

MORTAL FIRE





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C. F. Dunn

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For Cinders and my family,
without whom...

Truth is what we make it. We believe what we want to believe, see what we want to see; but when reality is thrust upon us, we are faced with the ultimate dilemma: to acknowledge it – or to run.

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Characters

ACADEMIC & RESEARCH STAFF AT HOWARD'S LAKE COLLEGE, MAINE

Emma D'Eresby, Department of History (Medieval and Early Modern)
Elena Smalova, Department of History (Post-Revolutionary Soviet Society)
Matias Lidström, Faculty of Bio-medicine (Genetics)
Matthew Lynes, surgeon, Faculty of Bio-medicine (Mutagenesis)
Sam Wiesner, Department of Mathematics (Metamathematics)
Madge Makepeace, Faculty of Social Sciences (Anthropology)
Siggie Gerhard, Faculty of Social Sciences (Psychology)
Saul Abrahms, Faculty of Social Sciences (Psychology of Functional Governance)
Colin Eckhart, Department of History (Renaissance and Reformation Art)
Kort Staahl, Department of English (Early Modern Literature)
Megan, research assistant, Bio-medicine
Sung, research assistant, Bio-medicine
The Dean, Stephen Shotter

MA STUDENTS

Holly Stanhope; Josh Feitel; Hannah Graham; Aydin Yilmaz;
Leo Hamell

IN CAMBRIDGE

Guy Hilliard, Emma's former tutor
Tom Falconer, Emma's friend

EMMA'S FAMILY

Hugh D'Eresby, her father
Penny D'Eresby, her mother
Beth Marshall, her sister
Rob Marshall, her brother-in-law
Alex & Flora, her twin nephew and niece
Nanna, her grandmother

Mike Taylor, friend of the family

MATTHEW'S FAMILY

Harry Lynes, his nephew
Ellie Lynes, his niece

Chapter



Of Magic and Monsters

IT MUST HAVE HAPPENED only minutes before.

The startled birds still circling above the tree from which they had risen were the only witnesses to the last moments of the woman's life. The impact tore the door from her car and from the twisted remains her eyes stared sightless, lifeless. Shredded shards of metal pierced the airbag – now a pale deflated bladder onto which her slow blood dripped.

A single uniformed officer bent over and picked up a small card from the edge of a wheel rut already filling with water. He flicked it on his finger, dislodging muddy drops from its plastic surface. He looked up at the sound of the engine and raised his hand.

“Hey, Frank!” My cab driver called to the officer from his rolled-down window as he slowed just yards from the scene. “What’s up?”

The policeman ambled towards us. “Hi, Al,” he greeted him. “She must’ve skidded on all this mud hereabouts. Reckon she was using her cell at the time. Lost control.”

He toed a shiny black mobile, its blue-lit face more alive than she would ever be. The cab driver grunted morosely.

“Darn technological revolution. Where’s she from?”

The officer flipped the card again, then wiped his thumb over the stubborn mud-smear surface, straining at the tiny print.

“San Diego. She’s a long way from home.”

He stared at the photo, then at the dead woman, canting his head to get a better look. “Sure is a shame, hey, Al? Bit of a looker

too. What a waste.”

“Huh, she’s from away! Wouldn’t you know it; darn foreigner wouldn’t be used to our roads.” Al sniffed, prepared to hawk out of the window, thought better of it. His eyes slid towards mine in the rear-view mirror. “Not that I got anything ’gainst foreigners, you know?”

“San *Diego*, Al, not San Salvador.”

“Yeah – might as well be – she ain’t a Mainer, anyhow.”

A second car drew up behind the police vehicle, reflecting brief sun and blinding me momentarily as the driver’s door opened. Squinting, Frank looked over his shoulder and, seemingly satisfied this newcomer was no random rubbernecker, nodded to the stranger once, then resumed his conversation.

“Where’re you off to?”

Al shifted the gear and the car’s engine made ready-to-go noises. I urged him silently to leave; the image of the mutilated wreckage lingered, sickened. A figure now bent into the shadowed interior; the wreck slid a fraction.

“I’m taking this lady to Howard’s Lake. I’d better be goin’; I’ve got another fare to pick up at eleven.”

The officer let out a low whistle.

“That college place, huh?” He leaned down and shaded his eyes against the light, peering into the back of the cab where I sat. He acknowledged me then looked back at his friend. “You take care on them roads, Al; the bridge is almost under water this side of town.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Don’t want to end up like her.” He gave me another curious glance as if I had grown two heads in the intervening seconds since he last looked, and patted the roof of the cab.

Distracted by movement, my focus shifted. In the shroud of the car, the man carefully rested the body of the woman against her seat; gently – almost reverently – folding the fabric of her torn skirt over her legs and closing her eyes. As if he cared; as if she mattered. The car suddenly shifted, jerked, metal razoring his bare arm. Before I could react, the man pulled his arm free, shot a look in our direction, and turned his back. But it wasn’t the expression on his face as he turned away, nor the almost

casual disregard as he covered his arm with his jacket, but my sudden shock of recognition as the sun struck his hair that left me speechless.

As the cab pulled away, leaving the officer to collect the scattered contents of the woman's life, I wondered in a passing thought at the deceptions conjured from a distant past and liberated by an exhausted mind.

Barely an hour before, an expansive sweep of blue sky gave way to thickening cloud as the aircraft made its descent towards rain-blackened tarmac, finally coming to a standstill under a leaden sky. Not so very different from home, really. The slight pang twisting in my throat instantly reminded me that home lay far behind on another continent and that I could still be vulnerable to a bout of homesickness despite the years spent away. I caught sight of my ghosted reflection in the thickened glass of the aircraft's window, then looked beyond to where airport buildings hunched together against the sky. Any regret at this year-long commitment dissolved in a feathering of anticipation; my life in England represented the old world – this was definitely the new.

The cab driver had thrown a question over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that, please?"

He grinned in the rear-view mirror at me, a man with a crumpled face and rabbit teeth, then repeated it slowly – idiot-fashion.

"You British?"

"Is it that obvious?" I smiled back at his eyes framed in the mirror. He shrugged what I took to be a *yes*, then continued.

"You a student?"

Either that meant I looked particularly scruffy after the long flight, or he was a poor judge of age.

"I wish! Not for a long time. How far is it to the college now?"

He thought for a moment.

"'Bout fifteen miles to town. Then another eleven to Howard's Lake. Won't be long – 'haps..." he screwed his eyes, calculating,

“... thirty-five, forty minutes.”

He frowned at an oncoming car as it veered towards us in the centre of the road, muttering under his breath something I wasn't probably meant to hear. I pretended not to notice and looked out of my window at the road gently curving around the edge of a large outcrop of rock, sparsely lined with thin birches, their leaves yellowing against the patchy September sky. The taxi came out of the long curve and the vista suddenly widened. The road ahead traced a line that intermittently disappeared between heavily wooded foothills towards a queue of mountains, some shrouded in cloud, some barefaced except for the darker shadows of trees. I craned forward over the front seat to get a better look.

“Town's 'bout thirty miles from them.” The driver nodded in the direction of the range. “Snow'll be covering 'em soon as maybe – last 'til spring. Good hunting, too. A man can lose himself up there...” he trailed off.

“What sort of hunting?” I prompted.

“Most sorts – bear, deer. Got wolves too.”

“They're hunted? Are you allowed to?”

I sounded like a conservationist. Not that I had anything against conservationists, but I didn't want to be summed up in a cliché.

“Su-re, you have to have a permit.” I felt him peering at me in the mirror again. “You one of them anti-gun lobbyists, or something?”

“We don't really have an anti-gun lobby in Britain,” I dodged. “So, what other wildlife is there?”

I sat back and leaned my head against the rear head-rest and let him talk about the eagles as jet lag finally set in and I drifted towards sleep.

Framed by a wreath of blonde hair, the woman's eyes stared back at me from the coffin of her car, longing for life. Her extended hand stretched towards mine, her once living colours fading to grey before evaporating like a wisp of smoke in the wind. There had been no time to say goodbye.

At the changing note of the engine, I woke with a start, scrubbing sleep and the lingering image from my eyes, shaken as much by the fact I dreamt at all as by the contents of the dream. Seeing me wake, Al grunted, "This is it," and I craned forward to look. Extravagant wrought-iron gates heralding the threshold of the campus, lay open like arms.

