

THE SARNIAN



BOOK ONE



DEAD IN THE WATER

NIK RAWLINSON



THE SARNIAN: DEAD IN THE WATER

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DAY ONE

St Peter Port, 7.15am

States of Guernsey Police Headquarters

Christine Le Page opened the door with her shoulder. She carried two beakers; the paper packets of sugar and sweeteners were clamped between her teeth.

She placed a beaker before him and let the packets fall from her mouth. Dixon slid back in his chair as they skittered across the table. Did he think they might be infected?

She closed the door with her hip, curled a foot round the leg of her chair and let herself fall on its over-stuffed cushion, which issued a flatulent sigh.

Christine smiled.

Dixon refused to smile back. He held her stare until she uncapped her pen and directed towards him the tiniest shake of her head.

‘Now,’ she said, looking down. ‘Dick-sun, Dick--sun, Dick---sun.’

She opened a folder and took out a form and wrote his name on the top. ‘George, yes?’

‘Look.’ He pulled up his cuff and checked his watch, ignoring the question. She knew what his name was. He couldn’t imagine anyone wouldn’t. ‘Is this going to take

long? I've been here half an hour.'

It wasn't his first time in an interview room, nor his first time sitting across the desk from a plain-clothed officer. The last had been on a soundstage at Pinewood and this, the real thing, hadn't turned out to be nearly so bad as the set dressers seemed to believe.

There was even a window - a small one. They hadn't had that on the set, just clean enough to let through some light and a hint of blue from beyond. The morning looked clear; the mail plane would have got in without problems, the papers unloaded and stacked... He silently cursed for not having come in much later, after some tea and toast and marmalade, thick-cut, with broadsheets fresh from the mainland.

'Age?'

He stared at her, tight-lipped. She raised her eyebrows, assessed the wrinkles, the expanding waistline, the bristle that tufted his nostrils, and ticked the box marked '55-64'. He saw her do it and didn't object.

'Ethnicity?'

'Is this relevant?'

'Just demographics.'

He wondered about her own demographics. Her hips were wide, her breasts were heavy - like two sandy seal pups trapped beneath a tarpaulin. She'd bounced down the stairs and gripped his hand far too tightly for a woman, let alone one who was clearly five years younger than himself.

She shook it, spouted some French-sounding name – DI Le-something-or-other – and taken to calling him George.

‘Mr Dixon, if you don’t mind.’

‘Of course not, Mr Dixon,’ she’d said, and so it had begun. Dick-sun, Dick-sun, Dick-SUN. Tock-tock, tick-tock, like a faulty metronome.

‘So, your wife...’ She turned the page.

‘My partner.’

‘Partner...’ She circled the word on her form. ‘Rachel?’

‘Richelle. Richelle Ibbott.’

‘How are you spelling that, Mr Dick-sun?’

He spelled it out. Both words.

‘When did you last see her?’

‘Friday night. Five, five thirty.’

‘Closer to one than the other?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Five. I was leaving for work. She was going to Forest Stores, I’d imagine. We didn’t have much food and –’

‘You eat separately, Mr Dick-sun?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You were heading for work.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, no, I mean... obviously.’ He slid back his seat an inch or two so she could see him more clearly. He cocked his head to one side and widened his eyes. He was waiting for her to recognise him. She was waiting for him to realise she wasn’t playing along.

Christine shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, I...’

‘Dear girl,’ he said, smiling as though forgiving some oversight, bringing her into the conspiracy, revealing a secret. He leaned forward and gently took her hand, the pen now protruding from both of their curled fists. ‘I’m George Dixon.’

‘So you said.’ She extracted her hand and tapped the pen on the top of the form. ‘But you haven’t told me what you -’

‘I’m the skipper...’ He paused, giving her time to make the connection. ‘In The Fleet?’

‘Forgive me, Mr Dick-sun.’ She licked the end of her pen and turned her attention back to the form. ‘Fisshrrmann,’ she drawled as she wrote it down. ‘Night fishing?’

Dixon sighed.

‘Only, if you were heading down to your boat at five,’ she continued, ‘I presume you’d have been casting off shortly before the tide -’

He shook his head, and Christine noticed how his hair lifted slightly, revealing itself as an otherwise convincing wig. ‘I’m an actor. A radio actor.’ Each time he said it he stressed the ‘ac’ and left the closing ‘tor’ to float free. ‘Surely you know The Fleet?’

She shook her head - a non-verbal lie. She knew very well what it was; her husband tuned in every night. But she also knew from years of taking statements that leading the witness would get her nowhere. If there were inconsistencies to uncover, the only way to expose them

would be to let Dixon talk himself into a corner.

