

JOURNAL EXTRACT

You'd never believe it to look at me now, but once upon a time I killed a man.

My calves ache with the effort of scrambling up the slippery fell. It is not too late, I need not carry out my plan. Murder is a choice, an act of free will. How easy to turn around and go back home. Nobody need ever know the wicked imaginings that twist my soul. It is within my power to let him live.

It is not merely his fate that lies in my hands this afternoon. It is my own.

My knees tremble. In the bag slung over my shoulder, I feel the sharp blade of the knife.

I didn't turn back, but passed beneath the large stone they called the Sword of Damocles. Long gone, destroyed like so much else that once seemed permanent and immune to change. I am ill at ease in the modern world. I shall not be sorry to bid it farewell. But before I leave, I shall share my secrets. I have this foolish superstition that, if they were buried with me, I should never find peace.

His back is turned, but when he hears my footsteps he spins round, leering with anticipation. He expected someone else. At the sight of me, his smile dissolves. The curl of his lip is familiar. I am accustomed to disappointing him.

14 MARTIN EDWARDS

'You contrived this.'

A nod of assent.

'How long have you known?'

What did it matter? When I did not reply, he let fly with a volley of abuse. I was jealous and selfish and sick in my head. The words glanced off me like arrows striking a shield.

When he reaches out and touches my arm, I recoil. A hungry gleam returns to his eyes. I can read his mind. We are alone and I am at his mercy. He looks about him, his attention caught by a rattle of stones.

I am dying now, withered and weary, but that afternoon I was so alive. More alive than ever before. Or since.

Slowly, he takes off his belt. Followed by his shirt.

I stand in front of him, motionless. He commands me to undress, just as I expected. My hands shake as I pull off my stockings and struggle out of my corselette. I take too long. Grunting with impatience, he strips quickly. When I start to fold my petticoat, he roars in disbelief.

'For God's sake, woman!'

I bend down and reach into the bag. I have obeyed him for the last time. He stands in front of me, naked and defenceless. I am almost naked too.

But I have the knife.

CHAPTER ONE

Who shall I be today?

Guy smiled at the landlady as she proffered a ballpoint pen with a bitten top. Her hands were chapped, her pink nail varnish flaking. He reached inside his suede jacket.

‘Thanks, but I always write with my own fountain pen.’

He liked to think of the black lacquer Waterman Expert as an heirloom, though he’d picked it up less than eighteen months previously in a grubby little shop in Camden Town. The landlady opened the register with as much reverence as if it were *The Book of Kells*. Guy paused; hadn’t Megan described him as a regular Jekyll and Hyde?

Today, no question – Dr Jekyll.

At Haverigg, he’d studied calligraphy, an agreeable means of passing the long days. No need for artistic skill, just patience and attention to detail. Before running out of both, he’d mastered the basics of an elegant script. Bending over the page, he wrote with a flourish.

RL Stevenson.

Perfectly safe, this flight of fancy. He’d once made the mistake of introducing himself as Guy Mannering to a woman who proved to be a closet Sir Walter Scott fan, but Mrs Welsby didn’t strike him as bookish. Bed and breakfast places

further up Campbell Road rejoiced in names like Brideshead and Xanadu, but this house, squashed at the end of a three-storey Victorian terrace, was called Coniston Prospect. Not that the name lacked imagination. A tall man looking out of the attic window would need to stand on his toes to see beyond the trees and satellite dishes and catch a glimpse of Coniston Water.

Fanned out on the table were the *Daily Express*, opened at the gossip page, and a local tabloid. On a scuffed sideboard squatted a Pye transistor radio, so ancient it was probably fashionable retro chic. Through the interference, he discerned Lionel Richie's breathy enquiry, '*Is it me you're looking for?*'

'Welcome to Coniston Prospect, Mr Stevenson.'

The smell of fried bread and burned bacon lingered in the air. Guy gave a contented sniff. He preferred four-star luxury, a boutique hotel by Grasmere or Ullswater would have been more his style, but he didn't mind roughing it until he sorted himself out. No bad thing to keep your feet on the ground. He found it so easy to get carried away. After leaving Llandudno in a hurry, he was short of cash. Lucky he was adaptable – Megan's word was *chameleon*.

'Please, Mrs Welsby, the name's Robert.'

Her smile revealed teeth as crooked as the Hardknott Pass. Guy winced. Dentistry counted for a lot, in his opinion. In more affluent days, he'd spent a fortune on caps and straightening.

