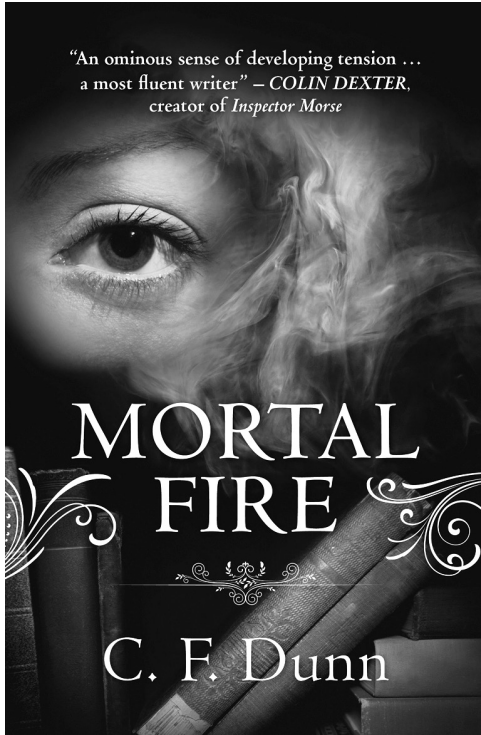


DEATH BE
NOT
PROUD

BY THE SAME AUTHOR
Mortal Fire

"An ominous sense of developing tension ...
a most fluent writer" – COLIN DEXTER,
creator of *Inspector Morse*



THE SECRET OF
the Journal



DEATH BE NOT PROUD



C. F. Dunn



LION FICTION

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*For my mother and father,
who made all things possible.*

CHAPTER



I



Abyss

*Death waits for us all; it is only a matter of time
and the when and the where and the how
are the only variations to the song we must all sing.*

I had good days and I had bad days.

It wasn't as if I could blame anyone else for the condition I found myself in, so I didn't look for any sympathy. I knew that my near-vegetative state caused my parents hours of anxiety, but I couldn't face the questions that queued in my own mind, let alone answer any of theirs.

I stayed in my room. Where I lay at an angle on my bed, I could watch the winter sun cast canyons of light as it moved across the eaved ceiling. Sometimes the light was the barest remnant from a clouded sky; at others, so bright that the laths were ribs under the aged plaster, regular undulations under the chalk-white skin.

I hadn't spent so long at home for many years. Here at the top of the house, the cars droned tunelessly as they laboured up the hill beyond the sheltering walls of St Mary's Church. Below, the voices of the street were mere echoes as they rose up the stone walls, entering illicitly through the thin frame of

the window. I listened to the random sounds of life; I watched it in the arc of the day. And the sounds and the light were immaterial – the days irrelevant – time did not touch me.

Sometime – days after fleeing Maine – my mother knocked softly on my door, her disembodied head appearing round it when I did not answer.

“Emma, you have twenty minutes to get yourself ready for your hospital appointment; your father’s getting the car now.”

Her voice hovered in the air above my bed, and I heard every word she said, but they didn’t register. I didn’t move. She came into the room and stood at the end of my bed, her hands on her hips, her no-nonsense look in place. The lines creasing her forehead were deeper than I remembered, or maybe it was the way the light from the window fell across her brow.

“I know you heard me; I want you to get up and get dressed *now*. I won’t keep the hospital waiting.”

She hadn’t used that tone with me for nearly twenty years and I found it comforting in its severity.

“*Emma!*”

My eyes focused and saw her shaking, her hands clutching white-knuckled at the old iron-and-brass bedstead.

“Emma, I am asking you, *please...*”

My poor mother; with my Nanna in hospital and her youngest daughter tottering towards the edge of reality, she was strung out just as far as she could go, eking out her emotional reserves like food in a famine. I blinked once as I surfaced from the dark pool of my refuge, my mouth dry; I half-rolled, half-sat up. Wordlessly, I climbed off the bed and went stiffly to the bathroom down the landing, my mother a few steps behind me. I shut the door quietly on her, and turned to look in the mirror above the basin. Sunken eyes stared back from my skull-like head, skin brittle over high

cheekbones. Even my freckles seemed pale under the dim, grim light from the east window. Mechanically I brushed my teeth and washed, not caring as the cast on my arm became sodden. The bruises above my breasts and below my throat stood out against my fair skin. I pressed my fingertips into them, hands spanning the space between each smoky mark. I closed my eyes at the subdued pain and remembered why they were there.

Mum waited for me outside the door, and I aimlessly wondered if she thought I might try and escape – or something worse. I understood the effect of my behaviour on my family; I understood and cared with a remorse that should have torn the very heart from me, had I one. But my head and my heart were divorced, and I witnessed my distress in their pinched, tight faces and harried, exchanged looks as no more than a disinterested observer.