‘Heavens to blazes,’ he said, not quite under his breath. ‘What kind of a cultural wasteland do you inhabit on this godforsaken island?’ He picked up a sachet of sweetener and threw it down in disgust. The single tablet was too light to fall with any great force, and instead its oversized packet drifted down on a gentle arc that entirely spoiled the effect.

‘Oh come, now, Mr Dick-sun, I listen to -’

‘Music?’

‘And the news. The weather, of course, and the airport arrivals, and on Thursday...’

‘The Fleet, as it’s clear you lack the slightest idea, is a long-running, award-winning -’

‘Soap?’

‘A continuing radio drama.’ He stressed the words in such a way that it almost seemed a waste not to have held up his fingers and drawn out speech marks either side of his head. ‘It’s testament to the effort the BBC puts into regional programming at the expense of -’

‘Ah.’ Christine clapped her hand on the table. ‘A local drama.’

‘It has won an award.’ Dixon was struggling to keep himself calm.

‘Yes.’ Christine drew out the word and tapped her teeth with the end of her pen. She stared at him for thirty seconds to press home the point that his growing excitement would have no effect on the way she conducted the interview.

'I'm sorry,' she said at last. 'I might be missing something, but I can't see what this... Award... has to do with the disappearance of your wife.'

'Nothing,' Dixon snapped. 'Nothing at all, except that the last time I saw my partner - not my wife, my partner - was Friday night.'

'When you left for work.'

'When I left for work.'

'On the boat?'

'No.' At last, she'd provoked him to snap at her.

'Where do you work, Mr Dick-sun?'

'The BBC.'

'Which is where?'

He slid back down in his seat. 'Is there someone else I could speak to?'

Christine looked at her watch. 'DCI Pawsey should be in around nine. I can get you some more coffee if you want to wait...'

'I don't drink coffee.'

'You should have said.'

'I did.' He pursed his lips and blinked, very slowly. 'Now, if you don't mind, I shall be signing books in Town this morning. If you happen to find my partner, would you be good enough to let me know?'

'We certainly shall, Mr Dick-sun.'

'Perhaps this would help.' He reached into his pocket and took out a small, creased photograph. 'She can't have

gone far. Now if you'll excuse me...' He stood, allowing the chair to scrape on the floor, expecting Christine to look up. She didn't. Instead, she reached across the table and picked up the picture. Dixon shook his head.

'If you wouldn't mind.' She tapped the form with the nib of her pen. 'Your signature, please. Just here.'

He took the pen and bent down to sign, planting his scrawl beside her own: Christine Le Page. He tossed down the pen and headed for the door.

'Before you go, Mr Dick-sun...'

He stood, with the handle cupped in his palm.

'Why did you leave it so long to report your wife's disappearance?'

'This is a small island, Miss Le Page.' He spoke each word slowly, splitting them up carefully. 'My partner can hardly have gone very far, can she.'

At last Christine met his eyes, and she smiled. 'We can but hope, Mr Dick-sun. We can but hope.'

Marble Bay, 8.15am

When Oliver Carey replayed the moment later that day in the newsroom, it was always the ring he saw first. A small clear stone set in a thin band of gold, just enough to catch the light as it gently softened the bay. What he'd read as a pebble or rock – or a twist of rope washed up by the tide – was an outstretched hand on a slender white arm, thrown

wide on the pebbly sand.

He swam there three times a week, and this was the first time he'd ever had to share the bay with anyone else. That was why he swam there.

He could have swum in Town, up on the hill at Beau Sejour, or outside by the castle at La Vallette, but in both of those places he'd have to wear shorts, and he father wouldn't have liked that.

So instead, he'd ride across the island, from his boat to the car park at Jerbourg Point, and he'd run along the soft bed of needles as far as the steps to the bay. If he was on the late shift, he'd turn there and clamber down them, stripping off at the bottom and cooling himself in the sea.

It was still three days until May when he found her. Still a little too cool for comfort. He'd been swimming around the rock, then turned on his back and lay with his arms outstretched, naked but for the salty tracks that the trickling water sketched on his chest.

He wasn't afraid he'd be seen - not down there. Walkers were rare at that time of day, and most would be focused on keeping their dogs on the track. Few would come down, and even those that looked out to the sea would find their eyes caught by the ferry en route from the mainland, or maybe the cut of the crumbling cliff as it turned the corner and carried the path to Fermain.