The long drive wove through parkland until – sitting on a broad knoll by a placid lake – the old college appeared. The house might have been built for a nineteenth-century industrialist in any county back home, with its façade of rich burgundy bricks with bacon-stripes of pale yellow, and gleaming eyes of arched windows. Turreted and bespectacled with ivy, it alluded to a variety of styles and in doing so, had none. But looks can be deceiving – as I had once found to my cost.

The cab drew up before the classic columned portico and the taxi driver climbed out while I delved into my handbag to find the letter of introduction with instructions on where to go and whom to see, surprised to find my hands shaking a little. I hadn't been so nervous in a long time, but then this lay beyond my comfort zone in unfamiliar territory where all but the weather seemed new to me. He pulled my two pieces of luggage from the boot and left them on the wide, white steps leading to the entrance and, once I had pressed the unfamiliar currency into his hand, he left me there.

As the car disappeared down the drive, the stillness – the absolute quiet – came as a shock after the persistent hum of the engine. No birdsong carved the air, no wind stirred the tired leaves, and a light rain fell silently against the sodden ground. The creeping doubt returned along with the hollow twisting in my throat, reminiscent of my first day at another university a long time ago. I pushed away the dread, putting it firmly in its place, and slammed the lid shut before it could escape again. I was here out of choice – an opportunity I couldn't afford to miss – my chance of a lifetime. Before I lost my wafer-thin resolve, I took a deep breath, grabbed my bags firmly to prevent my hands from trembling and walked through the doors.

The entrance hall took me by surprise. Far from being as

portentous as the sombre, discordant exterior suggested, the low coffered ceiling of the porch gave way to a room filled with light from a huge glass dome that rose above the inlaid marble floor – an atrium in the Neo-Classical style. Sort of. Diffused by the clouded sky, the light gleamed quietly on the polished wooden surfaces of the panelling around the room, and the faint scent of beeswax hung in the air. I stepped into the pool of light illuminating the intricate stonework of the floor – a Cosmology – the known world replicated beneath my feet; the whole world summed up in complex patterns of blue and green and gold.

“Professor D’Eresby?”

I looked up. A woman in her early twenties, with dark eyes and the healthy glow of youth, stood by a reception desk. Her straight brown hair, drawn into a high ponytail, swung buoyantly as she stepped towards me.

“Professor D’Eresby?” she asked more hesitatingly, carefully pronouncing my unfamiliar name.

“Yes – I’m Emma D’Eresby.”

The girl looked relieved and her smile broadened in welcome, showing perfectly even teeth, brilliantly white against her tan. She made me feel pale just looking at her.

“We have been expecting you, ma’am. Did you have a good trip?”

I returned her smile. “Thank you, yes. It’s very kind of you to meet me”

She beamed. “Professor Shotter – the Dean – thought you might like someone from the history faculty to meet you; I volunteered. I’m Holly Stanhope – I’m a post-grad and you’re my tutor.” She smiled shyly. Every sentence ended on a rising note like a question. I remembered her name from the list I received before I left home.

“Hi, Holly – that was brave of you.” She looked blankly at me. “To volunteer, I mean.”

“Oh!” Holly nodded enthusiastically, “I get it,” and she laughed. Her attention switched as she looked at my luggage on the floor, frowning slightly.

“Did the porter get your bags already?”

“No, this is all I brought with me.”

Her frown deepened; obviously visiting English academics were expected to arrive with a baggage train.

“I sent most of my books and things on in advance,” I explained.

“Oh, sure,” she nodded, but that wasn’t the sort of luggage she meant, and I wondered if I would find myself short of clothes. “I’ll show you your room, Professor.”

I followed her, our footsteps echoing through the empty atrium towards the far end of the room where a large, modern glass door filled one of the series of high glassed arches that separated it from what lay beyond. Above them, carved into the stone and gilded so that each letter reflected the subtle light, a Latin inscription teased:

Res ipsa loquitur.

Holly heaved the huge door open with her shoulder and held it for me, forestalling my urge to try and puzzle out the caption.

The damp smell of old stone hit me as we entered an enclosed cloister, the familiar, haunting scent of old buildings everywhere, of the castles and abbeys, hall houses and churches with which I grew up. Ornate windows framed the view onto a large grassed area, surrounded on all sides by buildings and, from every arch, grotesque gargoyles spewed water into stone urns for as long as the rain fell.

Holly led me along the cloister, chattering animatedly as she described the history of the college. It had been conceived as the culmination of a rich man’s desire to emulate and recreate all that he admired on his Grand Tour of Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. The bequest of the philanthropic owner led to the formation of a university college in the early part of the twentieth century, establishing a reputation for academic rigor that rivalled its much larger cousins. It felt steeped in its own history and would perhaps have been hidebound but for the addition of the new building enclosing the quadrangle with an altogether different structure. Conceptually brilliant, soft red

sandstone enclosed extensive walls of glass. Holly noticed my evident admiration.

“That’s the faculty of medicine. It has the med centre and the medical research facility. It’s won awards,” she added, with evident pride.

“I’m not surprised,” I said with feeling; Holly glanced at me appreciatively and I smiled back at her and, even if we hadn’t found the same wavelength yet, I felt that we were beginning to tune in.

I scanned the quad out of the cloister windows as we rounded the corner, looking for the reason I came here in the first place. No building within view matched the description I had been given.

“Where’s the new library, Holly?”

“The library’s beyond the med fac, that way,” Holly nodded towards it. “It’s awesome; it’s got an amazing collection of historic manuscripts and texts. That’s what I’m basing my research on.” The upward cadence made her sound uncertain, as if she sought reassurance.

“*You and me both,*” I thought. The opportunity to indulge my obsession, to follow my desire, lay in that library. Other women of my age were married, had children, at least a boyfriend – a *life*. History was my lover – where its strands of truth led, I followed as slavishly as a mistress.

“What’s your area of research, Holly?”

We reached the end of the cloister and she hesitated with one hand on the stone newel of the stairs curving away towards the floor above.

“Yeah, uh – it’s ‘Religion and Reality in Early Modern Europe.’” She cast a brief look at me to gauge my reaction.

“Ah,” I said.

“I based it on your dissertation, Professor D’Eresby; it was my...” she struggled for a word, “... inspiration,” she finished, reddening.

“Oh!”

I felt at once both flattered and embarrassed by the admiration in the girl’s eyes; my students at Cambridge were less

reverential and after all, barely six years separated Holly and me in age. I glanced away, seeking something appropriate to say in response.

“Thanks,” I ventured lamely. She looked doubtful and I realized that my answer inspired little confidence. As she led the way up the stairs, I fought against the blunting influence of the long journey on my increasingly soggy brain to make more of an effort.

“What particular aspect did you find interesting?”

She looked pleased to be asked her opinion. We reached the second-floor landing and took a left turn down the long corridor to a smaller wooden staircase leading to what would have been the servants’ quarters in the past. She shifted the bag she carried to the other hand before replying.

“I really liked your theory on the mystery plays – you know, where you said ‘religion is the shadow of reality’. That’s where I got my idea from, right?” She stopped outside one of the doors and beamed at me. Had I really said that? Even repeated with such sincerity by this girl, my own words sounded absurdly pompous now that my outlook on things had changed so completely. But that was then, and this was now, and she wouldn’t know what I went through to get to this point in my life, so I just murmured, “I’m glad you found it useful,” and changed the subject. “Is this my room?”

“Uh huh.” Holly unlocked the door to the attic room with a key she fished out of her jeans pocket, holding it out for me and stepping to one side to let me through.

“I hope you like it,” she said brightly. “It’s not very big but it has the best views.”

The view through the window to the mountain range was indeed spectacular and the room considerably bigger than my one in Cambridge.

“This is perfect, it reminds me of home, but the views are so much better – and it’s so quiet.” That reminded me – I’d hardly seen anyone since I arrived. “Where is everyone?”

She looked surprised. “They’re in class; they don’t get out yet.”

Of course. I forgot that here term began weeks earlier than at home.

“The Dean said for me to show you where the dining room is if you would like some refreshment; or I could show you your tutor room – if you prefer.”

I did prefer. The thought of meeting more people whose accents and humour I would have to negotiate with the single brain cell left to me was too much to contemplate at this stage of the day. Food could wait; too tired to eat anyway, the memory of the dead woman’s face curbed what appetite I might have summoned.