I also realized that, from a clinical point of view, I probably suffered from delayed shock – the result of two near-fatal attacks in a very short period of time with which I struggled to come to terms. But neither Staahl nor the bear seemed even remotely important when compared with what had passed between Matthew and me that precipitated my leaving the only man I had ever really loved.

I dressed in what Mum put out for me, substituting the cardigan for my sage jacket, and all the while I ached, but I couldn't tell whether the pain came from my broken body or from my heart.

The hospital wasn't far from where we lived and my father parked in a lined disabled bay, ignoring the disapproving stares of the people sitting on a nearby bench. They stopped staring and averted their heads when he helped me out of

the car, all the justification he needed in my fragile frame as I leaned against him for support. The strapping still loose, my ribcage felt as if the semi-knitted bones grated with every step I took, but I welcomed the pain as relief from the indescribable emptiness that filled every waking moment.

The double doors to the reception hissed back into their recesses, releasing a gust of warm, sanitized air. Feeling suddenly sick as it hit my face, I retched pointlessly, my hollow stomach reacting to the acrid smell of disinfectant, each spasm pulling at my chest, and I felt my legs give way beneath me. A flurry of activity and hands and voices alerted me to the fact that, although I was drifting, blissful unconsciousness eluded me.

“When did she last eat?” a pleasant-voiced man asked from beside my head. He lifted my eyelid and a beam of directed light hit me; I twisted my head to escape it. He lifted the skin in the crease of my elbow and it sagged back into place like broken elastic.

“She’s dehydrated as well; how long’s this been going on?”

Mum sounded tense. “Five days. She refuses to eat, she barely drinks a thing and she was already too thin. We don’t know what to do with her; she just won’t talk to us.”

Five days? Had it been so long? I counted only three. Five whole days without him.

“I’ll have to admit her – get her rehydrated. These injuries need seeing to and I’ll contact someone in the mental health team at the same time.”

My eyes flicked open.

“No,” I muttered weakly.

Humorous hazel eyes met mine. “Ah, she speaks; you’re back with us, are you? Did you have something to say?”

“No – I won’t be admitted,” I said, strength returning along with my stubborn streak.

“Well, you haven’t left yourself with much of a say in the matter – you’re a right mess. However…” he continued, “if you promise to eat and drink starting from now, I could be persuaded to reconsider.”

“If I must.”

I wasn’t far off being churlish but he didn’t seem to mind, and I wondered why everyone was being so kind to me because I didn’t deserve it, not after the way I treated them, not after what I had done.

The dry biscuit scraped my throat and the tea from the little cafe next to reception tasted stewed by the time I drank it, but it helped.

“Sorry about the biscuit.” The young doctor eyed it, pulling a face. “The nurses ate all the decent ones; there’s not a Jammy Dodger left in sight. Hey ho – at least that’s better than nothing, and I suppose we must be grateful for the little we are given.” He smiled cheerfully, his harmless chatter scattering brightly into the bland room. I stared at the ceiling, impassive and beyond caring.

I finished the tea under his watchful eye, his excuse being that business was a bit slow and he had nothing better to do than to sit there and watch me. He took the empty cup, chucked it in a bin and rolled up the wide sleeves of my jacket, revealing both arms.

“So, what happened here, then?”

He started to unwind the bandage on my left arm. My throat clenched uncomfortably, remembering the last time it had been dressed by Matthew as he stood so close to me – his hand on my arm, my skin running with the connectivity between us.

He misunderstood my reaction. “That hurt?”

“No.”

“OK, so what did you do here... *heck*, *whew!*” he whistled. “That’s quite something; not a case of self-harm, I’m guessing. Accident?”

The long scar had lost its livid appearance, and the edges of the bruising were beginning to fade.

“No.”

“This is healing well; nice job – very impressive stitching, almost a shame when they have to come out.” He admired the fine stitches, turning my arm to catch a better look under the glare of the overhead lamp.

“Our daughter was *attacked*.” Dad sounded none too impressed by the young man’s obvious enthusiasm about my injury. The doctor’s tone moderated.

“Ah, I didn’t know – not good. This as well?” He indicated the cast on my arm, looking only at me for an answer.

“Yes.”

“And two of her ribs,” my mother interjected. “I think Emma’s in a lot of pain but she won’t tell me.”

He stood up straight, pulling at one earlobe as he contemplated his course of action, his hand barely visible beneath thick, brown hair that curled up a little over his collar.

He checked his watch. “This cast is sopping wet – you’re not supposed to swim the Channel in it – it needs changing. I could send you to the main hospital in Peterborough, or you could let me have a bash at it – your choice.”

“Whichever, I don’t mind.”

He came to a decision.

“Right then, we’d better get on with it – I need the practice anyway. Footie’s on tonight and I want to get home for the kick-off.” He winked at me. “Off you go, I’ll manage without you,” he said, ushering my surprised parents out and

beckoning to a nurse at the same time. “So this happened... when? Three, four weeks ago?”