'My friends call me Rob.'

'I'm Sarah,' she said quickly. 'I do hope you'll be happy here.'

Her eagerness to please was unfeigned and he found himself

warming to this solid woman in turquoise tracksuit and down-at-heel trainers. Seizing her hand, he found her grip was weak, her flesh soft. Once she'd been pretty, but she'd put on too much weight and years of disappointment had faded her blue eyes. The fair hair was dyed, the roots greying. No rings on the fingers. She could use a little excitement in her life. He pitched his voice lower.

'I'm sure I will be.'

He meant it. A threadbare carpet wasn't the end of the world. All she needed was encouragement. There was more to life than wiping cobwebs from picture rails or scrubbing ketchup stains out of your pinafore.

'I suppose you'd like to unpack?'

He nodded. It wouldn't take five minutes. He travelled light, out of habit as well as need.

'I'll put the kettle on. A cup of tea is so refreshing after a journey. Have you travelled far?'

'I'm not long back in England, as it happens.'

No less than the truth. He'd spent too long in rain-sodden Llandudno, gazing out at wind-whipped waves. The tan came courtesy of a solarium in Deganwy. No matter; the sparkle of delight in Sarah Welsby's eyes told him that she was thinking south of France rather than the coast of North Wales. It would be unkind to disillusion her and Guy hated being unkind. He was about to murmur that the world was becoming smaller when his eye caught a headline in the local newspaper, above a blurry photograph of a face he would never forget.

What happened to Emma Bestwick?

* * *

‘Detective Chief Inspector Scarlett!’

Hurrying towards the entrance of Divisional HQ, coat collar raised against the cold bite of February, Hannah heard pounding feet and someone shouting her name. She stopped in her tracks and swivelled.

A man was racing across the car park towards her. As he drew closer, his shoes skidded on the rain-greased tarmac and he lost his balance. With a stifled cry, he tumbled to the ground.

She walked over and helped him rise gingerly to his feet. He was about five feet seven, but lean and sinewy, with his clothes so slickly tailored that he did not seem small. She smelled cedarwood; he’d overdone the after-shave. He squinted at the streak of mud on his cream trousers with as much pain as if he’d broken his ankle.

‘All right?’

‘I’ll live.’ Scots accent, gritted-teeth smile. ‘You know, this is the first time I’ve ever been picked up by a senior police officer.’

Early thirties, features as sharp as his suit. Gel glistening on coal-black hair. Despite his fall, not a strand out of place.

‘Tony Di Venuto, I presume?’

‘So you know who I am without being introduced. Proof positive you’re a top detective!’

Di Venuto knew she’d recognised his voice from their phone conversation, but still treated her to a roguish smirk. Hannah groaned inwardly. A phrase of Les Bryant’s echoed in her mind. *If he were a chocolate pudding, he’d eat himself.*

‘What can I do for you?’

‘When we spoke last Friday, you promised to consider reopening the Emma Bestwick file. You’re in charge of cold cases. It’s a perfect project for...’

‘As I said, the moment you provide any new information, we’ll be glad to study it.’

‘Hopefully my piece in the *Post* will jog a few memories.’

‘Hopefully. Now if you’ll excuse me...’

‘I realise you’re very busy.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘I believe she was murdered, Chief Inspector. Emma deserves justice. Her killer is still at large.’

He even talked in tabloid headlines. Hannah summoned the stonewall smile she reserved for press conferences when she had no titbits to offer.

‘We never found any evidence she was dead. People disappear from home every day of the week. Plenty of them are never seen again.’

‘Ten years have passed. Nobody has heard from Emma in all that time. It’s inconceivable that she’s still alive.’

Hannah cast around for the right words. She didn’t want a casual remark to finish up as a sensational quote in a newspaper article. The media relations people would send her off on another press training day for punishment.

‘Stranger things have happened.’

‘Won’t you let me take you through the facts?’

‘That won’t be necessary.’ Hannah stepped away. ‘One thing you ought to know. I was a member of the team that investigated Emma Bestwick’s disappearance.’

Guy’s new quarters occupied the basement at Coniston Prospect. He’d mentally rechristened it Coniston Glimpse. Mrs Welsby advertised en suite facilities, which meant he had exclusive benefit of a chilly toilet and separate bathroom on the other side

of a short passageway. A yellowing spider plant drooped on the mantelpiece above the gas fire. The room reeked of damp, and as he lay on the stiff mattress Guy noticed patches of rot around the window frame. The radiator and pipes kept cackling, as though Macbeth's witches were trapped inside.

