

SNATCHED

‘Shame we’ve got to head home tomorrow,’ said Mariner.

‘My God.’ Reaching over, Suzy took hold of his wrist to check his pulse, which at the mere touch of her fingers, raced a little. ‘I think you might be turning into a normal person.’

‘I’m not sure that I’d go that far.’ They sat, shoulders touching, on the pew of a darkened church, the only light from the jewel-bright stained glass windows and the dazzling tiers of votives in front of them. Hushed and reverential, the air was sweetened by a hundred years of incense and tallow. The tinny ring-tone of a mobile phone shattered the quiet and Mariner automatically dived into his coat pocket to silence his, even though the culprit turned out to be a Spanish woman a little way behind them. A couple of people turned and tutted disapprovingly.

‘So it’s been all right, being a tourist?’ Suzy said, pulling on her hat as they emerged from the chapel into the biting cold of the afternoon. She linked her arm through his.

‘I have,’ said Mariner. It came as a surprise to him too. ‘The company helps of course. Always handy having a historian around, to draw attention to my profound ignorance of anything to do with high culture.’

‘Oh, don’t worry.’ She broke away from him for a moment to take yet another photograph. ‘You have other talents.’ She came back to him. ‘And you’ve finally forgotten about-?’

‘I had done, until you reminded me.’

‘Sorry.’

Mariner smiled. ‘Just kidding.’

‘You’ve stopped jumping at shadows,’ she said squeezing his arm in encouragement. They drew to a halt. ‘Anyway, I know the prospect of wandering round shops would ruin the experience for you, so I’m going to abandon you to this bar while I go and buy a few bits and pieces for my parents and my niece. That okay?’

Mariner glanced through the window, where a flickering log fire pleasingly glinted off glass and amber. ‘Sounds perfect,’ he said. ‘You’re perfect.’

‘Don’t.’ She frowned a little. Nobody’s perfect. I’ll see you back here in forty-five minutes. We can go and find somewhere to eat then we can watch the candlelight nativity procession-.’

‘Do we have to?’

‘It’s our last chance. And I promise I’ll make it up to you later.’ She shot him a lascivious look that made Mariner’s belly tingle. Then she leaned up to kiss him, before turning and heading off into the melee.

‘Bag!’ Mariner called after her, noticing too late the thief-magnet slung carelessly over her shoulder. But she was already too far away to hear, swallowed up by the crowd.

It *was* pretty remarkable, Mariner thought, taking his half-litre of Belgian lager to a vacant window table. When Suzy had first suggested a weekend in one of Europe’s most beautiful but tourist-ridden cities only two weeks before Christmas, he’d felt almost panicked. His one previous experience of a city break had been nothing short of torture. And it pained him to admit it, even to himself, but he was also afraid of what it signified. Weekend breaks were for couples. Were he and Suzy a couple?

With her razor-sharp perception, Suzy had read all this going on in his head. She’d laughed of course, that easy laugh that melted him inside. ‘All I’m suggesting is a weekend

away,' she said. 'I'm not expecting you to get down on one knee. I just think it might be fun.'

And despite Mariner's reservations it had been, and more. The three days they had spent here had been nothing short of idyllic; visiting galleries, strolling the canals, eating in good restaurants and returning early, for long nights in their cosy boutique hotel. Suzy was right, it was the most relaxed he'd been for weeks, or at least since . . . He dodged an unwelcome incoming memory. It had been a difficult time. Mariner was no stranger to death threats - most police officers experienced them at some point. Usually they represented the convicted felon's last desperate attempt at defiance and posed no real danger. But this time had been different, the line between threat and reality a very thin one indeed. A spasm of recalled fear pinged in his gut.

Taking a long draught of his beer, he forced his attention back to the pleasant here and now; the horse-drawn carriages clattering by in front of the Christmas market stalls, a cluster of carol singers, their breath steaming in the frosty air; and a game he'd newly learned from Suzy. Person-snap. A committed people-watcher, it was Suzy's assertion that that there are a limited number of human 'types' on this planet and that after a certain age (which they had both reached, she was quick to point out) it is possible to match everyone encountered to someone already known. For example, here was a taller version of Charlie Glover, whereas *she* definitely resembled a young WPC Mariner had always secretly fancied. Wishful thinking of course; she was about twenty years too young for him. And there's . . .