“No.”

He waited and I realized that he wanted an answer with more information than that.

“Two weeks – just over two weeks.”

“You’re sure? This is healing well – looks nearer four weeks old, and you wouldn’t believe the number of lacerations I’ve seen over the last few years, specially on a Saturday night in A and E, though none as clinical as this, I grant you. Just over two weeks; hmm, well, if you say so...”

For all his cavalier chatter, he was surprisingly gentle as he re-dressed my arm, and then started to remove the cast Matthew had so carefully applied all those dark nights ago. I felt a pang of regret as it fell to the floor, as if he were slipping away from me along with the cast. A stifled sob came out of nowhere, catching me off-guard.

The young doctor didn’t look up. “Want to tell me about it?” He must have thought I remembered the attack.

“No.”

“Can sometimes help to talk,” he encouraged, still focusing on the messy process in front of him, a fixed grimace on his face as he tried to get the gauze under the cast on straight.

I wiped my eyes on the back of my sleeve. “No, thanks.”

He made a pretty good job of it, although the new cast felt heavier than the last one, and my arm objected to carrying the additional weight.

“Two down, one to go,” he said, nodding in the direction of my chest. The nurse started to unbutton my jacket and, instinctively, I drew my arms in front of me to stop her. She looked to the doctor for back-up, and he smiled apologetically.

“The top has to come off, sorry.”

Reluctantly, I let my arms drop and she continued. I felt exposed under the harsh light as he interrogated my body, and I kept my eyes fixed on the shadows of people moving across the floor, just visible in the crack at the bottom of the door where light peered under. He became suddenly businesslike and professional as he unwound the strapping and probed my ribs. I caught my breath and craned my head to look. “That sore?”

“Yes.”

I tried not to react but, from what I could see, at least the intense bruising from my collision with the edge of the shelves in the porters’ lodge was definitely fading and, although my ribs ached, I could tell they were on the mend.

“They’re OK – just need strapping again.”

He completed the task and thanked the nurse and she left. The doctor stood with one hand on his hip.

“Like to tell me how you got those?” he said, looking at the small, regular-shaped bruises across my breastbone and around my neck. “And don’t tell me they were done at the same time as the rest of the damage – these are more recent.”

“They don’t bother me.”

“That wasn’t what I asked; has someone been hurting you?”

I laughed hoarsely, the irony not lost on me. “Not in the way you think; this is *entirely* self-inflicted.”

He lifted an eyebrow, obviously not happy with my reply. I dragged my soft jacket back on and, although my hands were more free, my stiff fingers struggled to do up the buttons again. He leaned forward to help.

“So, there’s nothing more you want to say; I can’t contact anyone for you?”

His brown-green eyes were kind and concerned; he had a sweet face.

“No – thanks.”

“OK, you’ve got your reasons, no doubt, but if you were a dog, I’d be calling the RSPCA right now. You’re all done. I’ll call your parents, but remember, I don’t want to see you in here again in your emaciated state. Drink plenty, eat lots and I won’t report you.”

He chucked the remains of my old cast in the pedal-bin, the lid clanging shut long before I took my eyes off it.

“Report me? For what?” I asked dully.

“Oh, I don’t know, causing unnecessary suffering to the NHS budget, or some such; doctors like me don’t come cheap, you know.”

No, I knew that.

He left the room, taking my notes with him, and took longer than I expected to return. Minutes later, when I joined my parents in the seating area, the expressions on their faces were ambiguous. He must have said something. I sighed internally, dreading what conclusions they might have drawn between them, and deciding I needed to make a bigger effort to appear more normal to prevent a repeat of the earlier farce. When we reached the reception area I did something I had longed to do for the last month or so.

My grandmother resided in a side ward in a part of the hospital to which I had never been. Single-storey and purpose-built, its windows overlooked a paved courtyard with raised stone beds filled with semi-naked plants, now shivering under the overcast sky. Although made as pleasant as possible, even the brightly coloured curtains and cheerful prints that decorated the windows and walls of the assessment unit could not

disguise the sense of imminent death that accompanied the living corpses inhabiting the beds.

Mum went over to talk to the nurses, and I was left to gaze at my grandmother from where I stood. Better than expected, she looked well, her face full and her skin still softly coloured, not sallow and drawn. She lay with her eyes closed. I went over to her and tentatively reached out to touch her hand as it rested on the peach-coloured cotton cover, to find it warm.

“Nanna?”

She did not respond. I pulled the high-backed chair close to her bed. The card I sent from Maine weeks ago sat on the bedside cabinet along with the regulated clutter of my family’s gifts, a few personal items and a photo of my grandfather in its over-polished frame.

“How are you, Nanna?” I asked softly. “I’m so sorry I haven’t been to see you; I’ve been away but... but I’m back now.”