So he'd tipped back his head and blown through his nose to stop the sea from flooding his nostrils - and then,

swinging his hips, he'd thrown his legs over himself and turned a full circle. He'd swept through the waves, brushing the sand with the tip of his nose and planting his feet on the bed.

Only then did he open his eyes, and that's when he'd seen that he wasn't alone.

That's when he'd seen the hand.

He sank to his knees and crabbed to the right to find a more favourable viewpoint, then lifted his feet and trod water while scanning the beach for a story.

There were no signs of life: no empty bottles or tins, no black ring of a long-spent fire or hint of an overnight party. He supposed that the arm might have belonged to a tourist, but why would she be here alone? She couldn't have slipped from a liner anchored in sight of Town. A missing passenger would have been noticed; the police would have sent a release to each of the papers and radio stations. The newsroom would have received a copy, yet it hadn't come up at the daily conference at which the contents of each day's paper were settled.

She didn't seem to be moving.

He kicked out his feet and swam to the beach. His mind was made up: he'd leave her to sleep off the drink, but first he'd gather his clothes and his phone and take a quick picture. There was always the chance that she wasn't a tourist, but someone of note on the island.

*

Detective Chief Inspector Marc Renouf settled the phone on its cradle. He looked at the desolate office. The early shift was heading home, the day shift was just coming on. The office was empty except for himself and his newest recruit, a transfer from Jersey who'd just settled down at her desk: middle-aged, read-headed, Christine Le Page. She was reading a handwritten form and warming her hand on a half-drunk beaker of coffee.

He gathered his thoughts for a moment, then stood up and walked across.

'Sir.' She nodded without looking up.

He knelt on the floor and rested his arms on the edge of her desk. He read the form sideways on: a witness statement signed by George Dixon.

'I've just had a rather unusual call.'

'Unusual?' She put down the form and looked at him. They were about the same age: he perhaps a few years younger, with lightly receding hair and a stomach that pulled at his shirt when he squatted like that.

'Said he was a journalist,' Renouf said. 'Guy by the name of Carey. Oliver Carey. Claims he works for The Sarnian. Ring any bells?'

'Not really. We used to get it in Jersey, but I can't say I read it. Too much of a Guernsey bias.'

Renouf chuckled.

'Guernsey Police does have a press office?' Le Page asked.

‘Ah, no. Well, yes, but he wasn’t chasing a story,’ Renouf corrected her. ‘He had something for me. Us.’

Christine Le Page raised her eyebrows. ‘A no-notice chance to be quoted? No time to come up with a tactful statement.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Because it’s entirely self-serving, you know.’ Christine distrusted the press. She tried to steer whenever she could, and knew that the option to comment was almost always a losing hand. If you played along, you were quoted on the paper’s own terms. If you declined, they ran the story anyway.

‘It’s a bit more important than that. Maybe. He says he’s found a body.’

‘A dead body?’

‘Is there any other kind?’

‘Where?’ She set down her beaker – the one she’d brought through from the interview room, having poured Dixon’s drink down the sink.

‘Marble Bay.’

Christine shook her head. ‘You’ll have to forgive me –’

‘East coast. A mile or so south of Fermain. I thought you might like to accompany me?’

‘Now?’

‘The tide’s turning, so unless you want to get your feet wet...’

She tidied the statement into a drawer and locked it,

tucking the keys in her pocket. 'Two minutes. I'll get my coat.'

Renouf reached across for her desk phone and then, pulling his mobile out of his pocket, he looked up the number for Charlie Dubois, the island's forensics officer.

Oliver Carey stepped over the splatter of vomit, the passage of which still burned in his throat. He picked up the rest of his clothes and pulled on his shirt. In the time it had taken to call the police and empty his stomach onto the beach, the gentle breeze had more or less dried him off. His shorts were clammy but his shirt, which he'd anchored beneath a small rock as he swam, was still wet with sweat, and he shivered as he pulled it over his arms and his chest.

He climbed the steps to the line of the trees and sat on a carved granite block that marked the way to the bay. He looked out to sea and tried to ignore the body.

8.52am

Marc Renouf stood back from the corpse, a handkerchief pressed to his nose and mouth. 'Richelle Ibbott,' he said in a muffled voice, confirming what they'd read on the cards in her purse. 'Friend of my wife.'

'George Dixon's partner?' Christine asked.

'You know her?'

She shook her head. 'No, but Dixon came in this morning.'

Reported her missing.'

