

# STRANDED

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Val McDermid

*Foreword by Ian Rankin*



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# Foreword

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Passion. Obsession. Revenge.

These three words would make a great tagline on a movie poster, and they are subjects Val McDermid tackles in her short stories. The mark of great shortstory writers, however, is that they not only unsettle their readers, shaking us out of complacency, but that they explore the psychology of human interaction. In his book of modern aphorisms, *The Book of Shadows*, the poet Don Paterson includes the following: ‘A mercy, I suppose, that it ended. Any deeper intimacy with each other anatomy would have involved a murder.’

Val McDermid could almost have written those words, including that wry and tangy ‘I suppose’. Of course, in Val’s world things often go far beyond Don Paterson’s imaginings, because the crimewriter recognises that love is the most destructive of emotions. It turns worlds upside down and people inside out. It can so easily turn to lust, or envy, or loathing. It can, and often does, lead to violence, both emotional and physical.

Val has always been a restless writer – the journey through her fictional universe could never have been made by a single, consistent hero or heroine – and the shortstory form suits her, allowing her to pick apart relationships with a furious skill, highlighting flaws and jealousies. The readers can see tragedy and horror emerging while the participants cannot. And always there are those twists awaiting us, just when we think we’ve seen it all. But Val is no fatalist: a dark humour infuses many of the stories here, and one story – ‘The Road and the Miles to Dundee’ – is very different to the others, allowing the author to explore her roots and the strong pull of family and background. It’s a huge, moving tale and one which shows her extraordinary range.

Those who have read her novel *Killing the Shadows* will be unsurprised that Val has a dark view of the writer’s life, exhibited here in no fewer than four stories. Her writers harbour dark secrets, painful memories, or are driven to act out revenge tragedies not dissimilar to the ones they write about. I only hope I never get on her wrong side . . .

I should, right at the start, have laid my cards on the table. I’ve known Val for years. But before I knew her, I knew her books. I was intrigued by the author biography on her early jackets. It seemed to me we must have grown up near one another. And so we did: five miles apart, yet we first met in Seattle, where we were both attending a crime-fiction convention. We went out drinking and talking and – eventually – singing. Since then, we’ve shared experiences which would make decent short stories in themselves . . . except that few people would believe them. The short story, after all, unlike real life, has to convince us that it could have happened, or might be happening right now. And this is the real trick of a good short story: it has to pull us into its world straight away, convincing us with immediately recognisable characters. Once snared, we can begin our descent into the dark confines of the plot.

There are stories here which will make you shudder, and which will linger long in the mind. Two worlds of hurt and healing: the hurt we do to each other; the healing that comes with recognition. The recognition that we have these potentials within us. It’s up to us to choose between good and evil, love

and destruction.

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Ian Rank

# Mittel

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Picture a city, its architecture a mix of Austro-Hungarian empire and former Eastern bloc. A mix that should sit uneasily together but instead fits comfortably from long familiarity. Picture this city, its long strings of trams dominating wide streets that feel dusty but which are in fact surprisingly clean. Picture this city, its inhabitants going about their imaginable business, their pace brisker than by the Mediterranean but more sultry than in its colder northern sisters. Picture this city. Call it Mittel.

And in this city, a street. And in this street, a café. And in this café, a table. And at this table, a woman. And in her hand, a pen.

What she is writing is not important. It is not part of the lesson she has to teach you. The fact that she is writing at a table, alone, however, is part of that lesson.

You have spent years living with a different woman, one who never understood that when you were irritable or impatient it was seldom with her. It was simply your way of externalising other stresses and other frustrations. And it made you crazy, her inability not to take this personally.

And now the wheel has turned and you are in love with a woman who is sometimes distant and shrouded. And you are slowly grasping the fact that this is seldom anything to do with you. It is simply her way of externalising other stresses, other frustrations. And you are having to learn not to take this personally.

You walk up to the table in the café in the street in the city of Mittel after the agreed length of time has passed. And now the sun is out. Her smile dazzles you with its warmth. And suddenly the tumbled click, the juggler hangs seven balls in the air and you know you've done the right thing. 'Perfect timing,' she says.

Yes, you think. But it doesn't last. Every time you take a run at it, your feet stumble on unexpected cobbles. And there's always a good reason for it, a reason that makes perfect sense to both of you, but a reason that still leaves you feeling bleached and split like driftwood on the shores of love.

At last, you call her on it. 'Is everything all right between us?'

Apparently surprised, she says, 'Of course it is.'

'Only, you haven't touched me since we got here. I'm not talking about sex, I'm talking about just touching me, kissing me, holding me.'

'You know I'm not comfortable with public displays of affection.'

'I know that. But I'm talking about when we're here together, in bed, in our room, in the hotel. For ourselves.'

'I'm nervous about my presentation today,' she says. 'And I'm tired. And this bed's uncomfortable. And it's hot. And I'm premenstrual. And I find it hard to combine work and pleasure. And it's not fair. I'm not even awake.' And she turns away because she doesn't want to feel your eyes on her.

You tell her you love her. She grunts, 'Love you too.'

So you keep your distance all day. You leave her to talk to everybody else, to dazzle them with her discourse, which she does supremely well. You notice this, in spite of your efforts not to let her feel you're scrutinising her. You stay back, out of her face, give her space. And at last, at the end of the



afternoon, you're back at the hotel, there's the prospect of a couple of hours together before the evening marathon of more presentations in languages neither of you speak.

