the afternoon.'

'Sounds like you fit hand in glove.'

'More like foot in sock. Or perhaps sockless foot in shoe.' Lynley looked away from the arguing couple who were now shaking their mobile phones at each other. He turned to Daidre. 'So he'll be there in the house, Daidre. He'll act as chaperone. And, as I said, we'd have a chance to talk over breakfast. And during the ride back here. Although, of course, I could pop you into a taxi should you prefer that.'

'Why?'

‘A taxi?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘It’s just that . . . things seem unfinished between us. Or perhaps unsettled. Or merely uneasy. Frankly, I’m not sure what it is, but I expect you feel it as much as I do.’

She seemed to think about this for a moment, and from her silence Lynley took hope. But then she shook her head slowly and put her hand on the door handle. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘And besides . . .’

‘Besides?’

‘Water off a duck’s back. That’s how I’d put it, Thomas. But I’m not a duck and things don’t work that way for me.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You do,’ she said. ‘You know that you do.’ She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. ‘I won’t lie, though. It was completely lovely to see you again. Thank you. I hope you enjoyed the match.’

Before he could reply, she got out of the car. She hurried into the hotel. She did not look back.

*Baywater
London*

He was still sitting there in front of the hotel in his car when his mobile rang. He was still feeling the pressure of her lips against his cheek and the sudden warmth of her hand on his arm. So deep was he into his thoughts that the mobile’s ringing startled him. He realised at its sound that he’d not phoned Barbara Havers back as he’d said he would. He glanced at his watch.

It was one a.m. Couldn’t be Havers, he thought. And in the way that the mind will go spontaneously from one thought to another, in the time it took to fish the mobile from his pocket, he thought of his mother, he thought of his brother, he thought of his sister, he thought of emergencies and how they generally did occur in the middle of the night because no one made a friendly call at this hour.

By the time he had the mobile out, he’d decided it had to be a disaster in Cornwall, where his family home was, a heretofore unknown Mrs Danvers in their employ having set the place alight. But then he saw it was Havers ringing again. He said into the phone hastily, ‘Barbara. I am so sorry.’

‘Bloody hell,’ she cried. ‘Why didn’t you ring back? I’ve been sitting here. And he’s alone over there. And I don’t know what to do or what to tell him because the worst of it is that there’s sod all *anyone* can do to help and I know it and I lied to him and said we’d do something and I need your *help*. Because there has to be something—’

‘Barbara.’ She sounded completely undone. It was so unlike her to babble like this that Lynley knew something was badly wrong. ‘*Barbara*. Slow down. What’s happened?’

The story she told came out in disjointed pieces. Lynley was able to pick up very few details because she was speaking so fast. Her voice was odd. She’d either been weeping – which hardly seemed likely – or she’d been drinking. The latter made little sense, however, considering the urgency of the story she had to tell. Lynley put together what he could, just the salient details:

The daughter of her neighbour and friend Taymullah Azhar was missing. Azhar, a science professor at University College London, had come home from work to find the family flat stripped of nearly all possessions belonging to his nine-year-old daughter as well as to her mother. Only the child’s school uniform remained, along with a stuffed animal and her laptop, all of this lying on her bed.

‘Everything else is gone,’ Havers said. ‘I found Azhar sitting on my front step when I got home. She’d rung me, too, Angelina had done, sometime during the day. There was a message on my phone. Could I look in on him this evening? she’d asked me. “Hari’s going to be upset,” she said. Oh yes, too right. Except he’s not upset. He’s destroyed. He’s wrecked, I don’t know what to do or to say, and Angelina even made Hadiyyah leave that giraffe behind and we *both* know why because it meant a time when he’d taken her to the seaside and he’d won it for her and when someone took it off her on the pleasure pier—’

‘Barbara.’ Lynley spoke firmly. ‘*Barbara*.’

She breathed in raggedly. ‘Sir?’

‘I’m on my way.’

*Chalk Farm
London*

Barbara Havers lived in north London, not far from Camden Lock Market. At one in the morning, getting there was merely a matter of

knowing the route, as there was virtually no traffic. She lived in Eton Villas, where parking one's car depended upon very good luck. There was none of that at an hour when the residents of the area were all tucked up into their beds, though, so Lynley made do with blocking the driveway.

Barbara's digs sat behind a conversion, a yellow Edwardian villa done into flats at some point during the late twentieth century. She herself occupied a structure behind it, a wood-framed building that had once done duty as God only knew what. It had a tiny fireplace, which suggested it had always been used as some sort of living space, but its size suggested that only a single occupant had ever lived there, and one needing very little room.