I deposited my bags on the single bed in the tiny adjoining bedroom and poked my head around the door of the bathroom. With only a cramped shower in one corner and no natural light to brighten the drab tiles, it still contained everything I needed. I left the exploration of the little kitchenette until later.

Holly led me back to the side of the quad where the floors seemed to be divided into faculties, and up a set of stairs. History twinned with English, the long corridor divided by a communal meeting area with a few, low-slung seats upholstered in a coarse fabric the colour of beech leaves in spring. Open staff pigeon-holes, gaping like teeth, lined the back wall. Numbered tutorial rooms lay on either side of the corridor with my room halfway along on the left. The door already proclaimed my name and designation: “Visiting Professor”. Holly needed to get back to class and I thanked her profusely and wondered vaguely, watching her ponytail swing as she disappeared down the corridor, what she would report to her fellow students about their new tutor.

Large enough for a modern desk with a half dozen chairs ranged in front of it, the room provided ample space for five students and my books. Two big windows let in plenty of light and an old-fashioned radiator belted out heat; but it was stuffy and felt as if it had been unoccupied for some time, with that musty smell that comes with layers of dust and a lack of fresh air and humanity. I threw open one of the windows and welcomed the clean scent of rain-washed grass and wet brick that accompanied the cool breeze.

Turning my back on the window, I then surveyed the rest of the room. Deep-set bookshelves lined the short wall behind the desk and on them were the boxes of books I sent in advance. I opened the box nearest to me and lifted the book from the top: *Monsters, Magic and the Mediaeval Mind*. I smiled fondly, oddly comforted by the familiar title. A sudden squeal followed by laughter from the quad below reminded me it must be nearly lunchtime. Weaving unsteadily across the wet grass in the rain, students made their way towards the atrium, a boy throwing handfuls of soggy leaves that a girl attempted to dodge. No change there, it seemed. I waited a few moments more until the flurry of student activity in the corridor outside my door subsided, then, tucking my book under my arm, shut the door behind me. The key jammed in the lock and the wretched thing wouldn't budge. I wriggled it in frustration and muttered at it under my breath.

"You have to turn it the *other* way."

I jumped, spinning around in embarrassed confusion, already beginning to apologize for my language, and a willowy dark-haired woman of about my age admonished the lock with mock severity and no malice. Her light, accented voice cut through my protestations.

"Americans," she tutted, her eyes dancing. "It is something about being ex-colonists, I think – they had to put the lock in upside down to make a point."

She held out her long-fingered hand to me, her head tilted to one side so that her dark, short hair formed a glossy curtain that caught the light.

"Elena Smalova, lecturer in Post-Revolutionary Soviet Society, and you must be..." she made a show of reading the name on my door, "... ah yes, Professor D'E-re-sby." She pursed her lips as she struggled with the alien pronunciation. "How do you say that?"

"*Dares-bee*. And it's Emma, by the way; it's good to meet you."

Her name seemed familiar but, too tired to remember why, I took her offered hand instead and we shook with all the dignity our Imperialist past could muster before bursting into giggles at

the absurdity of it. Her brown eyes tilted up in the corners, tiny creases emphasizing the laughter that seemed to be on the verge of breaking out at any moment.

“This is my room.” She patted the door of the room opposite mine. “I am so glad you are here, we can keep each other company. Have you eaten yet? Everyone can’t wait to meet you. If you come now, I can show you the staff dining-room. It was a shock when they found the old professor; nobody knew he had a bad heart, but now it is good to have someone who is young. We did not think you could be here so soon.” She rattled through her words and phrases so rapidly that I lost track of what she asked at the beginning, although I thought it might have been something to do with food, so I winged it in the hope I wasn’t far off the mark.

“Thanks, that’s very... er, kind, but I haven’t unpacked yet and I’m bushed, so if you don’t mind, I think I’d better get back to my rooms and sort myself out.”

Elena pulled her eyebrows into a tight “V”. “*Booshed*, is that where you are from? I thought you are English?”

“No. Yes – sorry, my mistake. I’m *tired*; I couldn’t sleep on the flight so I won’t make much sense at the moment.”

“*Da*, I understand now. So, you must have tea. Come with me; I will make you Russian tea and all will be well.”

She eyed me with such a look of expectation that it would have been rude to refuse. Linking her arm companionably through mine, we began to walk down the corridor towards the stairs, out of the humanities fac, across the quad, to her rooms the floor below mine.

Bigger than mine and much more homely, the room had cheerful throws covering each chair and, above the sofa, a distinctive needlepoint wall-hanging with stylized roses in reds on a cream-and-black background. Elena saw me looking at it.

“It is an Uzbek Suzani embroidery; do you like it?”

It reminded me of the painted barge-ware I had once seen on holiday on the Norfolk Broads.

“Yes, I do – it’s very unusual.”

I held back a yawn and she pointed wordlessly to an armchair

with a sheepskin cushion by the window. I sat gratefully, the high back supporting my aching shoulders into which I locked all the tension of the last forty-eight hours. Elena disappeared through a door; shortly afterwards I heard running water and a kettle being filled. I let my head rest on the back of the chair and closed my eyes.

I woke abruptly. It took me a moment to remember where I was and a second more to locate Elena sitting in the armchair opposite, her legs slung over one arm, reading.

She looked up at my sudden movement.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I must have been more tired than I thought.” I rubbed my eyes and sat up. She didn’t seem in the least bit put out by the stranger falling asleep in her chair.

“That’s OK; you are tired, I think. You would like some food?”

I shook my head. “No thanks, I’m not hungry.”

“Yes – yes, you are hungry; you must eat now.”

Before I could reply, she disappeared only to return a minute later with a bowl and a large mug, which she placed on the low coffee table before me. I peered blearily at the food, trying to locate my appetite.

“Soup – chicken soup. I make it,” she declared triumphantly, then with a slight note of anxiety, “You are not vegetarian, are you?”

I shook my head.

“No, and not a chance of becoming one with homemade chicken soup on offer.”

I picked up the spoon and gingerly sipped at the hot liquid. It tasted very good. A second later the paprika hit my throat and I coughed involuntarily, tears springing to my eyes. Elena looked pleased.

“Good?” she asked.

“Very,” I wheezed. The warmth spread through me, my brain becoming more alert. She nodded again and picked up the book she had been reading. A company of demons danced across the front cover in the glaring colours of a fifteenth-century manuscript; I recognized the book I brought with me. I finished

the soup and started to drink the hot, black tea thirstily. Elena looked up from the page she read, frowning slightly.

"This is your area of study, no?"

"Yes, sort of."

She narrowed her eyes as if assessing me, and turned back to the page. I finished my tea. Elena sucked air in through her teeth and closed the book with a snap. She gazed at nothing in particular for a moment, then suddenly asked as if in mid conversation: "And do you believe all... *this*?" she indicated the book in front of her with a flick of her hand.

"In what way, '*believe*'?" I asked, taken aback.

"Do you think this is true? All these demons, these monsters; this book... it talks as if they were true."

I couldn't fathom the sudden change in her manner. I thought carefully for a moment, choosing my words.

"It's not so much a question of what we believe, it's what *they* believed that matters."

Thoughtful again, she peered at me, searching for hidden meaning in my words.

"But what if it *is* true?" she whispered, her eyes becoming round.

"I haven't ever considered that," I admitted. "Why?"

"No, it's nothing. I am just being ridiculous." She squirmed upright, swinging her legs around and turning to face me.

"Now," she said, slapping her hands determinedly on the tops of her thighs. "What are you going to wear for your welcome reception?"

I couldn't help the alarm in my voice. "*What* welcome reception?"

"For you, of course. Every new senior member of staff must be introduced; it is the tradition here."

"To the history faculty?" I asked hopefully. "I can handle that."

Elena looked shifty. "Not exactly, no."

I raised an eyebrow.

"To the college staff," she admitted.

"What, *all* of it?"

“No, no – not *everyone*,” she backtracked rapidly. “Just the senior members.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. I couldn’t think of anything I would hate more at this point.

“I suppose it can’t be helped,” I said, almost to myself.

Elena’s face brightened. “*Da* – it will be fun...” She stopped and adjusted her choice of words. “Well, not *fun*, perhaps; but you will meet everyone and then you won’t have to see them again.”

That was so far from being encouraging, that I laughed. She saw the funny side of it and joined in.

“I thought I’d got away with it – no welcoming committee or anything,” I said ruefully.

She obviously thought that highly amusing. “Oh, no! You can’t expect to be a highly respected visiting academic from *Cam-bridge*...” she emphasized the word, “and not be... what is the word...?”