Listen to this. A city where the low boom of church bells calling the hours is lost in the rattle of rain on café awnings. Breathe this. A city whose market square is heavy with the perfume of strawberries and lavender. Imagine this. A city where wars have left recent scars and where history is alive and kicking, where conversations turn to conflicts on the turn of a nuance. And in this city, a hotel. And in this hotel, a room. And in this room, a woman. She's standing behind you, fingers tentative on your shoulder blades. You wish to fuck she'd stop it. You told her right at the start that you don't do reassurance. Your self-sufficiency makes you impatient of neediness. And today, with an unnamed anxiety gnawing at you, making her feel better isn't something you're capable of.

You love this woman. You've opened yourself up to possibilities with her. You don't do commitment, but you've committed to her by the simple – but for you, infinitely complicated – act of telling the people you care about that you're with her and you're happy. But sometimes you wish she was a million miles away. She's easier to love at a distance when her need surfaces and makes demands on you that you don't want to meet. Sure, you are touched by her pain. And there are times when you are proud to be the one that this strong woman is willing to be vulnerable with. But sometimes it's just too damn hard.

You know you're not always fair to her. She'd pay whatever it took to love you, and all you're required to do is to make a space in your life big enough for part-time love. But she's not a small insignificant person. She's big in every way and she's already carved a niche in your world. Her name follows you round at work and at play. Her face insinuates itself at unlikely and unpredictable points in your daily existence. You turn on the radio and her voice fills the room. And sometimes her ubiquity even in her absence feels like suffocation, her very generosity a trap.

You want this to work, more than you've wanted anything for a long time. You want what she brings in her gift – reliability, intelligence, good humour and a sense of a future that contains what you both want. And you do want so many of the same things; truly, you do. You know because you've both spent a long time working them out before either of you even knew that you would end up letting the love breathe.

But still you shrug away from the stroke of her fingers. Just a tiny movement, almost imperceptible but enough for her to get the message. From the corner of your peripheral vision, you see her hand jerk back.

'What do you want to do?' you say. 'It's probably too late in the day for a museum or a gallery. We could go back up to the old town. Or look at shoe shops.' This last with a grin. You know her weakness for footwear.

'I don't care,' she says. 'This is the last time we'll have alone together for ages. I don't mind what we do. I'd be happy to stand on a street corner in the rain as long as I'm with you.'

You know she means it. You picture the two of you locked in an embrace on the busy corner of the street, oblivious to the trams clattering past, the traffic cop dressed in white directing the cars and buses, the umbrellas parting around you as the rain pours down, plastering your hair to your head.

running in rivulets down the inside of the collar of your leather jacket. You imagine the tender warmth of her lips against yours, the feel of her body soft against the stiff leather, and you know you love her enough to do it too.

‘OK,’ you say. ‘Let’s go.’

And then she reaches for you, hands at your waist, eyes pleading. And it’s gone, the dream of love in the rain on the street corner.

Your hands flutter up in a defensive gesture. ‘I’m not . . . I can’t . . . I’m not in the right place for this.’

You see the hurt she tries to hide and you hate the way she can make you feel bad for nothing more than being who you are.

Out in the street, the rain falls relentlessly. Two blocks from the hotel, she stops abruptly and says she doesn’t want to walk. ‘You go off and do your thing,’ she says. ‘I’ll catch up with you at the presentation.’

You smile. It’s a real smile and you see that register in her eyes. And suddenly, surprisingly, she’s smiling too. And her smile is a mirror of yours in its genuineness.

And that’s when you understand it might just be fine.

Picture a city. A city whose tacky souvenirs include a pair of wooden figures sheltering under a umbrella. A city where statues of heroes are turned to face the direction of the latest enemy. A city that tries not to wear its hurt on its sleeve. Picture this city. Call it Mittel.

# Driving a Hard Bargain

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I'd find it a lot easier to believe in therapists if they acknowledged the existence of the inner spiv as well as the inner child, parent, teacher and washingmachine mechanic. We've all got one, and no matter how hard we try to be stylish and sophisticated, our inner spiv will sabotage us every time. It's the driving force that dictates Prince Charles's cuff links and Hugh Grant's sexual hot button.

I share my weakness with Princess Diana. No, I'm not talking bleating, indiscreet me. I'm talking Mercedes motors. But it's not the big Mercs and the turbocharged Bentleys that speak to the spiv in me. It's the flashy cabriolets, sleek feline coupés that make teenage boys on street corners drool. Tragically, these days, like sex for men with xxxx-large beer guts, it's all in the mind. The one drawback to my chosen career as Kate Brannigan, private eye, is that when it comes to cruising the mean streets of Manchester, it's anonymity that cuts it, not flamboyance.

A girl can still dream, though. So when Gerry Banks told me he'd lost his BMW Z3 roadster, one of only half a dozen then in the country, an advance release that had cost him a small fortune to come by and which turned every head when he drove down the street, I understood why he spoke as if he was talking about the death of a particularly close and beloved family member. If I'd been lucky enough to own one of those little beauties, I'd have probably replaced the bedroom wall with an up-and-over door so I could sleep with it. And if some rat had kidnapped my baby and held it to ransom, I'd have hired every investigator in the kingdom if it meant bringing my darling home to me.

Banks had revealed his pain behind the closed door of his office, a functional box on the upper floor of the custombuilt factory where his company made state-of-the-art electronic components. The sort of things that tell your tumble drier exactly when to scorch your favourite shirt. The best you could call the view of the nearby M62 would be 'uninspiring'. But if, like Gerry Banks, all you could see was a hole in the car park where a scarlet roadster ought to be, it must have been heartbreaking.

'I take it that's the scene of the crime,' I said, joining him by the window.

He pointed to the empty parking space nearest the door, the series of smooth curves that made up his pudgy features rearranging themselves into corrugated lines. 'Bastard,' was all he said.