Fuck. Mariner's stomach flipped as, for a split second, a powerful and unwelcome image crossed his line of vision. It can't have been. Twisting round he tried to pinpoint what he'd seen, to confirm that split-second impression, but already it had vanished, blending in with the masses, leaving Mariner's mouth suddenly dry and adrenaline coursing through him. Almost immediately he was struck by the ridiculousness of it. How could it possibly be him, here, right

now? It had to be a trick of the imagination; Suzy's reminder had brought it all flooding back, and his brain had done the rest, seeking out an individual who fit the picture. That was all. He was jumping at shadows again.

Draining his beer, Mariner ordered another and as, some time later, he got to the bottom of the second glass, he checked his watch. He didn't want to drink too much. They'd have a bottle of wine with dinner and he wanted to be sober enough to enjoy whatever the night would bring. So far his little recurrent problem had remained at bay and he didn't want to risk its alcohol-fuelled return. He frowned. By his calculation, Suzy had been gone for over an hour-and-a-half, twice what she'd promised, and Suzy always kept her word. It was one of the many things he liked about her. She'd hardly be the first woman in the world to get carried away with shopping, but the bar was getting busy and he couldn't sit here indefinitely at an empty table. He'd give her a quick call and let her know he was heading back to the hotel. But when he tried her number, it went straight to voicemail.

This was a compact city and they had explored most of it, walking, at different times, past the streets of tourist shops, so Mariner had rough idea of where she should be. A couple of times Suzy had pretended to be pulled in their direction, just to wind him up. It seemed sensible to swing by there on his way back, looking out for her as he went. After fifteen minutes the impossibility of this enterprise was clear. The shops heaved with tourists of all nationalities and Mariner had no way of knowing exactly which she'd have patronised. And as he progressed from one to the other he realised that she could well be just one step ahead of him, and this could go on for hours. Maybe he'd misunderstood her parting remark, and she'd meant that she would meet him *at the hotel* in forty-five minutes. The best thing would be to go back there. Seeking refuge from the jostling main street he walked a little way up a quiet, narrow alley to try calling

her again before starting back. This time when the dialling tone cut to voicemail, he left a message, telling her of his intentions. It was as he was ending the call, replacing his phone in his pocket that a splash of colour a little way up the alley caught his eye. It was a familiar splash of colour. It was a hat exactly like the one Suzy had been wearing.

Coupled with what he thought he'd seen, it sent a chill through him that was nothing to do with the air temperature. He walked over and picked up the hat. A long black hair clung to it. Last time he'd seen Suzy, this was firmly on her head. Surely she would notice if it fell off. And why would she come up here? Out of curiosity, Mariner went further along the passage, round a slight bend to see where it went. Perhaps she was taking more photographs. Mariner had read somewhere recently that more photos had been taken in the last year, than had been taken in all the years that went before. It had seemed extraordinary, though a few days with Suzy had made him think again. But the passage opened out onto a non-descript residential street alongside an unremarkable stretch of canal; nothing worth capturing for all eternity here. Unlike the old town, where cars were rare, this fed into a main traffic artery. Mariner was making his way back down the alley when his foot made contact with a shard of brittle plastic that went skidding across the ground. Looking down he saw further debris and getting closer recognised it as the smashed up pieces of a mobile phone. He knew straight away that it belonged to Suzy. Her phone was so old that Mariner had jokingly asked her if it came with a length of string. From the crushed and broken matter he foraged out the sim card, prised open the back of his own phone and inserted it. Suzy's contact list unfurled before him. And mirrored on the screen he saw again that ominous face in the crowd. Oh God no.