Her breathing came as a rhythmic pattern of in and out. I held her small hand between my newly liberated fingers, stiffly stroking it in time to her breaths.

“I’ve been working. I went to America, do you remember? I went to where the journal came from – as I said I would – and I’ve found it, Nanna; I’ve found Grandpa’s journal.”

Perhaps I hoped that she could hear me or would somehow respond. I laid my head on the bed, the movement of her chest so slight that it barely lifted the bedclothes. I watched as it rose and fell.

“I haven’t read it yet, but I will; we’ve waited so long, haven’t we? Will you wait a little longer – until I’ve read it – then you can tell Grandpa for me, because he’ll want to know, won’t he? He’ll want to know all about it, like the last chapter of a book.” Her breathing halted for a second, and I lifted my head to look at her anxiously, but she seemed peaceful

and the pattern of her breaths returned to their slow, shallow beat. I laid my head down on my arm by her hand and closed my eyes.

“I met someone when I was out there. I think you would like him – he reminded me of Grandpa; his hair is the *exact* same colour – the colour of ripe corn.” I smiled to myself despite the wretched ache somewhere in the middle of my chest.

“But I left him there, I had to. He’s different... I can’t explain it, there’s so much about him that I don’t understand and, until I do – until I’ve worked it out – I can’t be with him, I can’t go back...”

A soundless tear heralded an unlooked-for stream and I let them flow, glad that Nanna remained unaware of my sorrow.

“Sorry, Nanna,” I managed after a few minutes, the top layers of bandage on my wrist already soaked. “That wasn’t supposed to happen. You’re stuck in here and I’m blubbing all over the place; what would Grandpa make of the pair of us?”

The faintest touch on the crown of my head startled me and I lifted my face. My grandmother’s eyes were open, their faded blue alert. The corner of one side of her mouth lifted in a weak but discernible smile.

“Nanna? *Nanna!* You can hear me? Oh – you heard me,” I said as I realized that she might have heard my ramblings. “I’m sorry,” I said again. “I didn’t mean you to hear *all* of that. I’ll get Mum for you.” I turned my head and saw my mother still talking to one of the nurses. I felt a slight touch against my fingers and looked down. My grandmother had moved her hand towards mine.

“What is it? Don’t you want me to get her?”

Her fingers lifted and tapped against mine again, a slight question in her eyes.

“Oh this – it’s nothing; I had an accident, that’s all.”

I looked away from her, hating lying. She tapped again, a persistent glare in her eyes. “All right, I was attacked, but I’m fine now; I had someone to look after me.”

I couldn’t hide the shake in my voice. Nanna made a guttural sound in her throat made of frustration that she could not speak.

“I bet if Matthew were here he could help you – he’s like that – full of surprises.”

Raw pain twisted inside me, but it was worth it just to be able to speak his name. Her fingers fluttered again, accompanied by the smile, and I smiled back. I heard a noise behind me.

“Hello, Mummy, you’re looking *much* better,” my mother said over my shoulder.

“You didn’t tell me Nanna’s awake, Mum!”

“I did tell you she is much better, but you weren’t listening, darling.”

She leaned over from the other side of the bed and kissed her mother tenderly on her forehead. Nanna smiled her half-smile in response, then swivelled her eyes to look at me, then back to her daughter again, questioning.

“Emma’s fine; nothing time won’t heal.” She looked at me. “Darling, I need to talk to Nanna for a minute...”

I nodded and kissed my grandmother’s warm, soft cheek. “Thank you,” I whispered in her ear; “I will come and see you again soon.” She grunted in her throat, her blue eyes watching my face.

That evening, I sat in the dining room and ate for the first time in days. It felt cold by the great floor-to-ceiling windows that let in a steady stream of air through the insubstantial

frames, and I remembered that I needed layers of jumpers to survive the raw winter here. I moved around to the other side of the table, closer to the electric fire that did its best to make inroads on the chill. Dad pushed the kitchen door open with his foot, carrying several plates and bringing with him a waft of cooking-scented air. He laid a plate of hot food in front of me, spirals of steam rising.

“Your mother said not to wait, and tuck in while it’s hot. It’ll do you good – put some colour in your cheeks,” he said in an attempt at being positive. I regarded the food with a singular lack of enthusiasm. “Come along now,” he chivvied, “step to it. Chop, chop. Remember what the doctor said. We don’t want you ending up in hospital now, do we? And it’ll take a load off your mother’s mind,” he added, as the door began to open and she came in.

The increased mobility of my hands made eating much easier, although my right arm ached with the effort and my left hand could barely grasp a fork. My parents said nothing but the questions were not far away. I sensed they were waiting for me to eat something before they started. I was right.

“What a very pleasant young doctor you saw today,” my mother ventured. I put my fork down and waited. Dad had almost finished his food and he eyed my near-full plate.