I waited for a couple of minutes, the way you do when someone's paying their respects to the dead. When I spoke, my voice was gentle. 'I'm going to need full details.'

'Fine,' he sighed, turning away and throwing himself miserably into his black leather executive chair. I was left with the bogstandard visitor's number in charcoal tweed and tubular metal. Just in case I didn't know who was the boss here.

'Take me through it from the beginning,' I urged when he showed no signs of communicating further.

'He turned up on Tuesday morning at nine. He said his name was John Wilkins and he ran a valet executive valet service for cars. He gave me a business card and a glossy brochure. It quotes half a dozen top Manchester businessmen saying what a great job this Valet-While-U-Work does.' His voice was the self-justifying whine of a man desperate not to be seen as the five-star prat he'd been. He pushed a folded A4 sheet towards me, a business card lying on top of it. I gave them the brief glance

that was all they deserved. Nothing that couldn't come out of any neighbourhood print shop.

‘So you agreed to let him valet your car?’

He nodded. ‘I gave him the keys and he promised to have it back by close of business. But he didn’t. He clenched his jaw, bunching the muscles under his ear.

‘And that’s when you got the fax?’

He looked away, ostensibly searching for the piece of paper I knew was right under his hand. ‘Here,’ he said.

‘We’ve got your car. By this time Friday, you’ll have ten thousand pounds. Fair exchange is no robbery. No cops or the car gets it just badly enough not to be a writeoff. Yours faithfully, Rob-It-While-U-Work,’ I read. A villain with a sense of humour. ‘The price seems a bit steep,’ I said. ‘I thought the Z3 only cost about twenty grand new.’

‘If you can get one. They’re not officially released till next January and there’s already a two-year waiting list. Money can’t buy a replacement. I’m not interested in common rubbish. You know where I live? Not in some poxy executive development. I live in a converted sixteenth-century chapel. There’s not another one like it in the world. Anywhere. I want my car back, you understand? Without a scratch on it,’ Banks said, the ghost of his management skills starting to emerge from the shadows of his grief. ‘I’ll have the money here tomorrow afternoon, and I want you to take care of the exchange. Can you handle that?’

I’m so used to middleaged businessmen taking one look at my twenty-nine-year-old five feet and three inches and treating me like the tea girl that it barely registers on the Brannigan scale of indignation any more. ‘I can handle it,’ I said mildly. ‘But wouldn’t you rather get the car back and hang on to the cash?’

‘You think you could do that? Without putting the car at risk?’

I gave him the stare I’d copied from Al Pacino. ‘I can try.’

Like journalists, private eyes are only as good as their sources. Unfortunately, our best ones tend to be people your mother would bar from the doorstep, never mind the house. Like my mechanic, Handbrake. He’s no ordinary grease monkey. He learned his trade tuning up the wheels for a series of perfect getaways after his mates had relieved some financial institution of a wad they hadn’t previously realized was surplus to requirements. He only got caught the once. That had been enough.

When he got out, he’d set himself up in a backstreet garage and gone straight. Ish. But he still knew who was who among the players on the wrong side of the fence. And as well as keeping my car nondescript on the outside and faster than a speeding bullet on the inside, he tipped me the odd windfall on items he thought I might be interested in. It sat easier with his conscience than talking to Officer Dibble. He answered the phone just as I was about to give up. ‘Yeah?’ Time is money; chat is inessential.

‘Handbrake, Brannigan.’ The conversational style was catching. ‘I’m working for a punter who’s had his BMW Z3 ripped for a ransom. The guy called himself John Wilkins. Valet-While-U-Work. Any ideas?’

‘Dunno the name but there’s a couple of teams have tried it on,’ he told me. ‘A Z3, you say? I didn’t

think there were any over here yet.'

'There's only a handful, according to the punter.'

'Right. Rarity value, that's what makes it worth ransoming. Anything else, forget it – cheaper to let the car walk, cop for the insurance. I'll ask around, talk to the usual suspects, see what the word is.'

I started the engine and slipped the car into gear at about the same time my brain did the same thing. A couple of minutes later, I was grinning at Gerry Banks's receptionist for the second time that morning. 'Me again,' I chirped. Nothing like stating the obvious to make the victim of your interrogation feel superior.

'Mr Banks has gone into a meeting with a client,' she said in the bored singsong you need to master before they let you qualify as a receptionist.

'Actually, it was you I wanted a word with.' Ingratiating smile.

She looked startled. I'd obviously gone for a concept she was unfamiliar with.

'Why?'

'Mr Banks has hired me to try to get his car back,' I said. 'A couple of questions?'

She shrugged.

'When the car valet bloke arrived, did he ask who the Z3 belonged to?'

She shook her head. 'He said, could he have five minutes with Mr Banks concerning the ongoing maintenance of his roadster. I buzzed Mr Banks, then sent him in.'

'Those were his actual words? He said roadster?'

'That's right. Like Mr Banks always calls it.'

I'd been afraid that's what she would say.

I was being ushered into the presence of my financial advisor when Handbrake rang me back. Jos waved me to one of his comfortable leather armchairs while I wrestled the phone out of my bag and held it to my ear. 'You got a problem I can't solve,' Handbrake said. 'Whoever's got your punter's motor, either they're not from around here or they're new talent. So new nobody knows who they are.'

'I had a funny feeling you were going to tell me that,' I said. 'I owe you one.'

'I'll add it to your next service.'

I hung up. This was beginning to look more and more like something very personal. 'Drink?' Jos asked sympathetically.

'I'm not stopping. This is just a quick smashandgrab raid. Gerry Banks, Compuponents. Who's got the keys in for him?'