His lips moved but no sound came as he read once again the opening paragraph from the article in the newspaper that he'd cadged from the landlady.

This week sees the tenth anniversary of one of Cumbria's strangest unsolved mysteries. Thirty-year-old Coniston reflexologist Emma Bestwick vanished from home and was never seen again. Police were unable to establish whether she left of her own accord or was the victim of suicide, accident or murder. Perhaps the time has come for the Cumbria Constabulary's Cold Case Review Team to take another look at whatever happened to Emma.

How bloody typical. Talk about media irresponsibility. With so much strife in the world, how could it make sense to scour through the past, looking for trouble? People disappeared all the time, what was so odd about that? Why make a front page story out of one woman who went missing long ago? Emma Bestwick was a troubled woman who might easily have given up her old life and gone in search of something new. It was perfectly plausible; he'd made a fresh start himself more than once. Why bully an over-worked police force into raking up old ashes?

A timid knock at the door.

'Only me! I brought your tea down.'

He tossed the newspaper to one side, scrambled off the bed and flung open the door. Mrs Welsby's face was pink, as

though she felt like an intruder in her own home. He took the hot mug, blenching as it scalded his fingers, yet managing to preserve a grin of thanks.

'I meant to come back upstairs, but truth to tell, I needed forty winks. Travel can be exhausting, don't you find? It's wonderful to have the chance to put my feet up.'

'You do take milk?'

The mug bore a smiley face and he tried not to wince as he sipped. He loved leaf tea; his favourite was Assam, followed by Darjeeling, but this muddy mess was courtesy of two Co-op tea bags.

'Mmmmm. Lovely.'

He saw her eyes flicker in the direction of the newspaper. He'd left it on the bedside table.

'Thanks for letting me have a glance. Good to catch up.'

'You know the Lakes?'

'My favourite place in the whole world!' As soon as he said it, he realised it was the truth. Keep your Costa del Sols and your Corfus. Even the glory that was Rome was of another day. If he belonged anywhere, it must be here. The Lake District felt like home, even in the rain. Especially in the rain. 'Mind you, this is my first time back in a decade. Too long.'

'Well, I mustn't interrupt.'

'Any time!'

They swapped smiles, and as the door closed behind her, he climbed back on to the bed. The journalist was called Tony Di Venuto. What had caused him to light upon the disappearance of Emma Bestwick? News must be thin, there was no other explanation. The tenth anniversary wasn't much of a peg to hang a story on.

Since he'd last walked the streets of Coniston village, Guy had stopped thinking about Emma. He had a gift for blocking out unpleasantness, found it as easy as closing a door on a draught. Yet memories lurked like invisible weeds beneath the surface of a tarn. After heading out of North Wales, he might have journeyed anywhere. But the Lakes pulled him back; he was a puppet on an invisible string. True, he'd given a promise never to return. But ten years was long enough. Nothing was forever.

Hannah switched off the tape recorder and yawned as Les Bryant lumbered into her room. She'd spent the past hour listening to interviews conducted by Maggie Eyre, a young DC in her team. Dip sampling of tapes was a tedious part of the job and some DCIs were quick to delegate it, but for her it was not a task to be skimmed, however predictable the outcome. The idea was to check whether the interrogation techniques of junior officers were up to scratch and it was unwise to take much for granted. But it came as no surprise that Maggie's questioning of witnesses had been diligent, firm and courteous. Another tick in another box.

'Jobs they never tell you about at the student recruitment fairs,' she muttered.

Les shrugged and deposited his ample backside on a chair on the other side of her desk. 'Wouldn't know, I was never a student.'

She couldn't resist a grin. 'University of life, huh?'

'School of hard knocks, yeah.' He considered her. 'You look different today.'

'Thanks for noticing.'

He went through a pantomime of guesswork. 'Ummm... your hair's not the same. More blonde than brown these days.'

'We'll make a detective out of you yet. And don't dare to say that you liked it the way it was. Now, have you squared things with Lauren?'