“Eat up, Emma; don’t let it go to waste.” Mum shot him a glance and he shut up; she continued.

“He said that you’re healing very well and your stitches can come out in a week’s time; that’s good, isn’t it?”

I loathed being humoured.

“The thing is, darling, he is a little concerned...”

Here it comes, I thought.

“He mentioned that you have some bruises that weren’t caused by... well, by the attack, and that you said that they

were self-inflicted. He thinks that you might benefit from a little help.”

My dearest mother – always trying to be diplomatic – but she might as well have just come straight out with it and said: “The doctor thinks you’re off your rocker, darling, and you should be committed.”

I had to laugh. Dad looked shocked.

“It’s not a laughing matter, Emma. What your mother is trying to say...”

“I know what’s being implied, Dad,” I cut in, “but they weren’t self-inflicted, not in the way he means, so I don’t need any *help* – of any kind.”

I moved my plate away from the edge of the table, ready to rise, the silver fork sliding to one side, the remnants of my fragile hunger gone.

Dad frowned at the food on my plate. “And that’s another thing – you’re not eating; it can be a sign of emotional difficulties. It’s nothing to be ashamed of; it can happen to anyone.”

I stared at him and then at Mum in disbelief.

“I don’t need any help because there’s nothing emotionally wrong with me. I’ve told you, I need time to get my head straight about... things... but I don’t need anyone to do it for me. I just want to be left alone to get on with it.”

I pushed my chair back, the legs scraping painfully across the stone floor as they left the quietening pile of the rug, and picked up my plate to take it through to the scullery.

“So if *you* didn’t make those bruises, darling, who did?”

The subtle approach, direct but always when I’d dropped my guard; Mum knew me well. She saw me falter and stood up, taking the plate from me and putting her arm around my shoulders. I looked straight into the depths of her eyes, inflicting as much sincerity as I could pile into a few words.

“*Nobody* has hurt me, Mum.” I ducked out from under her arm, reclaiming the plate, and into the steamy kitchen. I washed my plate under a stream of hot water, the steam condensing almost immediately on the uneven stone walls. There were sounds of subdued whispers, then the door opened behind me and I heard the heavier tread of my father’s footsteps, but I didn’t turn around.

“Emma, did that *man* do this to you?”

For a moment I didn’t know to whom he referred, then anger flashed through me, blood rushing to my face.

“Matthew has *never* hurt me. How can you accuse him, after all he’s done?”

Disgusted, I flung down the tea-towel I had just picked up to dry my plate; it missed the draining board and sank below the bubbles left in the washing-up bowl. I went to push past my parents as they stood blocking the doorway.

“Don’t be angry, darling, but you did leave the States in a hurry – what else were we to think? That broken table in your room... and you had been out with him all day; I mean, what else...”

“Not *that*, Mum.”

Guilt twisted my voice. I was angry all right – angry at them for even suggesting that Matthew would have purposefully hurt me – but furious with myself for all the doubt and fear I had put them through – and tormented by what Matthew himself might be feeling right now. They let me pass and I slammed out of the kitchen, through the panelled sitting room and up the stairs. In the fading light, the watchful eyes of my ancestors followed me, the only points of light in portraits blackened with age.

I reached the sanctuary of my room. I seemed to make a habit of wrecking people's lives. Guy had deserved it and I felt little guilt in that respect. But my parents? If I were in their place and I saw my child behave in the way I acted, and witnessed the damage I bore, would I not also have come to the conclusion they had logically reached? And Matthew? I turned and buried my face in my pillow.

Matthew – what have I done to you? Would you ever believe me if I said that I loved you beyond boundaries, and that the only limits to that love were those defined within the mess in my head?

I made certain to be seen eating and drinking regularly, and my parents watched me, never leaving me in the house alone. Despite the size of the building, I felt confined and couldn't clear my head enough to think. Flashes of thoughts and images lingered on the edge of dreams I wasn't sure I had, words and faces tugging at my memory but always just out of reach.

I woke early several mornings later and lay under the thick duvet listening as the first birds began to stretch their voices; but the world sounded remote. Climbing out of bed, I drew the curtains to one side, letting in the feeble dawn. A dense fog shrouded the windows. I washed and pulled on my clothes, and found my quilted coat that I hadn't worn since the fight with the bear. From under my bed I dragged the bag that had lain there since my return home. Through the soft wool of his scarf, the hard edges of the two books – one the transcription of the little Italian treatise Matthew had made for me, the other the journal I had stolen – made their

presence known. I dared not look at them, placing them instead on my desk and, doubling the long scarf around my neck, I went quietly downstairs.

My parents still slept as I let myself out of the house and made my way past the Town Hall, crossing the road to the Norman arch where the entrance to the ancient passage made a black mouth in the golden stone. I entered it as I had always done as a child – with a sense of crossing a threshold into the past.