Mariner locked his hands around the back of his head and paced the alley in an effort to try and think straight. There must be a rational explanation for this. But every train of thought led

him back to the same place. He'd once watched a TV drama about a man who'd completely take over another man's life, family and friends without any of them realising, so close was the resemblance. But Mariner had struggled from the start with the premise that two people could look so exactly alike. And he didn't believe it now. If McNeish's didn't have a doppelganger, then Mariner had seen McNeish, and the only reason McNeish would be here, in this city, at this time, was to hurt him. After all, it was Mariner who had, only two weeks ago, secured the gangster's precious son a life sentence in prison. What better tit-for-tat than to take the person closest to Mariner. In this city thronging with people it would be so easy; the threat of a concealed weapon, Suzy dragged up the alleyway, dropping her hat, her phone destroyed along the way, before being bundled into a waiting car. As the full impact of it hit him Mariner almost threw up. He should get help, but could practically hear the local police's response already:

We need to wait sir. She's a grown woman. Perhaps she decided to do a little sight-seeing on her own; she might want her own space for a while (I might if I was with you!).

But I'm a police officer. I think she's been taken because of me. She could be in danger.

And you say you saw this man?

Yes.

Where were you when you saw him? In a bar, drinking, you say? And you saw him only for a second or two?

The scepticism would be justifiable. No. He was on his own. But maybe it wasn't too late. If he could establish exactly when and where Suzy had been taken-

'Oh my God!' An America-accented voice rang out. Galvanised by fear, Mariner dashed back towards the cry, emerging onto the street as a small crowd gathered. 'Can you believe

that??' the woman went on. 'The battery's gone dead, and I only took about a dozen shots!' Her fellow tourists sympathised as she waved her camera in the air but Mariner wanted to slap her.

He doubled back to the shops he'd been in before, this time forcing his way to the front of the queue to wave Suzy's hat in front of the assistants. 'Have you seen a woman who was wearing this?? When was she in here??' But they gazed at him blankly, shrugging and turning to their next customer. How could they remember one woman among hundreds? Back out on the cobbled street Mariner scanned and catalogued the parade of faces, desperate for a glimpse of the one he recognised. All of a sudden the place seemed almost entirely populated by young attractive women with oriental features and neat black hair. Those who made eye contact did so fleetingly, their attention focused on their own partners, children and friends. It was hopeless. He extended his search and the bridges and canals that had looked so quaint in daylight, took on an ominous dark presence in the gathering dusk, as if any of them could be harbouring evil.

Wound tight with pent up fear and frustration, Mariner took a few deep breaths then took out his phone again. There might be a problem convincing the police here, but he knew who would listen to him. It would cost a fortune on his network, but he put through the call anyway.

'There's no news,' Tony Knox, his sergeant said, cryptically, the solid scouse accent nonetheless instantly reassuring. 'Anyway how did you know?'

'Know what?'

'Millie's gone into labour. Isn't that what you're calling about?'

'No,' said Mariner, feeling a pang of guilt that he'd given no thought to his Detective Constable in days.

'What then?' said Knox. 'Suzy draggin' you round too many museums, is she?'

‘No,’ said Mariner, trying unsuccessfully to keep the tremor from his voice. ‘She’s gone.’

‘Gone? What the fuck did you say to her?’

‘No.’ Mariner said, his frustration rising. ‘She hasn’t walked out on me, she’s disappeared. She was meant to have met me in a bar,’ he cast a look at his watch, ‘two hours ago, but she didn’t show and now I can’t find her. Anywhere.’

There was a beat of silence at the other end of the line. Knox weighing up whether the boss had finally lost his marbles.

‘Well, okay, I’m sure . . .’

‘McNeish is here,’ Mariner blurted out.

‘What??’

‘I saw him. He walked right past me. I just glimpsed him for a second, but-,’

‘Christ.’ Now Knox was listening. ‘Where are you now?’

‘In the old town, just off the main street.’

‘And you’re sure Suzy hasn’t just gone back to the hotel?’

Was he? ‘Yes.’ Mariner lied, knowing it was the first thing he’d have to check when he’d rung off.

‘Okay then,’ said Knox. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll do some asking around and get back to you. Have you told the local plods?’

‘Not yet.’

Knox didn’t comment. He also knew it would be pointless. ‘I’ll get back to you.’