That morning the Assistant Chief Constable had scheduled a meeting with Les to review his conditions of service. He'd shambled out of retirement to lend his expertise to the Cumbria Constabulary's Cold Case Review Team. He was a dour Yorkshireman, a veteran of such fabled cases as the Whitby caravan shootings. The young DCs nicknamed him *In my day*, a tribute to Les's favourite phrase. But Hannah liked his morose humour as well as his nose for crime. He'd forgotten more about detective work than most cops would ever know. Once Lauren Self sorted out a few niggles about expenses, they could talk about extending his contract.

'Her ladyship was too busy. Press conference announcing that the force merger has been put on hold. I heard on the grapevine that some reporter asked if she thought the Home Secretary should be charged with wasting police time. By all accounts, she nearly jumped off the podium and slapped him.'

'Christ, I'll keep out of her way, then.'

The Home Office had decided that big was beautiful. Small forces must be gobbled up by larger neighbours, supposedly because terrorism and organised crime didn't recognise local boundaries, more likely because some number-cruncher in Whitehall imagined it might save cash. Goodbye bobby on the beat, hello regional call centre. Now the politicians were

wetting themselves because they'd got their sums wrong. Most of Hannah's colleagues were praying that soon mergers wouldn't merely be shelved, they'd be dead and buried. If forces amalgamated, people in the countryside would lose out, as per usual. If it came to a choice between throwing resources into some urban sink estate or cosy Keswick or Kendal, there would only be one winner.

'Reason I'm here, I wondered if you wanted me to have a quiet word with this reporter who's been stalking you.'

'I can fight my own battles. He turned up here as I was arriving, but I sent him off with a flea in his ear.'

'What do you reckon to him?'

'Looks a bit like the young Frank Sinatra.'

'Christ. Is that good?'

'Not really. I never was that keen on "My Way".'

'Not what I heard,' he muttered. 'Any road, journalists are like pit bull terriers. Good idea to throw 'em a bone now and then.'

'Thanks, Les, but there's nothing you or I can do to satisfy Di Venuto. We don't have the resources to look into every case the force never managed to close. He's come up with nothing new. Emma was a mixed-up lady. In the end we had to go along with the SIO's gut instinct.'

'Which was?'

'He reckoned she didn't want to be found.'

'Recharged the batteries, Mr Stevenson?'

The landlady gave a shy glance of greeting and Guy wagged a finger in playful reprimand.

'Rob, please.'

‘Rob.’ She tittered. ‘Sorry.’

‘Wonderful what a nap can do.’ He stretched his arms. ‘I feel at home already.’

‘That’s marvellous.’ Regret made the corners of her mouth turn down. ‘The Lakes are full of hotels with spas, Jacuzzis and gourmet cuisine. Foreign chefs, glowing write-ups in the *Michelin Guide*. How can a woman on her own compete?’

‘Don’t beat yourself up over it, Sarah. Give me traditional home comforts any day.’ In time he’d accustom himself to the sinister rumble of the central heating. ‘Here I feel like a house guest, not an entry on some computer system. As for food, I’m very much a full English breakfast man.’

She brightened. ‘Fried egg, two sausages, baked beans, grilled tomato?’

‘Perfect! I draw the line at black pudding, though.’

‘Oh, me too.’ A comical shiver. ‘Blood frightens me.’

He drew breath. ‘I’m looking forward to tomorrow morning already.’

‘You move on in a week’s time, then?’

‘That was the plan.’ So as to negotiate a discount on the daily rate. Always handy, even though Coniston Prospect must be the cheapest B&B south of Carlisle. ‘But you never know. Seems like I’ve been on the road for years. Perhaps it’s time to put down one or two roots.’

‘Really? What do you do for a living?’

I live dangerously. The phrase trembled on his lips. It excited him, the glamour of adventuring into the unknown. But over the years he’d learned not to show too many cards too soon.

‘Financial services. Internet-based stuff, mainly. Have laptop, will travel. That’s me.’

‘Goodness. Sounds very high-powered.’

A modest shake of the head. ‘Not as glamorous as you might think. Money’s all very well, but if it’s all tied up offshore, it isn’t much use in the short term, don’t you agree?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘And then there’s the hours. This 24/7 economy is terrific but we all need to sleep. Good people burn out too often. I tell myself, the simple pleasures are best.’

‘Oh, you’re absolutely right.’

‘And where better to enjoy them than here, in God’s own country – and in good company?’

Their eyes met. Blushing, she jumped out of her chair.

‘I’d best be off to the supermarket. Stock up on eggs and bacon!’ At the door she wavered. ‘If you wanted an evening meal, it’s no bother.’

‘I don’t want to put you to any inconvenience.’