“Humiliated?” I suggested.

“No, no!” she laughed again, “*proclaimed* to all the world.” She waved her willowy arm with a flourish.

“Well, let’s just hope that the world isn’t listening.”

“Ah, but it *will* be; the college has to celebrate your arrival. The Dean will want to show you off.”

“What on earth for?”

“Because...” she hesitated, “because he will think you a great catch for the college.”

“Good grief,” I muttered.

“Now, what will you wear?” she asked again.

“I haven’t a clue,” I answered truthfully, considering I hadn’t known about it in the first place. I mentally scanned my luggage. “How formal will it be?”

“Quite formal.” She looked smug, the humour back in her eyes.

“Not gowns, surely?”

She shook her head. “No, not gowns now. We wear gowns for *other* occasions.”

That sounded ominous, but at least a reprieve.

“Will a skirt suit do?”

She looked suddenly very serious. “Yes, that’s good, but no jeans.” She waved a censorious finger at me as a warning. About to protest that it wouldn’t have crossed my mind to wear jeans to a formal occasion, I caught her stifled smile before she bent double, tears forming in her eyes.

“Ah, that is a good joke,” she howled.

A mobile rang somewhere close by with the theme from *Dr Zhivago*. Elena squeaked and darted to the kitchen. I heard her exclamation and the rapid fire of Russian as she asked a question and then answered another. I picked up my book from where it lay dismissed, turning it over to study the front cover more closely. A devil’s face leered at me, one cloven hoof crushing the face of a man underfoot. Behind him, a demonic scene played over a darkly pastoral landscape. I focused on the figures in the background – tiny in comparison, but clear enough to make out. Naked humans sprawled contorted in near-death while thickly furred monsters clawed at their eyes and devoured their intestines. Black-eyed demons worked in pairs, the faces of their victims white with terror as their lives were made void. On their knees, arms raised skywards in supplication, men and women looked for hope. And all the time, reaching down from an idealized Heaven, a hand strained to reach theirs, almost touching – but not quite. I had seen dozens of such images from right across the medieval world; images reflecting the horror of people besieged by war and death, hunger and disease – a reconciliation of hope and fear in a pictorial fantasy, in religious analogy. Little more than that, its relevance lay in what it told me from a cultural as well as historical point of view. I fingered my cross, bringing the chain up over my chin, deep in thought.

Elena skipped back to her vacated chair, flinging her legs over the side again. “That,” she proclaimed, “was Matias.” She looked very pleased with herself. My face reminded her that I had no idea who she was talking about.

“Matias is my *gorgeous* boyfriend.”

I waited.

“He is flying back tonight. From Helsinki.” She clapped her

hands in glee.

This called for an appropriate response. “That’s... um... great. Does he live there?”

“No,” she sounded slightly impatient, then took a deep breath. “Matias is *here*, he’s a professor too – in genetics. He’s absolutely brilliant. He’s been to visit his parents in Finland for *weeks*. His mother is not well. Look...” She scrambled up and crossed the room to a series of shelves where she reached for a framed photograph. She brought it over to me. It showed her standing with her arm linked through that of a stocky, broad-shouldered, clean-shaven man in his mid to late thirties. His unruly, pale-brown hair would be inclined to curl if he let it grow any longer. Deep lines of an innate good nature ran from the edge of his nose to the corners of his mouth and he looked at Elena as if she were his most treasured possession in the world. Behind them, the Winter Palace gleamed in pale sunlight.

“Home visit?” I asked.

“*Da.*”

“So it’s serious, is it?”

“Mmm,” she beamed at me. I looked at the photo again; they looked very happy. A pang of longing for a memory – followed by a stab of jealousy – snagged my contentment, but I didn’t want to let it surface to diminish hers.

“I’d better skedaddle, Elena, you’ll have lots to do,” I said, rising stiffly and stretching taut limbs. She began to protest, but I shushed her.

“Thanks for taking a complete stranger in hand,” I smiled. “I think they would have found me in a sorry heap somewhere if you hadn’t rescued me.”

“It was my pleasure,” she replied, and meant it; then spoilt it by adding, “I bet the others that I was to be the first to meet you, and I won.”

She was still smirking as I pulled a rueful face at her and left to find my own room.

I enjoyed light duties for the rest of the week, including the opportunity to meet the post-graduates under my supervision.

From the inquisitive looks they gave me on entering my tutor room, Holly must have given them her first impressions. By all accounts the venerable professor who preceded me stuck by the rules to the letter, whereas my interpretation of convention tended to be more *flexible* – as long as I considered it moral, legal, and in the best interests of my students.

I gave the room a thorough clean and what academic gravitas I could muster in a few days. The books helped, but there were too many for the shelves and now they spilled along the window-sill and stood in more or less neat piles at the edge of the room. The walls were otherwise bare and I regretted not bringing some of the prints and posters I used at Cambridge for visual inspiration in dull moments. Nonetheless, my laptop and organized bundles of paper made my desk look fit for purpose and I prepared to begin.

It hadn't taken long to gauge my group. I started by asking them to summarize their dissertations – in writing – in no more than 200 words. Protestations and accusations of cruelty led to a general breakdown of order, followed by their realization that I was pulling their legs. I reminded them that, for the most part, I had been in their shoes less than a decade before. Once they understood I refused to be taken overly seriously, we all relaxed and work began in earnest.

Overseeing the five post-grads came as part of the deal that brought me to the States. In return for unfettered access to the contents of the library and ample time for research, I aimed to guide them through the intricacies of producing a viable MA thesis by the end of the year. Holly took it upon herself to introduce the other four: Josh – clearly recovering from celebrating his birthday the day before – lounged long and lanky in regulation jeans and T-shirt, with tatty green Converse coming apart at the seams. He flicked back dark hair from his eyes to look at me. Someone, somewhere produced students like these to order. Open and friendly – once he decided I didn't bite – he would need keeping an eye on to complete his dissertation to a passing standard.

Hannah, on the other hand, was short, sturdy and resolute.

Her golden-brown hair bubbled around her face and her hazel eyes flashed determinedly. Her overshot jaw made her look stubborn and – although I thought she would require little motivating from me – I envisaged a battle of wills if she needed directing in any way.

Next came Aydin. Sensitive and studious, his Turkish accent made it difficult for the others to understand him at first. In his thirties and as new to America as I, he struggled to adjust. His thesis looked promising, but he wrestled with the written aspect and he knew it. A sense of desperation surrounded him; an insecurity in the way he interacted with the others, as if he expected them to discover his true identity and reject him. Aydin needed special care to graduate successfully.

Leo, however, knew exactly who he was and where he wanted to go. His shock of white-gold hair stood in carefully gelled spikes, the colour matching the cream jacket which emphasized the breadth of his football player's shoulders but which was impractical for student life in its blatant exhibition of wealth. His demeanour shouted confidence and he considered himself handsome and made sure we knew it as well. I couldn't fathom why he put in the effort to complete an MA when it seemed blindingly obvious he would rather be in Hollywood. I wondered if there would be enough space in my room for his ego. Holly dimpled when he spoke, already captivated.

The easy part of the week over and jetlag waning, the Dean invited me to his study for tea. Elena shrugged when I asked her what she knew about him and Matias wasn't much better. "The college is his life," he'd said. "Shotter will do anything to promote it – or protect it, for that matter. Believe it or not, it's difficult to get a position at this place unless you're a heavyweight academically – or you offer something else he wants. So, there it is."

I considered myself a relatively junior lecturer back in the UK. I could think of nothing else that distinguished me from any other person in my position, except, perhaps, for my grandfather's academic standing; but he had died many years ago and his reputation faded as others superseded him.

Professor Shotter rose to greet me as I entered the ground-floor room. Clearly once a principal room in the original house, windows overlooked the grounds to the front. Sunlight fell across polished broad oak boards and the edge of an oriental rug, its fringe frayed and its pile rubbed and worn where hard, leather-soled shoes had taken their toll over the years. The Dean inched around the large desk where he had been sitting, pulling his blazer close to him to prevent the embossed gold buttons from catching on the edge.

“Well, well, Professor D’Eresby.” Sharp, pale-blue eyes appraised me from under neatly trimmed eyebrows twitching upwards as he took me in.

I held out my hand automatically. “Professor Shotter. How do you do?”