The only thing in common between Gerry Banks's home and the flat whose bell I was leaning on was that they'd both been converted. Somehow, I couldn't see my client in this scruffy Edwardian rattrap in the hinterland between the curry restaurants of Rusholme and the street hookers of Whalley Range.

Eventually the door opened on a woman in jeans faded to the colour of her eyes, a baggy chenille jumper and her early thirties. Dark blonde hair was loosely pulled back in a ponytail. She had the kind of face that makes men pause with their pints halfway to their lips. 'Yeah?' she asked.

'Tania Banks?'

Her head tilted to one side and two little lines appeared between her perfectly groomed eyebrows.

‘Who wants to know?’

I held a business card at eye level. ‘I’ve come about the car.’

The animation leaked out of her face like the air from a punctured tyre. ‘I haven’t got a car,’ she said, her voice grating and cold.

‘Neither has your husband.’

A muscle at the corner of her mouth twitched. ‘I’ve got nothing to say.’

I shrugged. ‘Please yourself. I thought we could leave the police out of it, but if you want to play the other way . . .’

‘You don’t frighten me,’ she lied.

‘Maybe not, but I’m sure your husband knows people who would.’

Her shoulders sagged, her mouth slackened in defeat. ‘You’d better come in.’

The bedsit was colder and damper than the street outside, in spite of the gas fire hissing at full blast. She perched on the bed, leaving the chair to me. ‘You left him three months ago,’ I said.

‘I got tired of everybody feeling sorry for me. I got tired of him only ever coming home when the latest mistress was out of town on a modelling assignment,’ she sighed, lighting a cheap cigarette.

‘And you wanted a life. That’s why you’ve been doing the part-time law degree,’ I said.

Her eyebrows flickered. ‘I finished the degree. I’ve just started the one-year course you need to be a solicitor.’

‘You don’t get a grant.’ Some of my best friends are lawyers; I know about these things. ‘The fees are somewhere around four and a half grand. Plus you’ve got to have something to live on. Which you expected to get from the divorce settlement. Only, there’s a problem, isn’t there?’

‘You’re well informed,’ she said.

‘It’s my job. He’s clever with money, your husband. On paper, he’s spotless. It’s the offshore holding company that owns the car, the house, everything. He takes a salary of a few hundred a month. And the company pays for everything else. And it’s all perfectly legal. On paper, he can’t afford to pay you a shilling. So you decided to extract your divorce settlement by a slightly unorthodox route.’

She looked away, studying the hand that held the cigarette. ‘Ten grand’s a fraction of what I’m entitled to,’ she said softly. Her admission of guilt didn’t give me the usual adrenalin rush. She sighed again. ‘You have no idea what I’ve had to put up with over the years.’

I submitted my account to Gerry Banks without a qualm. I’d done the job he asked me to do, and as far as I was concerned, he should be grateful. He’d asked me to handle the exchange, to make sure his car came back to him in one piece. It had been me who’d made the foolish offer to get the Z3 back without handing over the cash. And everybody knows that we women aren’t up to the demanding job of being private eyes, don’t they? Hardly surprising I wasn’t able to live up to my promises.

Besides, we’ll have forgotten each other inside six months. But I’ll never forget the wind in my hair the night Tania Banks and my inner spiv cruised the M6 till dawn with the top down.

# The Wagon Mound

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Nothing destroys the quality of life so much as insomnia. Ask any parent of a new baby. It only takes a few broken nights to reduce the most calm and competent person to a twitching shadow of their normal proficiency. My wakefulness started when the nightmares began. When I did manage to drop off, the visions my subconscious mind conjured up were guaranteed to wake me, sweating and terrified, within a couple of hours of nodding off. It didn't take long before I began to fear sleep itself, dreading the demons that ripped through the fabric of my previous ease. I tried sleeping pills, I tried alcohol. But nothing worked.

I never dreamed that I'd rediscover the art of sleeping through the night thanks to a legal precedent. In 1961, the Privy Council heard a case concerning a negligent oil spillage from a ship called the *Wagon Mound* in Sydney Harbour. The oil fouled a nearby wharf, and in spite of expert advice that it wouldn't catch fire, when the wharf's owners began welding work, the oil did exactly what it was supposed to do. The fire that followed caused enough damage for it to be worth taking to court, where the Privy Council finally decreed that the ship's owners weren't liable because the *type* of harm sustained by the plaintiff must itself be reasonably foreseeable. When Roger, the terminally boring commercial attaché at the Moscow Embassy, launched into the tale the other night in the bar *Proyekt OGI*, he could never have imagined that it would change my life so dramatically. But the lawyers have never been noted for their imagination.

Proximity. That's another legal principle that came up during Roger's lecture. How many intervening stages lie between cause and effect. I think by then I was the only one listening, because his disquisition had made me think back to the starting point of my sleepless nights.

Although the seeds were sown when my boss in London decided to invite the bestselling biographer Sam Uttley on a British Council tour of Russia, I can't be held accountable for that. The first point where I calculate I have to accept responsibility was on the night train from Moscow to St Petersburg.

I'd been looking after Sam ever since he'd landed at Sheremetyevo airport two days before. I hadn't seen him smile in all that time. He'd lectured lugubriously at the university, glumly addressed a gathering at the British Council library, done depressing signings at two bookshops and sulked his way around a reception at the Irish embassy. Even the weather seemed to reflect his mood, grey clouds lowering over Moscow and turning April into autumn. Minding visiting authors is normally the part of my job I like best, but spending time with Sam was about as much fun as having a hole in your shoe in a Russian winter. We'd all been hoping for some glamour from Sam's visit; his Channel Four series on the roots of biography had led us to expect a glowing Adonis with twinkling eyes and a gleaming grin. Instead, we got a glowering black dog.