Beyond the passage, the Meadows were silent except for the soft rush of the river running through them and away under the bridge. Shaggy tufts of grass, decorated with beads of glass, left my shoes saturated within minutes of wading through them. Out here I found a sense of freedom I hadn't felt for days. Out here, in my solitude, thoughts and ideas began to coalesce, and from the disorder in my mind, take shape.

By the time I returned to the house, traffic piled up the hill, filling the air with heavy fumes and protesting engines. The front door opened before I could turn my key in the lock, Dad's face instantly relieved when he saw me.

"I just went out for a walk," I explained a bit defensively as I went into the hall. Mum came out of the sitting room, cup in hand. Her brow cleared when she saw me and I started to unzip my coat.

"We have a visitor, darling," she said brightly. I bristled, because what she meant was, "*You* have a visitor", but I didn't let it show. She went back into the sitting room where I heard her say something, and a man's voice answered. My father helped me out of my coat.

"Do this for your mother, Em," he said quietly; "she's

finding all this a little tough.” I looked at him with a degree of surprise at his uncustomary sensitivity, but he didn’t elaborate and instead indicated the open door.

The wiry, white-haired man stood up when I entered.

“Hello, Emma – it’s been a long time.”

He held out his hand and I shook it automatically; he was careful not to squeeze too hard. I remembered him as a friend of my parents.

“Mr... Taylor.”

“Mike, please – it must be at least eighteen years since I last saw you.”

“At least,” Dad said, balancing on the edge of the sofa arm, adjusting his position as it creaked under him. “Emma had just won the inter-house tennis tournament at school and developed sunstroke.”

I was surprised he remembered that; I’d been forced to spend the rest of the blazing summer day in bed with the curtains drawn and a cold flannel on my head. I knew Mike Taylor as a doctor of some kind, and he had ruffled my hair and tugged my thick rope of a plait when last we met, congratulating me on my win before I succumbed to the effects of the sun. He had been easy going with an open, approachable manner, and nothing seemed to have changed. I sat in one of the old armchairs, the high sides and padded wings supporting my back and arms which ached from the unaccustomed exercise. He sat on the sofa, stretching his arms across the back and crossing his legs, revealing lively red socks. I eyed him guardedly. My mother called from the dining room, and my father went to help with the tea. He had lit a fire and curious flames tentatively explored the kindling; I watched them.

“You’ve been busy since I last saw you,” Mike said cheerfully.

Ah, so this wasn't a social call; I thought as much. "You've been in the States, Hugh said. What did you make of it?"

I cut straight to the point. "What did they tell you?"

He cocked his head on one side and eyed me speculatively beneath thick eyebrows, their colour long gone.

"They're worried about your emotional state."

I blinked at his bluntness.

"Oh – yes."

"Do they have any reason to be worried?"

"No."

"You've had a bit of a rough time out there, I believe – the attack nearly killed you; is that right?"

I kept my tone quite even.

"Yes."

"And then something else happened, your mother said?"

He stroked his top lip, waiting, but I said nothing; he didn't need to know about the bear, or anything else that followed. "Not bad going for one term, all things considered. How are you feeling about that, then?"

"Oh *please!*" I rolled my eyes.

"That's too obvious a tack, is it? I'm out of practice," he said ruefully, running his hands through his shock of white hair, his scalp bright pink where the dense thatch thinned. "Well, I said to your parents I'd give it a try." He grinned. He must be in his sixties, his good looks grizzled by time.

"You must have had a good doctor to get you back on your feet so quickly," he went on. I viewed him suspiciously.

"Did my parents say that?"

"Well, no," he admitted, "but they did describe your injuries in some detail, so it doesn't take a brain surgeon to work it out – which is a good thing, because that's not my line; stands to reason. A *Dr Lynes*, I think Penny said."

I recoiled at the mention of his name.

“Yes.”

I looked away. The new-lit fire snapped and hissed greedily as the damp wood began to catch. The vigour of the flames made me feel tired.

“He must be good. Does he work at the university?”

I knew what he was trying to do in engaging me in conversation, drawing me out until he could delve deeper, penetrating the darker recesses of my mind; but it took less effort to go along with the pretence than to oppose it.

“Yes, Matthew heads up the medical faculty there.” I felt a swell of pride for him but I tried not to let it show in my voice in case it spilled onto my face, and then goodness only knows where it would end, and I didn’t want to cry – not in front of this near-stranger.

“Matthew... *Matthew* Lynes?” he said sharply. “Matthew Lynes treated your injuries?”

I sat up, alert to the changed tone.

“Yes. Why, have you heard of him?”

“It can’t be, it was *years* ago, but... the name,” he said, almost to himself. He looked at me. “What is he like – describe him.”