He looked at it for a moment before taking it. “Yes – of course, my dear, very nice to meet you too.” He held my hand a little longer than I expected.

He peered at me again, harder this time; not what he anticipated, perhaps? Whatever his thoughts, he gathered them quickly, ushering me towards a deeply buttoned sofa, glowing ruby in the sun. I sat down feeling awkward and self-conscious, crossing my ankles to one side and hoping he didn’t notice me pulling my skirt over my knees. A knock on the door heralded a middle-aged woman bearing a large butler tray complete with burnished silver teapot and bone china. She set the tray down, giving me a fleeting look.

“Mrs Shotter.” The Professor indicated without looking at her. “Any sandwiches, my dear?”

I started to rise to my feet to greet her, but she turned and left the room without waiting. She returned a minute later carrying an old-fashioned three-tiered cake stand with a selection of sandwiches and little cakes.

“Thank you, Mrs Shotter.” I made a point of looking at her as she placed it at an angle on the table. She nodded in acknowledgment, meeting my eyes properly for the first time.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, darting a glance at her husband who leaned towards the table to pick up a napkin. He

didn't seem to notice and she left without another word.

Behind him, ranged across the wall, a series of photographic portraits of people in academic gowns relieved the monotony of the plain surface. He broke my gaze.

"Will you pour, Professor D'Eresby?"

"Yes, of course, but might I ask that I'm referred to as *Doctor*, rather than *Professor*? It has different connotations in Britain and I have yet to be raised to such an elevated status."

I didn't think it an outrageous request but, although he maintained his smile, the Dean's eyes became decidedly frosty.

"My dear, while at *this* college, I would be obliged if you would adopt the customary title you are entitled to in this country; it is a matter of maintaining standards. You understand, of course."

Well, that told me. Low and soft, his voice might be considered pleasant were it not so smooth. Too smooth – slick like oil – it lacked sincerity, so everything he said came with an unvoiced thought. And his age? I would guess early sixties, but there is a point with some people at which they appear ageless. I judged his wife younger by at least a decade – if not more – and once attractive before a drawn cast replaced the bloom. The Dean, on the other hand, with greying hair thinly covering a head dappled with age, and skin in gentle undulations around his cheeks, reminded me of an iguana. His deep-set eyes, still an arctic blue, followed every move I made. He watched me pour the tea, add milk, and stir. He asked questions about my work, my research, who I knew at Cambridge, whom I had met. He paid particular attention to the status of each individual as if making a mental note for future reference. Finally, he leaned over and very deliberately patted my knee. I flinched and he smiled.

"Make no mistake, my dear; I – and all the college staff – look forward to welcoming you tomorrow at your reception." He emphasized the word "*your*"; I internally shivered. He showed me to the door and I kept one step ahead of him, avoiding the hand that hovered too close to my back.

Chapter

2

The Reception

RAIN CONTINUED TO FALL when I woke on Saturday morning. Elena said they had endured one of the wettest summers for a long while and I told her that I had been in training for this in Britain for the last twenty-nine years or so and a little more rain wouldn't deter me. She then asked me about tea with the Dean.

"You could have warned me, Elena. I was given the third degree by..." I couldn't think of a name more suitable, "Mengele – with hands," I added, grimacing at the memory. I told her what happened. She tutted disapprovingly.

"He didn't! What did you do? Did you hit him?"

It was my turn to be surprised. "No, of course not!"

"Why not?"

Quite frankly, it wasn't the first time I had encountered such behaviour. In the past, I dealt with it by adopting a distinctly icy demeanour with anyone who attempted such overfamiliarity without my express permission, which seemed to do the trick.

"It's not what I do, Elena." She pouted, effectively telling me what she thought of my tactic and I changed the topic to one that was far more terrifying. "OK, then, what's the drill for tonight?"

"Drill?" she queried.

"What happens, what am I expected to do? Will I have to make a speech?" I asked, the thought sticking in my throat.

"*Nyet!*" she said, brightening at the idea of my reception party, and launching into the gory details with more relish than I considered decent. Formal functions at Cambridge were the norm,

of course, steeped as most of the colleges were in tradition. Used to a different way of doing things, I derived comfort from the rituals that needed no interpretation, just acceptance – and adherence – to a tried and tested plot. Here, on the other hand, I anticipated a new script in a play with which I was unfamiliar but where I became the principal player. I never liked drama at school.

She bounced onto the sofa in her sitting-room and sat cross-legged looking like a skinny Buddha. “It’s really not that bad. You just have to smile and make small chat. They all want to hear your accent, so it doesn’t matter what you *say* to them. And anyway, Matias will be there.”

I couldn’t resist a touch of flippancy. “Oh well, that’s all right then, I’m saved. Honestly, Elena, small talk is *agony*.”

She refused to accept my idea of torture and instead wanted to see my clothes. With my limited wardrobe, that didn’t take long.

That evening, I selected the safe black suit that let me fade into the background, my small gold cross given to me by my father on my sixteenth birthday, and the little pearl studs from my grandmother. Wherever I went they travelled too, my companions, sitting comfortably against my skin, the cool gold warming almost instantly it touched me.

In the mirror of the small bathroom, my eyes stared nervously out of my pale, oval face. Tawny freckles dappled my nose and high cheeks, not so obvious now as during the summer when the sun made a mockery of any attempt to disguise them. I contemplated more make-up but decided against it – a pale and freckled academic being decidedly preferable to a painted maypole.

My long hair, however, needed to be taken in hand. It lay heavy against my back and I pulled my brush through it fiercely, willing it into submission, but it kinked unattractively where I slept on it and I regretted not having washed it again. I gave up and plaited it, turning the untidy end under like the tail of a show horse, and secured it with a velvet scrunchy. In the dim electric light, my hair looked respectable enough and tied back like that, it wouldn’t attract so many comments.

Light from the reception room spilled onto the ground of the quad, making pale-green squares in the dark grass. I shivered in the rapidly cooling night, but continued to loiter, not wanting to lose this moment of solitude. Already crowded, illuminated figures travelled in random conversation around the room, stopping briefly before moving on. The gentle murmur of voices became a hubbub then softened again as a door opened and shut with each addition to the guests. Elena clutched Matias's arm for warmth and turned around, beckoning me to join her.

"Emma, come on, it's so *cold*."

In no hurry to face a room of strangers, I dawdled. "Go on in, don't wait for me; I'll join you in a minute."

She dropped Matias's arm and trotted back to me, putting her hand firmly around my shoulders and driving me forward despite my resistance.

"Look, don't worry. It is only for a few hours..."

"... and then it will all be over. Yes, I know. Just what my mother used to say before taking me to the dentist," I interposed. "But it didn't make the experience any more pleasant."

Elena giggled. "I like the dentist," she chirped.

I rolled my eyes skywards and shook my head. "You would."

The chill intensified as cold dew seeped through the fine-stitched soles of my evening shoes. I would have to go in before they were ruined and my new-found friend abandoned me for good as a hopeless case. I ran my eyes along the range of windows, willing myself on. At the far end – furthest from the gathering crowd inside the room – a figure stood silhouetted against the light, intensely still. Although I could not be sure because his eyes were clothed in darkness, I felt certain he watched us – the force of his gaze as palpable as my racing pulse. Elena pulled on my arm, breaking the spell.

"Matias...!" Elena pleaded for help over her shoulder and he strode purposefully towards us.

"We'll have entered the next ice age if you two don't hurry up. I don't believe in brute force, Emma, but if I don't get a drink in the next few minutes, my genes will become extinct shortly after I've extinguished *yours*." He attempted to look threatening,

but spoilt it with a grin that just made him endearing and more like a well-loved teddy-bear than ever. We were friends the moment we met. I loved his acerbic wit, which he used freely at every opportunity to tease me, yet not once had he crossed the unspoken divide between humour and offence, and the depths of his kindness, though well disguised, knew no bounds.

I held up my hands in submission. "It's all right, I'm coming; I surrender."

He offered us both an arm to lean on and I glanced around his back as he walked us briskly towards the door, but the figure had gone.

The reception room swam with people. I wavered at the door and peered in at the large, masculine space – all wood panelling and heavy grandeur. Iron candelabra dominated the ceiling as ominous as crows, but lamps stood on oak tables at intervals around the room, throwing welcome warm pools of light in which people gathered.