Over dinner on the first evening, he'd downed his vodka like a seasoned Russian hand, and gloomed like the most depressive Slav in the Caucasus. On the short walk back to his hotel, I asked him if everything was all right. 'No,' he said shortly. 'My wife's just left me.'

Right, I thought. Don't go there, Sarah. 'Oh,' I think I said.

The final event of his Moscow visit was a book signing, and afterwards I took him to dinner to pa

the time till midnight, when the train would leave for St Pete's. That was when the floodgates opened. He was miserable, he admitted. He was a terrible company. But Rachel had walked out on him after eight years of marriage. There wasn't anyone else, she'd said. It was just that she was bored with him, tired of his celebrity, fed up of feeling inferior intellectually. I pointed out that these reasons seemed somewhat contradictory.

He brightened up at that. And suddenly the sun came out. He acted as if I'd somehow put my finger on something that should make him feel better about the whole thing. He radiated light, and I basked in the warmth of his smile. Before long, we were laughing together, telling our life stories, swapping intimacies. Flirting, I suppose.

We boarded the train a little before midnight, each dumping our bags in our separate first-class compartments. Then Sam produced a bottle of Georgian champagne from his holdall. 'A nightcap?' he suggested.

'Why not?' I was in the mood, cheered beyond reason by the delights of his company. He sat down on the sleeping berth beside me, and it seemed only natural when his arm draped across my shoulder. I remember the smell of him; a dark, masculine smell with an overlay of some spicy cologne with a hint of edge of cinnamon. If I'm honest, I was willing him to kiss me before he actually did. I was entirely disarmed by his charm. But I also felt sorry for the pain that had been so obvious over the previous two days. And maybe, just maybe, the inherent *Doctor Zhivago* romance of the night train tipped the balance.

I don't usually do this kind of thing. What am I saying? I *never* do this kind of thing. In four years of chasing around after authors, or having them chase after me, I'd not given into temptation once. But Sam penetrated all of my professional defences, and I moaned under his hands from Moscow to Petersburg. By morning, he swore I'd healed his heart. By the time he left St Pete's three days later, we'd arranged to meet in London, where I was due to attend a meeting in ten days' time. I'd been out of love for a long time; it wasn't hard to fall for a man who was handsome, clever and amusing, and who seemed to find me irresistible.

Two days' later, I got his first e-mail. I'd been checking every waking hour on the hour, wondering when and how, and edgy. It turned out I had good reason to be anxious. The e-mail was short and sour.

Dear Sarah, Rachel and I have decided we want to try to resolve our difficulties. It'll come as no surprise to you that my marriage is my number one priority. So I think it best if we don't communicate further. Sorry if this seems cold, but there's no other way to say it. Sam.

I was stunned. This wasn't cold, it was brutal. A hard jab below the ribs, designed to take my breath away and deflect any possible comeback. I felt the physical shock in the pit of my stomach.

Of course, I blamed myself for my stupidity, my eagerness to believe that a man as charismatic as Sam could fall for me. Good old reliable Sarah, the safe pair of hands who second-guessed authors' needs before they could even voice them. I felt such a fool. A bruised, exploited fool.

Time passed, but there was still a raw place deep inside me. Sam Uttley had taken more from me than a few nights of sexual pleasure; he'd taken away my trust in my judgement. I told nobody about my humiliation. It would have been one pain too many.

Then Lindsay McConnell arrived. An award-winning dramatist, she'd come to give a series of



workshops on radio adaptation. She was impeccably professional, no trouble to take care of. And we hit it off straightaway. On her last night, I took her to my favourite Moscow eating place, a traditional Georgian restaurant tucked away in a courtyard in the Armenian quarter. As the wine slipped down we gossiped and giggled. Then, in the course of some anecdote, she mentioned Sam Uttley. Just hearing his name made my guts clench. ‘You know Sam?’ I asked, struggling not to sound too interested.

‘Oh God, yes. I was at university with Rachel, his wife. Of course, you had Sam out here last year didn’t you? He said he’d had a really interesting time.’

I bet he did, I thought bitterly. ‘How are they now? Sam and Rachel?’ I asked with the true masochist’s desire for the twist of the knife.

Lindsay looked puzzled. ‘What do you mean, how are they now?’

‘When Sam was here, Rachel had just left him.’

She frowned. ‘Are you sure you’re not confusing him with someone else? They’re solid as a rock Sam and Rachel. God knows, if he was mine I’d have murdered him years ago, but Rachel thinks the sun shines out of his arse.’

It was my turn to frown. ‘He told me she’d just walked out on him. He was really depressed about it.’

Lindsay shook her head. ‘God, how very Sam. He hates touring, you know. He’ll do anything to squeeze out a bit of sympathy, make sure he gets premier-league treatment. He just likes to have everyone running around after him, Sarah. I’m telling you, Rachel has never left him. Now I think about it, that week he was in Russia, I went round there for dinner. Me and Rachel and a couple of his colleagues. You know, from *Material Girl*. The magazine she works for. I think if they’d split up, she might have mentioned it, don’t you?’

I hoped I wasn’t looking as stunned as I felt. I’d never thought of myself as stupid, but the calculating bastard had spun me a line and reeled me in open-mouthed like the dumbest fish in the pond. But of course, because I’m a woman and that’s how we’re trained to think, I was still blaming myself more than him. I’d clearly been sending out the signals of needy gullibility and he’d just come up with the right line to exploit them.