I struggled to find words to capture him. “He’s quite tall, slim, blond, reserved and quietly spoken... he has very blue eyes...”

“Very good-looking? Or, he was,” he interrupted.

“Yes, he still is – very.” I blushed, wondering why he shouldn’t be.

He stared at me curiously. “How old is he, roughly?”

I frowned, “Early thirties, I think.”

He dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. “Hah, well, obviously not the same person, then. That would’ve been quite a coincidence, though,” he mused.

“So you knew someone by the same name?” I probed.

He sat forward on the sofa, the old feather seat squishing under the pressure.

“Yes, some thirty years ago, it must be. I had a difficult op to perform – still the early days of some forms of cardiothoracic surgery, you see. We’d run into difficulty, and the only person who’d performed this particular procedure – pioneered it, actually – was in the States. Well, I had the patient on the slab – chest open – you’re not squeamish are you?” I shook my head. “Heart failing as we watched, and we had nowhere else to turn. So we called this young chap up on a sort of improvised video link – very grainy picture, but it worked. It was the middle of the night there and he talked us through it – didn’t bat an eyelid, very self-possessed, very calm for his age. Remarkable man. Only in his late twenties, early thirties, I’d say, but years ahead of the rest of us. Wonder what’s happened to him?”

My heart leapt erratically and I stared at the man sitting in front of me. Even with my dodgy maths I could work out that Matthew would have been a young child at the time Mike referred to, yet I had never believed in coincidence.

“Remarkable chap,” he said again, shaking his head. “What a coincidence – that name. Still...”

I made an attempt to appear politely indifferent, but really my mind was in turmoil. It made no sense whatsoever, yet that made it all the more plausible. Matthew never added up, and here – in this chance meeting – I had the first indication other than my own observations, that my growing suspicions might be right after all.

My face cracked into a smile. “Yes – *what* a coincidence,” I said brightly. “Gosh, I’m hungry – it must be breakfast time; would you like a cup of tea?” I stood up. “So, what are

you going to report to my parents?" I asked, blithely, showing him the way.

He beamed. "Oh, that you're a basket case quite definitely, young lady; no doubt about it," he replied, genially. *He had no idea...*

I smiled at his joke. "And that's the medical term for it, is it?"

"From a cardiothoracic surgeon's point of view? Quite probably!"

I couldn't wait to leave them all drinking tea and chatting. I knew that as soon as I left my parents would press him for a medical diagnosis, and I felt confident now that he would give them what I wanted. I made my excuses, grabbing toast and a mug of tea for appearances' sake and retreated to the sanity of my own room where I could filter out the information I had gleaned.

How many blond, unusually attractive and highly skilled American surgeons with his particular name could there be? And thirty years apart? That would make him in his sixties now and that would hardly describe the man *I* knew – not by a long stretch of the imagination. I thrummed my fingers on my desk as I thought, pleased that at last I had the flexibility in my hand to do so. Matthew's translation of the Italian medical treatise lay on top of the journal, and I opened it halfway through. His beautiful script – so unlike a typical doctor's scrawl – antique in style, and quite different to anything I had seen outside historic manuscripts. I closed the book, tapping its front cover, and thinking while my tea cooled enough to drink.

A thought struck me and I seized my handbag, emptying it of trivia onto my bed. I found my bank card and stuffed it

in my back pocket. I gulped the hot tea, sending it scalding down my throat, before hurrying downstairs and through the front door without stopping to say goodbye.

The fog had partially lifted by the time I tracked down a computer shop, but the day remained grey and lowering, the damp sky clinging stubbornly to the rooftops. It didn't take long – I knew what I wanted – my eyes glazing as the salesman started to point out all the irrelevant details of the laptop in front of me. Exasperated, I pushed the bank card towards the dazed man, thanking him and leaving the shop before he could tell me about its superior memory. As long as it was better than mine, I really didn't care.

I took it straight back upstairs to my room, grinding my teeth in frustration every second it took to load, drawing Matthew's scarf around my neck and feeling him closer to me now than I had dared for the last week. Only a vague idea presented itself but, in terms of regaining my sanity, whatever I did must be better than the indeterminate state in which I remained suspended.

Using my mobile to connect the laptop to the internet, a search of his surname brought an overwhelming number of results, none of which looked promising. I thought for a second and then typed in his first name as well. There were innumerable references to "Matthew" and various ones to "Lynes" – some in other languages – but the two names did not occur meaningfully together until the mention of his appointment to the college in Maine issued by the Dean some six years ago. I continued to scroll down until – on the eleventh page – I stopped. On impulse, I clicked a link to a site specializing in archival material – sports memorabilia and its ilk – mostly from the USA. I typed in a search and watched as a photograph of a yellowed newspaper sheet

appeared, the foggy picture inserted in the tight type of a previous century. The headline seemed clear enough – “Triumph for Top Team”. I smiled at the use of the well-worn alliterative title, then peered at the article more closely, wondering how on earth anybody could be expected to read it. I tapped the “Magnify” icon in one corner, and the page enlarged. I read the caption under the photograph:

Squad celebrate athletic title in record time.