I recognized several members of the history faculty, but there were more senior academic staff here than I thought existed at the college and their combined voices were an engulfing wall of sound as I entered the room. A hush fell as dozens of curious eyes turned to focus on me. Fleeting, I considered making my excuses and making a run for it, but Matias blocked my escape and Elena held on to me with a grip of steel. No going back, I would have to make the best of it.

"OK, let's get on with it. Who's first?" I said cheerfully, despite the nerves bouncing around my tummy like a hyperactive ball in a bare room.

Elena squeezed my arm encouragingly as she led me over to a well-dressed woman in her late fifties. Greyed fair hair framing a benign face gave me the distinct impression of being broken in gently, and Elena all but pushed me forward as the woman held out her hand in greeting.

"Siggie Gerhard, Faculty of Psychology and Neurological Science, and you must be Professor D'Eresby. I have so looked forward to meeting you; we have common interests, I believe." Her voice smiled, her northern European accent just apparent

through impeccable English.

“Please call me Emma; how do you do? Do we?” I searched for a connection but couldn’t think of any off hand.

“We do,” she confirmed. “I have read your paper on the use of torture during the Inquisition – there are many similarities with incidences I have recorded with more recent victims; apart from the obvious use of pain, that is. This is Saul Abrahms, he is particularly interested in your theory.” She indicated to a slight man with a little beard and a bald head with whom she had been talking a moment before. He nodded, a faint smile on his fleshy lips as he gauged me.

“We were only discussing a case the other day. A little morbid, perhaps, but we would be most interested to explore this further with you.” He spoke rapidly but softly and with a strangely soothing, lilting expression like listening to water tumbling over pebbles in a stream. I needed no encouragement. A subject with which I was sadly very comfortable, it enabled me to legitimately indulge my interest at the expense of meeting a room full of strangers.

“What aspect of torture are you looking at? Political, cultural, military...?” I asked.

“Ideological,” Professor Abrahms said quietly. I felt my interest quicken.

“I can see the relationship,” I replied. “Religious and ideological: different reasons, similar motives. You said that the cases you are investigating are recent; what areas are you looking at in terms of region?”

The unctuous voice of the Dean broke in and I felt a hand on my elbow.

“Professor D’Eresby – welcome, welcome. I see you have met Professors Gerhard and Abrahms already.” Siggie Gerhard’s smile became fixed. “Professor Abrahms is internationally known for his work on Functional Governance relating to dictatorship and Professor Gerhard is, of course, a leading expert in the field of psychological disorders, as I’m sure you know. I’m afraid I must steal Professor D’Eresby from you, my dear.”

His ingratiating smile did not reach his eyes and he didn’t

appear in the least bit sorry. It occurred to me that he reserved the endearment for those whom he disliked. The Dean grasped my hand in his. Hot and fleshy, his palms were tacky, and I tried to pull my hand away, but his grip tightened as he manoeuvred me towards a cluster of people in the centre of the room.

“I am so pleased that you have been able to join our little family; I think you will find we have some of the finest minds gathered here. Quite the elite in their fields, as I am sure you are aware.”

I fought temptation to look behind him to see if he left a trail of slime, and instead smiled politely, gritting my teeth as I nodded to the unfamiliar faces.

A small figure with close-cropped hair stepped away from a group and placed herself squarely in front of me, looking expectantly at Shotter. He cast an acrid look at her, then, reassuming his veil of civility, introduced us.

“Professor D’Eresby – Professor Makepeace, one of our most illustrious lecturers and holder of the Chair of Anthropology.” His voice slid with obvious gratification over her accolades.

“Emma D’Eresby.” I removed my hand with alacrity from Shotter’s grasp and held it out to the tiny, grizzled woman standing in front of me. She leaned towards me with a conspiratorial air.

“Don’t listen to him, he’s full of wind,” she remarked in a low, husky voice, looking tartly at Shotter who huffed at her.

“Call me Madge,” she said, turning to face me finally and shaking my hand. “I’ll take it from here, Stephen.” She dismissed the Dean without looking at him and he reluctantly acceded and, giving a stiff smile, turned away. “By the way,” she whispered audibly in the direction of his retreating back, “don’t ever accept an invitation to tea from the old lech.” His shoulders flinched noticeably and I grimaced. She caught my expression. “Too late already? Well, you’ve obviously lived to tell the tale. We’ve all been expecting you, you know – new blood. Now tell me, what are you doing in this godforsaken place? You’re far too young to be buried along with the rest of the forgotten and unloved.” She squinted up at me, calculating, deep creases scored in skin leathered from years of sun and smoking. “You didn’t come for

the climate, so what did you come for?"

Her questions came laced with a sharpness I couldn't quite place; I found her directness disconcerting and became reluctant to open up under her scrutiny. To my relief, we were interrupted. She scowled.

"Hey, Madge, you old crow, you're monopolizing the chief cause of this gathering and that's very bad manners in my books. Well, he-llo there, Professor D'Eresby." Warm brown eyes and an easy, self-assured grin accompanied a tall, very attractive, loose-limbed man, whose casual garb defied the formal dress of the rest of the gathering. He threw his arm around Madge's shoulders and made no attempt to hide his appreciation as he ran his eyes over me. I didn't know where to look, feeling my colour rising.

"Are you the latest in our dear Dean's collection?"

"Collection of what?" I asked, returning his smile without hesitation and forgetting to answer Madge's question.

"Trophies. Been for tea with the Dean yet?" He raised a dark, arched eyebrow.

I nodded, frowning and his eyes gleamed.

"Su-re you have. Didn't you see the line of stuffed heads on the wall?"

"Heads?" Was I missing something here?

His grin widened. "Uh huh."

Madge tried to wrench herself free from his arm, but he kept it lying across her shoulders as if she were an old, comfy sofa.

"Stop playing with the girl, Samuel. She doesn't know what you are talking about," Madge admonished him. He ignored her glare and continued looking at me through half-closed eyes. His voice as warm as his eyes, he dripped seduction quite irresistibly, making my limbs weaken.

"He accumulates academics. This college has the greatest concentration of PhDs per student-head of any university in the US. Didn't you see the photographs on the wall? *You know you've made it when you've been framed,*" he crooned like a TV advertisement, wrapping his hands around his neck to illustrate a mounted head. I couldn't help laughing – he was irrepressible. Madge grunted.

“Professor Emma D’Eresby – *Professor* Samuel Wiesner – if you can believe he’s mature enough to have ever been to school. He has an excess of confidence.”

He bowed with pretend formality and I laughed; I couldn’t begin to take him seriously. “Don’t be taken in by his charm, my dear – it’s a honey-trap. He’s just divorced his second wife.”

“*She* divorced *me*,” Samuel corrected. “Don’t believe a word the old harridan says, she’s just jealous.”

“Believe me, you’re not my type, Sam.”

He feigned disappointment but within a split second bent down with his mouth to her ear. “Sure I’m not, but *she* is,” he said, still looking at me. “This one’s not for you Madge; *strictly* off limits.”

She ignored him and succeeded in freeing herself. “You rudely interrupted my subtle interrogation,” she continued archly; Samuel looked interested.

“Can I help?” he eyed me hopefully. Madge returned to her former question.

“So, what does bring you here?”

I concentrated on her, controlling the urge to smile as Samuel’s dark-brown eyes danced wickedly at me.

“The college has something I want,” I said carefully.

Samuel let out a low whistle. “British, beautiful *and* enigmatic. The Dean has surpassed himself. You’re here for the year, right?” I nodded, wondering why it was relevant. “There’s plenty of time then.” He rubbed his hands together in relish, grinning again. Madge nudged him hard in the ribs and he massaged them ruefully. “Time for a drink. What would you like?” he asked me, shooting a glance at the nearest table covered with half-consumed bottles.

“Nothing, thanks.”

“Aw, gee, let me get you something. Wine, beer...?”

“No, thank you, I don’t really drink. You get one if you like.”

Madge cast a swift look at him. “Take my advice, Emma, my dear, and don’t let yourself get distracted. Before you know it, you’re a Mrs Nobody with three kids and a mortgage. You’ll never know what happened to your career and nobody will care.”

Samuel placed a hand over his heart. "I'm mortally wounded by that remark. My wives didn't disappear but they sure sucked the life out of me. Or are you talking from experience, maybe?"

"No, just from observation," she answered dryly. I glanced towards Elena and Matias. She didn't look as if she would fade into obscurity any time soon. I caught her eye and she waved. I waved back.