‘Wait! So Millie’s baby; it’s started?’

‘First thing this morning,’ said Knox.

‘Great,’ said Mariner, unable to think of anything more original. ‘Keep me posted.’

Ending the call, Mariner sprinted the half mile or so to the quiet back street of the hotel, cursing himself for not doing this first of all. As he got nearer, he began to feel a new hope. Maybe he was being paranoid and had got this wrong after all. Perhaps when he got there he’d find that Suzy had beaten him to it, and was up in their room, running a bath or watching TV. The more he thought about it the more likely it seemed, and his fear began to recede a little. He’d feel pretty stupid when he called Knox back but God, what a relief it would be. But entering the hotel lobby through the glass doors, he could see that the reception lounge was empty and even before he reached the desk, past a handful of guests checking in, his eyes landed on the key for room 28 still dangling, untouched, on its hook.

Mariner fought down rising panic. Oh God. If something has happened to her because of me . . . For the first time he realised how much he’d taken Suzy for granted. Never mind that she was clever, beautiful and sexy, or that for some unfathomable reason she was also attracted to him. She’d been so patient with him, never pushing him, and accepting that for now she had to share him with the ghost of Anna. ‘I’m damaged,’ he’d told her. ‘You should steer clear.’ But she had chosen not to listen. She had even taken Jamie in her stride. And now this. Mariner was being punished, and as he headed back to the city centre, images of Jesus Christ himself seemed to be staring down on him from every stall and street corner, castigating him for his failures.

He took a deep breath to try and quell the anxiety. If he was to establish what had happened to Suzy, he needed to be more systematic. From the main square, he worked his way round in a circuit again, ducking in and out of shops, swearing under his breath at the meandering hordes blocking his path, and all the time the sound of jolly brass band carols ringing in his ears. *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. After a while the streets and the shops

began to blur into one. Mariner had completely lost track of where he'd been, and as time wore on and the sky grew black, his despair grew, a cankerous pain gnawing at the pit of his stomach. Tired and defeated, he conceded that he must return to the hotel and call the police. In the end it wasn't necessary. Turning into the street, his blood curdled at the sight of a police car already parked outside. Had a witness to Suzy's abduction reported it? But how would they know . . . Oh Christ, they must have found her body. A montage of past murder victims, lifeless and broken at crime scenes, flashed unwanted through his mind. Suddenly he was afraid of going in there, terrified of what he might learn. Cautiously entering the hotel lobby, he was in time to see the receptionist lift the key to room 28 and pass it to a uniformed policeman. 'No!' he cried.

'Tom?'

Only then did he see Suzy, stepping out from behind the officer, and he almost collapsed with relief.

'Where have you been?' she asked, as if it was he who had vanished into thin air.

'I've been looking for *you*. What happened? What's going on?'

'I had my handbag snatched; purse, phone, everything. I got a good look at him, so the police asked me to go to the station across town and make a statement. I tried calling you from there but you didn't answer, so in the end I left messages here at reception. Didn't you get them?'

Mariner took out his phone. Five missed calls including one from Tony Knox. The ring tone was set on silent. '-from when we were in the church,' he said.

As Suzy came across to him, Mariner wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close, breathing in the scent of her hair. Such was his utter relief couldn't even chide her for inviting the theft.

‘Hey, you’re squashing me!’ she protested.

‘It’s stupid. I thought-.’ Mariner’s voice cracked. ‘I thought I’d lost you.’

Leaning back, she looked up at him. ‘Hm. Does that mean you’ll take me to the nativity?’ she grinned cheekily.

‘Anything you want,’ said Mariner.

Hours later they joined the crowds to watch the spectacular candlelit procession through the streets. As a hush fell over them Mariner’s phone rang out. Keeping Suzy firmly by his side, he stepped away to answer it, a smile spreading over his features as he listened. ‘That’s fantastic,’ he said eventually. ‘Tell her well done.’

‘Millie’s had a little boy,’ he told Suzy. ‘Haroon. Mum and baby doing fine.’ And as he pocketed his phone the first flakes of snow began to fall.

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