Lynley cast a glance at the ground-floor flat inside the conversion as he made his way along the paved path towards the back of the villa. This was, he knew, the home occupied by Barbara's friend Taymullah Azhar, and the lights within it were still blazing out onto the terrace in front of the flat's French windows. He assumed from his conversation with Barbara that she'd been inside her own digs when he'd spoken to her, though, and when he got behind the villa, he saw the lights were on inside her bungalow as well.

He knocked quietly. He heard a chair scraping against the floor. The door swung open.

He was unprepared for the sight of her. He said, 'God in heaven. What have you done?'

He thought in terms of ancient rites of mourning in which women chopped off their hair and poured ashes upon the stubble that remained. She'd done the first, but she'd skipped the second. There were, however, ashes aplenty on the small table in what passed for the kitchen. She'd sat there for hours, it seemed to Lynley, and in a glass dish that had served as her ashtray, the remains of at least twenty cigarettes lay crushed, spilling burnt offerings everywhere.

Barbara looked ravaged by emotion. She smelled like the inside of a fireplace. She was wearing an ancient chenille dressing gown in a hideous shade of mushy-peas green, and her sockless feet were tucked into her red high-top trainers.

She said, 'I left him over there. I said I'd be back but I haven't been able to. I didn't know what to tell him. I thought if you came . . . Why didn't you ring me? Couldn't you tell . . . Bloody hell, sir, where the hell . . . Why didn't you . . .?'

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I couldn't hear you on my mobile. I was . . . It doesn't matter. Tell me what happened.'

Lynley took her arm and guided her to the table. He took away the

glass dish of cigarette dog ends as well as an unopened packet of Players and a box of kitchen matches. He put all of this on the worktop of her kitchen area, where he also set the kettle to boil. He rustled in a cupboard and came up with two bags of PG Tips as well as some artificial sweetener, and he excavated through a sink filled with unwashed crockery till he discovered two mugs. He washed them, dried them, and went to the small refrigerator. Its contents were as appalling as he'd expected they would be, heavily given to takeaway food cartons and to-be-heated ready-made meals, but among all of this he found a pint of milk. He brought it out as the kettle clicked off.

Throughout everything, Havers was silent. This was completely uncharacteristic of her. In all the time he'd known the detective sergeant, she'd never been without a comment to toss in his direction, particularly in a situation like this one in which he was not only making tea but actually giving some thought to toast as well. It rather unnerved him, this silence of hers.

He brought the tea to the table. He placed a mug in front of her. There was another sitting near to where the cigarettes had been, and he removed this. It was cold, a skin of someone's indifference to it floating on its surface.

Havers said, 'That was his. I did the same thing. What is it about tea and our bloody society?'

'It's something to do,' Lynley told her.

'When in doubt, make tea,' she said. 'I could do with a whisky. Or gin. Gin would be nice.'

'Have you any?'

'Course not. I don't want to be one of those old ladies who sip gin from five o'clock in the afternoon till they're comatose.'

'You're not an old lady.'

'Believe me, it's out there.'

Lynley smiled. Her remark was a slight improvement. He pulled the other chair out from the table and joined her. 'Tell me.'

Havers spoke of a woman called Angelina Upman, the apparent mother of Taymullah Azhar's daughter. Lynley himself had met both Azhar and the girl Hadiyyah, and he'd known that the mother of this child had been out of the picture for some time prior to Barbara's purchase of the leasehold on her bungalow. But he'd not been told that Angelina Upman had waltzed back into the lives of Azhar and Hadiyyah the previous July, and he'd never learned that not only were Azhar and the mother of his child not married but also that Azhar's name was not on the birth certificate of the girl.

Other details came pouring forth, and Lynley tried to keep up with them. It hadn't been due to the fashion of the times that Azhar and Angelina Upman had remained unmarried. Rather, there had been no marriage possible between them because Azhar had left his legal wife for Angelina, and this was a woman he'd refused to divorce. With her, he had two other children. Where they all lived was something Barbara didn't know.

What she did know was that Angelina had seduced Azhar and Hadiyyah into believing she'd returned to take her rightful place in their lives. She needed to obtain their trust, Barbara said, so that she could lay her plans and execute them.

'That's why she came back,' Barbara told him. 'To get everyone's trust. Mine included. I've been a bloody idiot most of my life. But this one . . . I've sodding outdone myself.'