"I've not found anyone I'd want to marry so far and besides..." I tried to think of something to say that didn't sound fatuous, "I have my work to focus on." I failed: Madge didn't look convinced and Sam rolled his eyes. "I'd better introduce myself to some of the others," I said, not meeting their eyes, grateful when Elena came bouncing up and hooked her arm through mine, saving me from embarrassing myself further.

"I hope Sam's behaving himself – he has a reputation, you know." Elena winked at him. Sam smirked; it was a reputation he obviously enjoyed.

"I wouldn't have guessed," I replied and Elena giggled.

"Come and meet the rest of the history department; I want you to tell them I met you first and won the bet; they do not believe me and I want my pizza."

"Thank you," I whispered when we were out of earshot. "That was getting a little... odd."

"You're welcome." She squeezed my arm. "But I thought you said you couldn't act; I think you should go on the stage."

"I didn't say I *couldn't* act, just that I don't *like* acting; there's a difference."

Elena checked that nobody was within earshot. "What do you think of Sam? He likes you, I can tell."

"He's..." I hesitated, trying to describe him, "... very funny."

She squeaked, only just suppressing laughter. "*Funny?* Do you not think he is good-looking?"

"Mmm – that too," I conceded. "But I didn't come here looking for a man, Elena, so don't go having any ideas about match-making." That was one thing with which I heartily agreed with Madge: I didn't need any complications right now.

Not discouraged, Elena scanned all the faces in the room as we crossed it.

“What about him?” she suggested, indicating a baby-blond man with a cherubic face and a dimpled chin.

“Too blond.”

“You don’t like blonds?” she exclaimed.

“Shhh,” I hushed her. “I’m sure he’s very nice, but he just doesn’t do anything for me. I prefer darker hair.”

“Tall, dark and handsome?” she probed, with an impish smirk.

“Yes, I suppose so...”

“Like Sam?”

She laughed at the look on my face.

“Yes, all right, like Sam,” I admitted, not only to her, but to myself as well. He exuded a seductive humour difficult to resist even though I loathed men who thought themselves attractive and used it to trap women. He must be aware of his good looks, but his sexuality wasn’t a snare, just how he was and I found his attention quite beguiling even though I should have known better by now.

There ensued what passed for a relatively normal conversation with the senior members of the history faculty, one of whom I knew from a conference in Florence and another two for their formidable reputations in their particular fields. It came as a relief to talk the same language without any further explanation or amplification and I would have happily stayed with them. However, I saw the Dean look towards me and detach himself from an earnest-looking couple with intent.

I tugged urgently on Elena’s sleeve, indicating an escape with a slight nod of my head. I made my excuses to my colleagues, already moving away in the opposite direction to the Dean.

“Not that way,” she hissed. Puzzled, I stopped short. A man standing to one side of the room made no attempt to disguise the fact that he watched us – his eyes unblinking, his face immobile. He stood between two lights where the shadows fell and, although in a group, he seemed alone. My skin crawled and I felt my face pale under his stare. A slight smile formed across

his lipless mouth and I turned quickly away, but I could feel his eyes as clearly as I had seen them. I wanted to get away from them more than anything else at that moment. I didn't need to explain; Elena wriggled nervously next to me.

"I'll go and find Matias." She craned her neck to look for him and saw his back at the far end of the room by the emergency exit, talking to Sam. "I will not be a moment." She began to weave her way towards him.

"No, wait!" I called after her but it was too late: the man slid through the crowd towards me like a wolf through trees. I started to follow her but found my way blocked by a little dumpy woman in a two-piece suit that bulged, talking animatedly to her companion as they made their way towards a table of canapés.

"Professor D'Eresby."

I didn't need to see the man to know who spoke, as his voice cornered me. I froze. To leave now would be unforgivably rude. I forged a mask of courtesy and swivelled slowly on the spot. Middling in height, everything about him appeared grey although he dressed entirely in black, the only point of colour the silver buckle of his belt. Pale eyes – cold as the North Sea – neither blinked nor deviated from my face. Nervously, I pushed a wayward strand of hair back into place.

"Professor D'Eresby," he said again and when he spoke, only the bottom half of his face moved, like the jaw of a skull. "I have waited such a long time to meet you; I believe we are neighbours."

My throat – dry as dust in the stuffy room – strained as I tried not to stutter.

"Neighbours?"

"My name is Kort Staahl." He seemed to think that I should have heard of him. "Faculty of English," he explained when I didn't react.

"Oh."

"There are things that I would like to share with you. The Dean has expressed a desire for me to mentor you – to show you the ropes, so to speak." Hairs rose on the back of my neck. "Such interesting things," he added softly, the air hissing slightly on his "s".

That did it. Irrational or not, I did *not* want to talk with this man whose motives were obscured by the mirror of his face. I nearly yelped with relief to see Matias striding towards me with Elena close behind. He raised a hand in greeting.

“Emma, I’ve been looking for you! Sam’s been asking about you and I said that only you would know the answers to his questions. You don’t mind do you, Kort, if I borrow Emma?”

Staaahl’s expression remained rigid.

“No, of course not, there will be plenty of opportunities to meet in the future.”

He smiled stiffly but there was an element in his intonation I didn’t like, almost as if what he said was not a promise, but a threat. Matias kept his arm in place as he walked me away.

“Now, if you two have finished using and abusing my manly strength by rescuing you from the untold horrors of Professor Staaahl, I have to speak to a colleague. Will you be quite safe, Emma, or would you like me to fetch Sam over for you? I’m sure he would be more than willing to step into my shoes...” he trailed off with a suggestive grin.

The thought – although quite appealing – I considered a little too obvious for my taste; besides, an attractive woman had attached herself to Sam and, from what I could see, he enjoyed the attention, although every now and again, his eyes wandered over to where we stood.

“Nope, thanks – I’m in search of a drink. Elena, can I get you one?”

She didn’t hear me as she waved vigorously to someone by the table laden with food. The man looked up and waved back.

“I’m just going to see David,” she said.

“If you must,” Matias grumped, but he shrugged with a degree of resignation as he watched her skip out of hearing, before turning back to me. “Emma, I won’t be long; I’ll be over there if you need me.”

“OK,” I nodded. “Thanks.”

Staaahl seemed to have vanished and I welcomed a bit of thinking space where I didn’t have to be archly correct or dance on somebody else’s eggshells. But I longed for a drink. I picked

up a bottle of water from a nearby table, and shook it, peering through the thick green glass into its empty heart. The juice similarly consumed, only a dribble of white wine remained and I wouldn't touch *that*. I should have accepted the drink from Sam when offered. I pivoted, searching the rest of the room for something more promising. Tucked away in a corner over by the window in the general direction in which Matias disappeared, stood a table where the bottles looked more or less untouched. I made a beeline for it, but a little man in an ill-fitting suit and odd socks stepped in front of me so suddenly that I nearly ran into him.

"Pro... Professor D... D'Eresby," he stammered, his eyes hardly meeting mine before darting away again to a fixed point somewhere behind me. "I... I understand you have come from the University of Cambridge."

He spoke rapidly like a typewriter, his head hunched forwards so that his body made a rough "s" shape. The same height as him, his gaze now rested on my clavicles and stayed there.

"Yes, I have..." I said, unsure to whom I spoke and what he wanted. My hand twitched to my neckline protectively.

"Good, good. Per... perhaps you might know Dr Hilliard? He would be in the same faculty as you."

For a moment I thought I misheard him. He glanced at me again and pushed his thick-rimmed glasses up his nose with one finger. "Ah, Dr Hilliard – yes, yes, a leading academic in your own field."

I heard myself reply, surprised by the dispassionate tone in my voice.

"I don't believe he is at the university any more."

The small man blinked rapidly as if this represented a grave piece of news.

"Pity, such a pity, but of course you have heard of him, a man of his standing?"

I smiled stiffly. "Yes, I have heard of him."

I wanted this conversation to end. It had taken me unawares and the resulting knot in my stomach was an all too familiar sensation I didn't expect tonight – not here – not *now*. I caught

sight of Matias talking to a man I couldn't quite make out in the dimly lit corner of the room.

"Will you please excuse me?" I said, politely. The jittery academic looked crestfallen. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him as there was no reason why he should have known, but talking to this awkward little man with the strange mannerisms about Guy Hilliard and another life brought me to my limit of endurance for one evening. Besides which, my head began to throb.

"Ye... yes, of course," he stuttered, but he remained rooted to the spot so that I found myself obliged to edge around him to escape.