A few weeks later, I was still smarting from what I saw as my self-inflicted wound at the Edinburgh Book Festival, where us British Council types gather like bees to pollen. But at least I’d finally have the chance to share my idiocy with Camilla, my opposite number in Jerusalem. We’d worked together years before in Paris, and we’d become bosom buddies. The only reason I hadn’t told her about Sam previously was that every time I wrote it down in an e-mail, it just looked moronic. It needed a girl’s night in with a couple of bottles of decent red wine before I could let this one spill out.

Late on the second night, after a particularly gruelling Amnesty International event, we sneaked back to the flat we were sharing with a couple of the boys from the Berlin office and started in on the confessional. My story crawled out of me, and I realised yet again how foolish I’d been from the horrified expression on Camilla’s face. That and her appalled silence. ‘I don’t believe it,’ she breathed.

‘I know, I know,’ I groaned. ‘How could I have been so stupid?’

‘No, no,’ she said angrily. ‘Not you, Sarah. Sam Uttley.’

‘What?’

‘That duplicitous bastard Uttley. He pulled exactly the same stunt on Georgie Bullen in Madrid. The identical line about his wife leaving him. She told me about it when I flew in for *Semana Negra* last month.’

‘But I thought Georgie was living with someone?’

‘She was,’ Camilla said. ‘Paco, the stage manager at the opera house. She’d taken Uttley down to Granada to do some lectures there, that’s when it happened. Georgie saw the scumbag off on the plane and came straight home and told Paco it was over, she’d met someone else. She threw him out, the two days later she got the killer e-mail from Sam.’

We gazed at each other, mouths open. ‘The bastard,’ I said. For the first time, anger blotted out my selfpity and pain.

‘Piece of shit,’ Camilla agreed.

We spent the rest of the bottle and most of the second one thinking of ways to exact revenge on Sam Uttley, but we both knew that there was no way I was going back to Moscow to find a hit man to take him out. The trouble was, we couldn’t think of anything that would show him up without making us look like silly credulous girls. Most blokes, no matter how much they might pretend otherwise, would reckon: good on him for working out such a foolproof scam to get his leg over. Most women would reckon we’d got what we deserved for being so naïve.

I was thirty thousand feet above Poland when the answer came to me. The woman in the seat next to me had been reading *Material Girl* and she offered it to me when she’d finished. I looked down through the editorial list, curious to see exactly what Rachel Uttley did on the magazine. Her name was near the top of the credits. *Fiction editor, Rachel Uttley*. A quick look at the contents helped me deduce that, as well as the books page, Rachel was responsible for editing the three short stories. There, at the end of the third, was a sentence saying that submissions for publication should be sent to her.

I’ve always wanted to write. One of the reasons I took this job in the first place was to learn as much as I could from those who do it successfully. I’ve got half a novel on my hard disk, but I reckoned it was time to try a short story.

Two days later, I’d written it. The central character was a biographer who specialises in seducing professional colleagues on foreign trips with a tale about his wife having left him. Then he’d dump them as soon as he’d got home. When one of his victims realises what he’s been up to, she exposes the serial adulterer by sending his wife, a magazine editor, a short story revealing his exploits. And the wife, recognising her errant husband from the pen portrait, finally does walk out on him.

Before I could have second thoughts, I printed it out and stuffed it in an envelope addressed to Rachel at *Material Girl*. Then I sat back and waited.

For a couple of weeks, nothing happened.

Then, one Tuesday morning, I was sitting in the office browsing BBC online news. His name leapt out at me. ‘Sam Uttley Dies in Burglary’, read the headline in the latest-news section. I clicked on the <more> button.

Bestselling biographer and TV presenter Sam Uttley was found dead this morning at his home in North London. It is believed he disturbed a burglar. He died from a single stab wound to the stomach. Police say there was evidence of a

break-in at the rear of the house.

~~Uttley was discovered by his wife, Rachel, a journalist. Police are calling for witnesses who may have seen one or two men fleeing the scene in the early hours of the morning.~~

I had to read the bare words three or four times before they sank in. Suddenly, his lies didn't matter any more. All I could think of was his eyes on mine, the flash of his easy smile, the touch of his hand. The sparkle of wit in his conversation. The life in him that had been snuffed out. The books he would never write.

Over a succession of numb days, I pursued the story via the internet. Bits and pieces emerged gradually. They'd had an attempted burglary a few months before. That night, Rachel had gone off to bed but Sam had stayed up late, working in his study. Sam, the police reckoned, had heard the sound of breaking glass and gone downstairs to investigate. The intruder had snatched up a knife from the kitchen worktop and plunged it into his stomach then fled. Sam had bled to death on the kitchen floor. It had taken him a while to die, they thought. And Rachel had come down for breakfast to find him stiff and cold. Poor bloody Rachel, I thought.

On the fifth day after the news broke, there was a large manila envelope among my post, franked with the *Material Girl* logo. My story had come winging its way back to me. Inside, there was a handwritten note from Rachel.

Dear Sarah,

Thank you so much for your submission. I found your story intriguing and thought-provoking. A real eye-opener, in fact. But I felt the ending was rather weak and so I regret we're unable to publish it. However, I like your style. I'd be very interested to see more of your work.

Gratefully yours,

Rachel Uttley

That's when I realised what I'd done. Like Oscar Wilde, I'd killed the thing I'd loved. And Rachel had made sure I knew it.

That's when my sleepless nights started.

And that's why I'm so very, very grateful for Roger and the case they call *Wagon Mound* (No.1) and for an understanding of proximity. Thanks to him, I've finally realised I'm not the guilty party here. Neither is Rachel.

The guilty party is the one who started the wagon rolling. Lovely, sexy, reckless Sam Uttley.