'Why did you never tell me any of this?' Lynley asked.

'Which part?' Havers asked. 'Because the bloody idiot part I would've expected you already knew.'

'The part about Angelina,' he said. 'The part about Azhar's wife, the other children, the divorce or lack thereof. All of that. Any of that. Why didn't you tell me? Because you certainly must have felt . . .' He could say no more. Havers had never spoken of her feelings either for Azhar or for his young daughter, and Lynley had never asked. It had seemed more respectful to say nothing when the truth, he admitted, was that saying nothing had just been the easier thing to do.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Yeah. Well, you were occupied anyway. You know.'

He knew she was talking about his affair with their superior officer at the Met. He'd been discreet. So had Isabelle. But Havers was no fool, she hadn't been born recently, and she was nothing if not acutely percipient when it came to him.

He said, 'Yes. Well. That's over, Barbara.'

'I know.'

'Ah. Right. I expect you do.'

Havers turned her tea mug in her hands. Lynley saw it bore a caricature of the Duchess of Cornwall, helmet-haired and square-smiled. Unconsciously, she covered this caricature with her hand as if in apology to the unfortunate woman. She said, 'I didn't know what to tell him, sir. I came home from work and I found him sitting on my front step. He'd been there hours, I think. I took him back to his flat once he'd told me what happened – that she'd taken off and that Hadiyyah was with her – and I had a look round and I swear to God, when I saw she'd taken everything with her, I didn't know what to do.'

Lynley considered the situation. It was more than difficult and Havers knew this, which was why she'd been immobilised. He said, 'Take me to his flat, Barbara. Put on some clothes and take me to his flat.'

She nodded. She went to the wardrobe and rooted around for some clothes, which she clutched to her chest. She started to head towards the bathroom, but she stopped. She said to him, 'Ta for not mentioning the hair, sir.'

Lynley looked at her shorn and ruined head. 'Ah, yes,' he said. 'Get dressed, Sergeant.'

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Barbara Havers felt appreciably better now that Lynley had arrived. She knew she should have been able to do something to take hold of the reins of the situation, but Azhar's grief had undone her. He was a self-contained man and had always been so in the nearly two years that she had known him. As such, he'd played his cards so close that most of the time she could have sworn he had no cards at all. To see him broken by what his lover had done and to know that she herself should have recognised from their first meeting that something was up with Angelina Upman and with all of Angelina Upman's overtures of friendship towards her . . . This was enough to break Barbara as well.

Like most people, she'd seen only what she wanted to see in Angelina Upman, and she'd ignored everything from red flags to speed bumps. Meantime, Angelina had seduced Azhar back to her bed. She'd seduced her daughter into abject devotion. She'd seduced Barbara into unwitting conspiracy through garnering her cooperative silence about everything having to do with Angelina herself. And this – her disappearance with her daughter in tow – was the result.

Barbara got dressed in the bathroom. In the mirror she saw how terrible she looked, especially her hair. Her head bore great bald patches in spots, and in other spots the remains of what had been an expensive Knightsbridge hairstyle sprang out of her scalp like so many weeds waiting to be pulled from a garden. The only answer to what she'd done to herself was going to be to shave her head completely, but she didn't have time to do that just then. She came out of the bathroom

and rooted for a ski cap in her chest of drawers. She put this on and together she and Lynley returned to the front of the house.

Everything was as she'd left it in Azhar's flat. The only difference was that instead of sitting staring at nothing, Azhar was walking aimlessly through the rooms. When, hollow-eyed, he looked in their direction, Barbara said to him, 'Azhar, I've brought DI Lynley from the Met.'

He'd just emerged from Hadiyyah's bedroom. He was clutching the little girl's stuffed giraffe to his chest. He said to Lynley, 'She's taken her.'

'Barbara's told me.'

'There's nothing to be done.'

Barbara said, 'There's always something to be done. We're going to find her, Azhar.'

She felt Lynley shoot her a look. It told her that she was making promises that neither he nor she could keep. But that was not how Barbara saw the situation. If they couldn't help this man, she thought, then what was the point of being cops?

Lynley said, 'May we sit?'

Azhar said yes, yes, of course, and they went into the sitting room. It was still fresh from Angelina's redecoration of it. Barbara saw it now as she should have seen it when Angelina unveiled it to her: like something from a magazine, perfectly put together but otherwise devoid of anyone's personality.