Matias saw me and smiled an invitation to join him. I wished fervently we were alone so that I didn't have to go through all the introductions again and make "small chat", as Elena put it so succinctly.

"Hi, Emma," he greeted me with a jocularly born of the near-empty glass in his hand. "I see you were cornered by our resident campus eccentric. You're doing well for one evening. You didn't look very happy over there; what did Eckhart say to you and how did you manage to shake him off?"

He meant only to tease but my head ached and I struggled to find my sense of humour. His companion turned away and went to the table nearby.

"He only asked if I knew someone, Matias. I think he finds it difficult to talk to people. He can't help it; he didn't mean anything by it."

Matias sobered for a moment. "I stand corrected; I'm getting crabby in my old age. Now, I'd better go look for Elena and make sure she's behaving herself." He winked at me then suddenly remembered the man who had returned from the drinks table and now stood quietly to one side, waiting.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "Emma, let me introduce you; this is Dr Lynes."

With some reluctance and a degree of curiosity as to who could get away with being called simply *Doctor* if I couldn't, I turned to the person I scarcely glanced at before. My breath caught as I met the intensely direct gaze of the tall, singularly

attractive man in front of me whom I instantly remembered from the scene of the crash.

“How do you do, Professor D’Eresby?”

He made no indication he recognized me as he offered his hand.

“How... how do you do?” I faltered, my eyes leaving the disconcerting familiarity of his fair hair, dropping to his arm where no sign of a bandage interrupted the immaculate line of his sleeve. Instead, his long fingers were strong, and I reacted slightly to his touch as his pulse beat against my palm. He smiled apologetically and withdrew his hand. I gathered my wits.

“Please, I’m just *Dr* D’Eresby – I can’t get used to this *Professor* thing everyone insists on here.”

I realized with a jolt that I had probably just managed to insult him without trying and a flash of heat rose to my face, but the corner of his mouth almost lifted into a smile.

“Would you care for a drink?” I couldn’t place his accent, but it might have come from either side of the Atlantic; a measured voice, resonant and instantly appealing. He offered me the glass he carried, ice suspended in the clear liquid.

“Thank you.” I took it without thinking, finding it difficult to look away from eyes the colour of indigo that had remained focused on my face from the moment we met.

“You are most welcome,” he replied.

My attention slid to his hair again and this time he questioned it in the slight upward lift of an eyebrow.

“I saw you – the other day – at the crash,” I stumbled in way of explanation. “With the dead woman,” I clarified, in case he’d forgotten – as if anyone *could* forget.

The merest flicker of reaction in the tightening of his mouth.

“Did you.” His response didn’t invite further comment and I searched for something to say rather than endure an uncomfortable silence.

“*Lynes* – did your family originate from England?” I asked.

He looked surprised – a slight frown creasing his forehead.

“Scotland, I believe,” he replied.

“Oh, yes – well, it’s the right island anyway.”

I could have kicked myself for being so asinine. He smiled politely. I looked away, embarrassed. Another pause followed.

“I understand you are on secondment from Cambridge.” It came as a statement rather than a question. I glanced up at him as he calmly looked down at me, his corn-gold hair contrasting with eyes that now seemed more denim. I deemed this topic safer ground.

“Yes, it’s part of a research project. History,” I added, although he probably already knew that, given his presence here at the reception. For me. For the first time in my life it occurred to me that my subject might sound dull to someone else.

“What period do you specialize in?” he asked.

“Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England – persecution of minority groups.”

Dull *and* trendy.

His eyes flashed momentarily over my face. “It sounds interesting.” His voice didn’t reflect the sentiment and I suspected he wanted to be polite, but he continued anyway. “Why are you interested in that era in particular?”

“A number of reasons, I suppose.” I thought for a moment, arranging my answers in order of priority, aware that I didn’t want to test his limits of boredom.

“First, it’s a time of immense change socially, politically and culturally. Secondly – from a practical point of view – it’s reasonably well documented compared with earlier periods. And thirdly...” I glanced up to see if I still had his attention. I did, but with an expression now veiled. I found it difficult to articulate my ideas under his scrutiny and I lost my train of thought.

“And thirdly...?” he prompted.

“And thirdly, it’s of particular significance to the region I come from.”

Dull, trendy *and* pointless. The wisp of hair disengaged itself again and I pushed it impatiently behind my ear. His eyes followed the movement.

“And where is that?”

“Lincolnshire – the East Midlands and East Anglia really.” For

the briefest moment, his eyes narrowed as he looked at me, and I felt myself blanching beneath his gaze. I shuffled uncomfortably, the ice clinking noisily in my glass. I took a sip – just water; I remembered how thirsty I was and took another.

“I expect you miss your home.” His voice held an echo of longing and my reaction to it took me by surprise.

“Don’t you?”

I don’t know what made me assume him to be far from home, perhaps his name or his accent, or even the colour of his hair, but he reacted immediately. His face became blank as a shutter fell between us.

“This is my home,” he said quietly.

I bit my lip; he responded as if I had tried to cross a threshold unbidden and uninvited. I attempted to rescue the situation by answering his original question, although I doubted whether he now wanted to hear the answer.

“I... I haven’t had time to miss it yet, but I will – I always do – though there are certain similarities between here and Britain which might make it easier.”

“Such as the weather?” he suggested, wry humour breaking through his reserve.

“Definitely the weather,” I allowed a smile in return; “and the functions,” I appended. We simultaneously looked at the still-crowded room, more as observers than participants. His voice – gently inflective, soothing almost – indicated he seemed to have forgotten my *faux pas*, even if I hadn’t.

“Not your choice of an evening’s entertainment perhaps?”

“No, not really, but I wasn’t given an option. ‘Resistance is futile,’” I intoned in imitation of a Borg, then thought that if he never watched *Star Trek*, the reference would be lost on him. I reddened again.

He smiled faintly. “Quite.”

Someone threw open a window and a stream of fresh air wrapped itself around my shoulders, cooling my flaming cheeks which I knew would be clashing horribly with my hair and freckles. In contrast, he maintained a quiet dignity, which the heat didn’t seem to touch. I found it difficult to pinpoint

what made him so attractive. I sneaked a look and found him scrutinizing me in return.

“There you are, Ginger! I wondered where you’d got to; I thought I’d lost you.” Sam’s buoyant voice cut in. He cast a look at my companion, then back at me. “Lynes.” He nodded a cool greeting.

“Professor Wiesner,” Dr Lynes returned, but Sam barely acknowledged him as he looked at me.

“Matias mentioned you were probably wanting to leave pretty soon, and that you don’t want to go on your own; something about Staahl, he said. I told him I’d go with you – see you safely to bed.”

His brown eyes were expectant, and his full, sensual mouth twitched suggestively, making me immediately wary. I glanced towards the edge of the room where Staahl had been, but the shadows were still empty; I shook my head.

“No thanks, Sam – I’ll go with Elena and Matias; where are they?”

I scanned the rest of the room for them. Despite the thinning crowd, I couldn’t see them anywhere.

“They left a few minutes ago. Elena thought you might like some company and I said I’d take you back when you’re ready.”

He obviously relished the idea and my jaw clenched as I restrained the wave of irritation at Elena’s betrayal and Sam’s supposition that I agreed to it. Denied a choice, I resented being manipulated. Sam peered at me, “Emma?” His cloak of confidence slipped. I felt suddenly tired.

“Yes, all right, Sam,” I responded, a little sharper than I needed to be. “Thanks,” I remembered to say with a little more grace, and resigned myself to being escorted back to my room by him. I’d let Elena know exactly what I thought of her when I saw her in the morning. He threw an arm around my shoulder, his unexpected closeness making me flinch away from him. I removed his hand firmly, and gave him a warning look, but Sam’s self-assured grin returned and I reddened, embarrassed and annoyed. I caught Dr Lynes watching, his face impassive; he saw me look up and pretended not to have noticed my discomfort.

“Well, I’ll say goodnight then – Dr D’Eresby, Professor Wiesner,” he inclined his head slightly in an almost antique gesture of courtesy.

“Yup sure, ’night Lynes.”

Eager to leave, Sam’s manner neared dismissive. I wanted to say something that would let the other man know how I appreciated him listening to me, and asking me about my home, and that Sam made assumptions that I neither welcomed nor shared. But I couldn’t and I didn’t so I could only say “Goodnight, Dr Lynes,” and hope that the tone of my voice said it all.