# Breathtaking Ignorance

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Every caterer's nightmare. The choking customer, collapsed on the floor gasping for breath. I already hurtled through from the kitchen as soon as I heard the coughing and spluttering, and I made to his side just as he slumped to the floor like a Bonfire Night guy, legs splayed, head lolling, eyes popping.

The boardroom crowd were keeping their distance, remembering all the strictures they'd ever heard about giving people air. There was a nervous hush, the only sounds the croaking gasps of the man on the floor. I knew exactly who he was. Brian Bayliss, chief legal executive of Kaymen Merchant Bank. I'd catered functions for him, both at the bank's Canary Wharf headquarters and at his opulent house in Suffolk, and I knew he was as pompous and bossy as they come. But that didn't stop me kneeling down beside him and dragging him into a sitting position so I could perform the Heimlich manoeuvre. That's one of the many fascinating things you learn at catering college. You encircle the victim with your arms, hug them tightly and sharply, forcing the air out of their lungs, which in turn frees whatever is blocking their windpipe. The downside is that somebody usually ends up covered in sick.

Bayliss was bright scarlet by now, his lips turning an ominous blue. I got my arms round him, smelling the sweat that mingled with his expensive cologne. I contracted my arms, forcing his ribs inward. Nothing happened. His gasping sounded ever more frantic, less effective.

'I'll call an ambulance, Meg,' John Collings said desperately, moving towards the boardroom phone. He'd organised this lunch, and I could see this was the last contract for a directors' thrash that I'd be getting from him.

I tried the manoeuvre again. This time, Bayliss slumped heavily against me. The dreadful retching of his breathing suddenly ceased. The heaving in his chest seemed to have stopped. 'Oh my God,' I said. 'He's stopped breathing.'

A couple of the other guests moved forward and gingerly pulled Bayliss's still body away from me. I freed my skirt from under him and crawled round him on my knees, saying, 'Quick, the kiss of life.' Out of the corner of my eye I could see John slam the phone down. In the corner behind him, Tess, the waitress who'd served him, was weeping quietly.

John's chief accountant had taken on the unenviable task of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Somehow, I knew he was wasting his time. I leaned back on my heels, muttering, 'I don't understand it. I just don't understand it.'

The ambulance crew arrived within five minutes and clamped an oxygen mask over his face. They strapped Bayliss to a stretcher and I followed them down the corridor and into the lift. David Bromley, Bayliss's deputy, climbed into the ambulance alongside me, looking like he wanted to ask what the hell I thought I was doing.

'It was my food he was eating,' I said defensively. 'I want to make sure he's all right.'

'Looks a bit late for that,' he said. He didn't sound filled with regret.

At the hospital, David and I found a quiet corner near the WRVS coffee stall. I stared glumly at the floor and said softly, 'He didn't look like he was going to pull through.'

‘No,’ David agreed with a note almost of relish in his voice.

‘You don’t sound too upset,’ I hazarded.

‘That obvious, is it?’ he asked pleasantly. ‘No, I’m not upset. The bank will be a better place without him. The guy’s a complete shit. He’s a tyrant at the office and at home too, from what I can gather. He says jump and the only question you’re allowed to ask is, how high? He goes through secretaries like other people go through rolls of Sellotape.’

‘Oh God,’ I groaned. ‘So if he recovers, he’ll probably sue me for negligence.’

‘I doubt if he’d have a case. His own greed was too much of a contributory factor. I saw him stuffing down those chicken and garlic canapés like there was no tomorrow,’ David consoled me.

Before we could say more, a weary-looking woman in a white coat approached us. ‘Are you the two people who came in the ambulance with –’, she checked her clipboard. ‘Brian Bayliss?’ We nodded. ‘Are you related to Mr Bayliss?’

We shook our heads. ‘I’m a colleague,’ David said.

‘And I catered the lunch where Mr Bayliss had his choking fit,’ I revealed.

The doctor nodded. ‘Can you tell me what Mr Bayliss had to eat?’

‘Just some canapés. That’s all we’d served by then,’ I said defensively.

‘And what exactly was in the canapés?’

‘There were two sorts,’ I explained. ‘Smoked chicken or salmon and lobster.’

‘Brian was eating the chicken ones,’ David added helpfully.

The doctor looked slightly puzzled. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure. He never touched fish,’ David added. ‘He wouldn’t even have it on the menu we were hosting a function.’

‘Look,’ I said. ‘What exactly is the problem here?’

The doctor sighed. ‘Mr Bayliss has died, apparently as a result of anaphylactic shock.’ We must both have looked bewildered, for she went on to explain. ‘A profound allergic reaction. Essentially, the pathways in his respiratory tract just closed up. He couldn’t physically get enough air into his lungs so he asphyxiated. I’ve never heard of it being brought on by chicken, though. The most common cause is an allergic reaction to a bee sting,’ she added thoughtfully.

‘I know he was allergic to shellfish,’ David offered. ‘That’s why he had this thing about never serving fish.’

‘Oh my God,’ I wailed. ‘The lobster!’ They both stared at me. ‘I ground up the lobster shells into powder and mixed them with mayonnaise for the fish canapés. The mayo for the chicken ones had grilled red peppers and roast garlic mixed into it. They looked very similar. Surely there couldn’t have been a mix-up in the kitchen?’ I covered my face with my hands as I realised what had happened.

Of course, they both fussed over me and insisted it wasn’t my fault. I pulled myself together after a few minutes, then the doctor asked David about Bayliss’s next of kin. ‘His wife’s called Alexandra,’ he told her, and recited their home number.