I pulled the cursor over the photograph and right-clicked “Magnify” again... and choked. Behind four other young men and looking as if he didn’t want to be there – stood Matthew. A little taller by perhaps an inch or two, his fair hair and distinctive good looks set him apart. Even the sepia photograph aged by time and corroded in quality, could not disguise the attraction that exuded from him, nor extinguish the fire that he set ablaze within me.

“*What on earth...!*” I exclaimed out loud, then breathed deeply to calm my scratchy nerves, and searched for a date on the paper: 1932.

I began to laugh and then found I couldn’t stop, hysterical tears blurring the image in front of me. Confused by intermittent sobs and barks of renewed laughter, I wiped my eyes and blew my nose, carefully checking the article, the date and the photograph once more, noting in the text that he had been given an age of twenty-four, and the accolade: “an outstanding sprinter and athlete of our time”.

“And the rest,” I thought – and *all* the rest. If this was indeed Matthew – and I saw no reason to disbelieve it other than the date – he must be around a hundred years old now.

“Yeah, *right.*” I started to describe the boundary of my

room in short steps, shaking my head periodically to clear it, like a dog with ear mites. “This is so weird,” I said to the mice in the walls to whom I had habitually talked as a child. “Oh come *on*; he’s an anomaly, sure, but a *hundred-year-old* anomaly? Is that rational? Is it *reasonable*?” As usual, the mice remained passive. “Fat lot of good you lot are.” A thought struck me. “He’s not a ghost, is he? No – no, he can’t be; he’s too *alive*. Who are you, Matthew? *What* are you? Come on – talk to me, for goodness’ sake – this will drive me insane!”

A rattling on the door made me jump.

“Emma, who are you talking to? Can I come in?” The door-handle turned impotently in my father’s impatient hand. “Emma – let me in; *now*.”

I minimized the page on the screen, at the same time calling out to him, “I’m fine – hold on a mo, I’m just changing.”

I grabbed the big auburn knitted jacket and pulled it over my top, hoping he wouldn’t notice the minimal change in attire, and turned the key in the lock. He pushed the door open, and looked around the room as if expecting to find someone else sitting there, then at my face, which burned. He peered suspiciously at me.

“Who were you talking to?”

Picking up my hairbrush, I ran it through my hair, hoping the action would lend a semblance of normality.

“Only the mice, Dad – you know – they’re great listeners.”

He grunted; I had spent many hours in angst-ridden solitary conversation with the mice before leaving home for university, and it was something of a family joke.

“As long as you are all right. Your mother wanted you to know that lunch is ready; we’ll expect you in five minutes.”

“Great – I’ll be down in a moment.”

Taken aback by my enthusiasm, he paused before leaving

the room, checking it out once more, his thick eyebrows drawn together. My heart galloping, I saved the link as a bookmark and shut the screen of my laptop, before joining him on the stairs.

I ate lunch with them around the family table with more gusto than I had shown for a long time. My mother couldn't disguise her relief.

"Darling, you're looking much better. Did your chat with Mike help at all?"

I thought about our exchange and answered with absolute honesty.

"It was a revelation – thank you so much for inviting him over." I felt a smile come from nowhere, and she smiled back.

"Are you *sure* you're all right? You seem a little flustered, and Mike did say that the effects of shock can last for some time; *acute stress*, I think he called it." She exchanged glances with my father at the other end of the table.

"Quite sure," I said firmly. "I'm starting work again – you know how it gets under my skin."

"Oh, Emma, that's wonderful." She rose from the table and came over and kissed me on the forehead, her hands around my glowing face. I felt the slow creep of guilt but pushed it away before it could get a hold; she didn't need to know anything that would destroy her happiness at this moment.

"But I might spend an awful lot of time on research; you won't worry, will you?"

"Darling, no, of course not." She seemed genuinely pleased and I hugged her.

Dad still regarded my sudden zeal with caution; he hadn't yet told my mother about my conversation with the mice, and I hoped that he wouldn't feel the need to any time soon. "What are you researching?" he asked.

“The journal.”

“Ah, that.” He looked both relieved and gloomy at the same time. The journal had been a constant in our family since long before my birth, and he viewed it almost as a rival. I picked up my empty plate and glass.

“Leave that, darling; we’ll clear up. You go and get on with your work.” Mum took them from me as I began to argue, and pushed me gently towards the door of the room. “Just don’t overdo it; you know what you’re like. And Mike said you need to rest,” she called after me as I disappeared around the curve of the staircase. “He said you’re not as strong as you think...”

But her words were lost as I passed beyond earshot, already travelling back in time and into another life.