Azhar said as they sat, 'I telephoned her parents once you left.'

'Where are they?' she asked.

'Dulwich. They wished not to speak to me, of course. I am the ruination of one of their two children. So they will not contaminate themselves through any effort to be of assistance.'

'Lovely couple,' Barbara noted.

'They know nothing,' Azhar said.

'Can you be sure of that?' Lynley asked.

'From what they said and who they are, yes. They know nothing about Angelina and, what's more, they do not want to know. They said she made her bed a decade ago and if she doesn't like the smell of the sheets, it's not down to them to do anything about that.'

'There's another child, though?' Lynley said, and when Azhar looked confused and Barbara asked, 'What?' he clarified with, 'You said you were the ruination of one of their two children. Who is the other and might Angelina be with this person?'

'Bathsheba,' Azhar said. 'Angelina's sister. I know only her name but have never met her.'

‘Might Angelina and Hadiyyah be with her?’

‘They have no love for each other as I gather these things,’ Azhar said. ‘So I doubt it.’

‘No love for each other according to Angelina?’ Barbara asked sharply. The implication was clear to both Lynley and Azhar.

‘When people are desperate,’ Lynley said to the man, ‘when they plan something like this – because it *would* have taken some planning, Azhar – old grudges are often put to rest. Did you ring the sister? Do you have the number?’

‘I know only her name. Bathsheba Ward. I know nothing else. I’m sorry.’

‘Not a problem,’ Barbara said. ‘Bathsheba Ward gives us something to start with. It gives us a place to—’

‘Barbara, you are being kind,’ Azhar said. ‘As are you’ – this to Lynley – ‘to come here in the dead of night. But I know the reality of my situation.’

Barbara said hotly, ‘I told you we’ll find her, Azhar. *We will.*’

Azhar observed her with his calm, dark eyes. He looked at Lynley. His expression acted as acknowledgement of something Barbara didn’t want to admit and certainly didn’t want him to have to face.

Lynley said, ‘Barbara’s told me there’s no divorce involved between you and Angelina.’

‘As we were not married, there is no divorce. And because there was no divorce between me and my wife – my legal wife – Angelina did not identify me as Hadiyyah’s father. Which was, of course, her right. I accepted this as one of the outcomes of not divorcing Nafeeza.’

‘Where is Nafeeza?’ he asked.

‘Ilford. Nafeeza and the children live with my parents.’

‘Could Angelina have gone to them?’

‘She has no idea where they live, what their names are, anything about them.’

‘Could they have come here, then? Could they have tracked her down, perhaps? Could they have wooed her out there?’

‘For what purpose?’

‘Perhaps to harm her?’

Barbara could see how this was entirely possible. She said, ‘Azhar, that could be it. She could have been taken. This could look like something it isn’t at all. They could have come for her and taken Hadiyyah as well. They could have packed everything. They could have forced her to make that call to me.’

‘Did she sound like someone under duress in the phone message, Barbara?’ Lynley asked her.

Of course, she had not. She'd sounded just as she'd always sounded, which was perfectly pleasant and completely open to friendship. 'She could have been acting,' Barbara said although even she could hear how desperate she sounded. 'She fooled me for months. She fooled Azhar. She fooled her own daughter. But maybe she wasn't fooling at all. Maybe she never intended to leave. Maybe they came for her out of the blue and they've taken her somewhere and she had to leave that message and they forced her to sound—'

'You can't have it both ways,' Lynley said, although his voice was kind.

'He is right,' Azhar said. 'If she was forced to make a phone call, if she was taken from here – she and Hadiyyah – against her will, she would have said something in that phone call to you. She would have left a sign. There would be some indication, but there is not. There is nothing. And what she did leave – Hadiyyah's school uniform, her laptop, that little giraffe – this was to tell me that they are not returning.' His eyes grew red-rimmed.

Barbara swung to Lynley. He was, she had long known, the most compassionate cop on the force and quite possibly the most compassionate man she'd ever met. But she could see upon his face that what he felt – beyond sympathy for Azhar – was knowledge of the truth in front of them. She said to him, 'Sir. *Sir*.'

He said, 'Aside from checking with the families, Barbara . . . She's the mother. She's broken no law. There's no divorce with a judge's decree and a custody ruling that she's defying.'

'A private inquiry then,' Barbara said. 'If we can do nothing, then a private detective can.'

'Where am I to find such a person?' Azhar asked her.

'I can be that person,' Barbara told him.