How did I know it was their home number? Not from catering executive lunches, I’m afraid. Perhaps I should have mentioned that Alexandra and I have been lovers for just over a year now. And that Brian was adamant that if she left him, he’d make sure she left without a penny from him. And, more

importantly, that she'd never see her children again.

I just hope the mix-up with the mayo won't hurt my reputation for gourmet boardroom food too much.

# White Nights, Black Magic

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When night falls in St Petersburg, the dead become more palpable. In this city built on blood and bone, they're always present. But when darkness gathers, they're harder to escape. The frozen drowned serfs who paid the price for Peter the Great's determination to fulfil Nostradamus's prediction that Venice would rise from the dead waters of the north; the assassinated tsars whose murders changed surprisingly little; the starved victims of the Wehrmacht's nine-hundred-day siege; the buried corpses of lords of the imagination such as Dostoevsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov; they're all there in the shifting shadows, their foetid breath tainting the chilly air that comes off the Neva and shivers through the streets.

My dead too. I never feel closer to Elinor than when I walk along the embankment of Vasilyevskiy Ostrov on a winter's night. The familiar grandeur of the Hermitage and St Isaac's cathedral on the opposite bank touch me not at all. What resonates inside me is the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand, the spark of her eyes.

It shouldn't be this way. It shouldn't be the darkness that conjures her up for me, because we didn't make those memories in the dead core of winter. The love that exploded between us was a child of the light, a dream state that played itself out against the backdrop of the White Nights, those heady summer weeks when the sun never sets over St Petersburg.

Like all lovers, we thought the sun would never set on us either. But it did. And although Elinor isn't one of the St Petersburg dead, she comes back to haunt me when the city's ghosts drift through the streets in wraiths of river mist. I know too that this is no neutral visitation. Her presence demands something of me, and it's taken me a long time to figure out what that is. But I know now. Elinor understood that Russia can be a cruel and terrible place, and also that I am profoundly Russian. So tonight, I will make reparation.

Three summers ago, Elinor unpacked her bags in the Moscow Hotel down at the far end of Nevsky Prospekt. She'd never been to Russia before, and when we met that first evening, she radiated a burst of excitement that enchanted me. We Russians are bound to our native land by a terrible, doomed sentimental attachment, and we are predisposed to like anyone who shows the slightest sign of sharing that love.

But there was more than that linking us from the very beginning. Anyone who has ever been in an abusive relationship has had their mental map altered forever. It's hard to explain precisely how that manifests itself, but once you've been there, you recognise it in another. An almost imperceptible flicker in the eyes; some tiny shift in the body language; an odd moment of deference in the dialogue. Whatever the signals, they're subconsciously registered by those of us who are members of the same club. In that very first encounter, I read that kinship between myself and Elinor.

By the time I met Elinor, I was well clear of the marriage that had thrown me off balance, turned me from a confident, assured professional woman into a bundle of insecurities. I was back on even keel, in control of my own destiny and certain I would never walk into that nightmare again. I wasn't s

sure about Elinor.

She seemed poised and assertive. She was a well-qualified doctor who had gained a reputation for her work on addiction with intravenous drug users in her native Manchester. She was the obvious choice for a month-long exchange visit to share her experiences with local medical professionals and voluntary-sector workers struggling to come to terms with the heroin epidemic sweeping Petersburg. She exuded a quiet competence and an easy manner. But still, I recognised the secret shame, the hidden scars.

I had been chosen to act as her interpreter because I'd spent two years of my post-graduate medical training in San Francisco. I was nervous about the assignment because I had no formal training in interpreting, but my boss made it clear there was no room for argument. The budget wouldn't run to a qualified interpreter, and besides, I knew all the technical terminology. I explained this to Elinor over a glass of wine in the half-empty bar after the official dinner with the meeting-and-greeting party.

Some specialists might have regarded my confession as a slight on their importance. But Elinor just grinned and said, 'Natasha, you're a doctor, you can probably make me sound much more sensible than I can manage myself. Now, if you're not rushing off, maybe you can show me round a little, help me get my bearings?'

We walked out of the hotel, round the corner to the Metro station. Her eyes were wide, absorbed by everything. The amputee war veterans round the kiosks; the endless escalator; the young woman slumped against the door of the train carriage, vodka bottle dangling from her fingers, wrecked mascara in snail trails down her cheeks; Elinor drank it all in, tossing occasional questions at me.

We emerged back into daylight at the opposite end of Nevsky Prospekt, and I steered her round the big tourist sights. The cathedral, the Admiralty, the Hermitage, then back along the embankment to the Fontanka Canal. Because she was still operating on UK time, she didn't really register the White Nights phenomenon at first. It was only when I pointed out that it was already eleven o'clock and she probably needed to think about getting some sleep that she realised her normal cues for waking and sleeping were going to be absent for the next four weeks.

'How do you cope with the constant light?' she said, waving an arm at a sky only a couple of shades lighter than her eyes.

I shrugged. 'I pull the pillow over my head. But your hotel will have heavy curtains, I think.' I flagged down a passing Lada and asked the driver to take us back to the hotel.

'It's all so alien,' she said softly.

'It'll get worse before it gets better,' I told her. I dropped her at the hotel and kept the car on. As the driver weaved through the potholed streets back to my apartment on Vasilyevsky Ostrov, I couldn't escape the image of her wide-eyed wondering face.

But then, I wasn't exactly trying.

Over the next week, I spent most of my waking hours with Elinor. Mostly it was work, constantly stretching my brain to keep pace with the exchange of information that flowed back and forth between Elinor and my colleagues. But in the evenings, we fell into the habit of eating together, then strolling round the city so she could soak up the atmosphere. I didn't mind. There were plenty of other things



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