‘Not a bit of it. I’d be glad of someone to talk to apart from the cat. The German couple who have the room on the first floor, they don’t say much. Only have eyes for each other.’

‘Young love, eh?’ He sighed in amiable reminiscence.

‘Well, I’ll see you later.’

When she opened the door, a Siamese cat stalked in. Svelte and snooty, with almond-shaped eyes, its demeanour suggested a commandant in *Bridge over the River Kwai*, sneering at a sweaty prisoner of war.

‘Rob, meet Clooney,’ the landlady said.

The cat gave a dismissive flick of its tail. Guy contrived a weak grin and kept his mouth shut. The animal looked as though it wouldn’t believe a word he said. The landlady said how intelligent Clooney was and left Guy in peace.

After the door had closed behind Sarah Welsby and her pet, he settled into an armchair and flicked the TV remote. Half a dozen soldiers had been blown up by a suicide bomber in the Middle East and a minister was insisting that their sacrifice hadn't been in vain. Five turgid minutes of regional news focused on wind farms and planning permission for affordable housing. The weather forecaster promised squally showers. Nothing about Emma Bestwick. No surprise; there simply wasn't a story.

Against expectation, this irked him. A ten-year anniversary ought to mean something to someone. At least Tony Di Venuto remembered. It was plain from the article that he'd done his homework. He'd mentioned stuff that was new to Guy.

Emma's sister and her husband, Karen and Jeremy Erskine, have lived with the torment of not knowing Emma's fate for a decade. Mr Erskine, who teaches history at the exclusive Grizedale College, was one of the last people to see Emma before she disappeared. Yesterday, however, he stated that his wife did not wish to make any public comment. 'This is a private family matter,' he insisted, before adding, 'My wife has lost hope of seeing her sister again. Ten years is a long time, we don't believe she will ever come back. Karen needs to move on.'

Jeremy Erskine. Interesting that Di Venuto had made the point that he was one of the last to see Emma – *alive* was the implication. How could Karen get on with her life if she had no idea whether Emma might turn up? Always there was the tantalising chance that one day the doorbell would ring and she'd open up to stare into a familiar, much-loved face. Guy's heart went out to her.

He made a note of the phone number of the editorial office and slipped on his wet weather jacket, tying the knot of his hood tight beneath his chin. Outside, the sky was the same colour as the slate buildings and passing cars had their headlights on. Opposite the Glimpse stood a chip shop, its lights dazzling in the murk, and a shuttered fudge emporium that specialised in clotted cream and rum 'n raisin flavours. No wonder Sarah Welsby was running to fat.

Rain spat into his eyes, but he blinked hard and kept moving, scanning the streets for somewhere to phone from. He didn't have a mobile – who would he ring, who would want to get in touch? Besides, this wasn't a call he could allow to be traced.

When he saw the phone box, he remembered the last time he'd used it. To ring up Emma Bestwick.

The kiosk was empty and he was in a hurry. No point in ignoring it out of some kind of superstition. He stepped inside and dialled. The switchboard girl at the newspaper office put him straight through.

'Tony Di Venuto?'

Of course, he disguised his voice. A whisper does not have a recognisable pitch, hadn't Nicole Kidman said so in *The Interpreter*?

'Speaking.'

The Scottish accent didn't match the name. Guy pictured a hawk-eyed newshound, bristling with ambition. Dreaming of the scoop that would carry him into Fleet Street, or Wapping or wherever the modern Press congregated.

'You wrote the piece about Emma Bestwick.'

'Who is this?'

Guy's heart was beating faster. Why was he doing this? A question he often had cause to ask himself. Not all his instincts were sound. He was apt to act on a whim, he made too many mistakes.

'Are you still there?' Tony Di Venuto asked.

Grinding his teeth so hard they might crack, Guy forced himself to focus on the here and now. This clammy kiosk with steamed-up windows, heavy with the reek of chips and battered fish, disfigured by graffiti extolling the sexual tastes of Bazzar and Kylie. He dared not let his mind roam.

'Don't hang up.'

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Guy counted silently, fighting for calm.

'Who - who are you?'

Guy breathed out. Di Venuto deserved a crumb. Something to pass on to the sister. It was the least he could do. Where was the harm, where the risk?

'Jeremy Erskine is right,' he hissed, 'Emma Bestwick won't be coming back.'

'How do you know?'

Guy slammed down the phone. He knew better than to give away too many secrets.