'Now there's a thing.' Renouf scanned the cliff for walkers. He'd posted Constable Falla at the point where the track led down to the bay, but the path was a tortuous route, twisting around the headland, and he knew that without more time and more help someone would happen upon them sooner or later. He was grateful, for once, that the second way down to the bay was roped off, awaiting repairs.

'You know he's an incomer.' Renouf said absentmindedly, still thinking of Dixon.

'Yes,' said Christine. 'Though Lord knows why. Do you know what he calls this place?'

Renouf pursed his lips.

'Godforsaken,' she said.

'Does he now? Does he indeed?' He shaded his eyes as he peered at the point where the path showed itself through the trees, high on the steep ochre slopes that hugged the back of the bay. In the summer they'd be thick with wild flowers, the trees to their right weighed down by damson and sloe. But not this morning. The trees were just budding, the leaves still small and light, and not yet dense enough to properly shield the bay.

On the cliffs that faced them, to Dixon's left and behind Le Page, was the fringe of the pine forest that sheltered the path as it curved to the south. The branches on those trees started too high to offer any protection, whatever the time

of year.

It wasn't the most attractive beach Christine had seen in her short time on the island. She could see why Renouf had described it as one of Guernsey's less visited spots. To get there from any direction required a long and uneven walk. There was no close parking, no kiosk or toilets, and not that much sand when you discounted the pebbles and rocks. The water was clear, though, and she could see why Oliver Carey would choose to swim there. To the back of the bay lay a series of caves, and she made a mental note to explore them before she returned to Jersey.

'Do you know Dixon yourself?' she asked, turning back to face Renouf.

He shook his head. 'Barely. My wife introduced us once. Struck me as rather naive on the whole. Not the sharpest tool, but a fairly high self regard, from what I could tell.'

'And a low one of everyone else.' She paused. 'It didn't take much to convince him my senses were on sabbatical.'

Renouf raised his eyebrows. 'To any avail?'

'None. No slips, nothing to say, no explanation for why he'd left it so long to report her missing.'

'How long?'

'Four days.'

Renouf curled his top lip. 'Perhaps she had a habit of wandering off,' he said, apparently unconcerned. 'Did you ask if she'd ever disappeared before?'

'Don't tell me you'd have left it that long,' Christine said.

Renouf was about to reply when someone stepped onto the stones behind them. They turned to see Charlie Dubois jump from the final step. ‘Charlie,’ Renouf called out, waving a hand at the forensics officer. ‘What’s the verdict?’

Dubois had already seen the body. Renouf’s call had caught him in his car, and he’d diverted down to meet them, parking at Jerbourg and walking the coast path to the bay. Renouf and Christine had passed him on their way down the steps as he jogged back up in search of a better signal on his phone.

He shook his head and handed some tape to Constable Falla, who’d trailed down the steps behind him. He pointed at two large rocks either side of the steps and told him to tie it between them, then started to walk towards Renouf and Le Page.

‘There’s no sign of trauma. Nothing conspicuous, anyway,’ Charlie called as he stumbled over the pebbles towards them. ‘No obvious weapon.’

Renouf took the cloth from his nose. ‘Can you tell how long she’s been dead?’

Charlie had reached them now, and he dropped his bag on the pebbles. ‘Not right away,’ he said, inhaling the sour aroma as though it might deliver an answer. ‘Two or three days, I’d say. Not much more. Four at the most.’

‘She’s been here since Friday?’ Christine asked.

‘Maybe,’ Charlie said. ‘Looks that way, anyway. There was a high tide that night, would have pushed her this far

up the beach. If she was killed any later she'd still be a couple of metres down there at the most.' He pointed towards the shore and away from the line of pebbles and seaweed on which she'd come to rest. 'I'll need to get her back to the lab before I can say for sure, though. How many bodies can you spare?'

'Four, five.' Renouf ignored his poor choice of words.

Charlie ran his hand through his hair. 'Could you stretch to ten?' he asked, tugging back his blond fringe to reveal a fine line of untanned skin where the roots met his scalp. His hair was thick and curly, and far too long for someone of his position. He had about him the air of a man who spent much of his life on the beach, surfing from Vazon when time and tides allowed.

'Well, if you ignore the nine-fifteen ferry, the farmer's market at Castel,' said Renouf, 'the cliff walk to Pleinmont, two follow-ups at St Sampson, one officer on leave, another sick...'

'And I've got a tide heading inshore and two acres of beach to comb before it disappears.'

'I can give you seven. Absolute tops, but I'd need Falla back at base by two. And Clarke by noon - I need him to call in a media briefing.'

'I'll stay,' Christine said. 'That would make eight.'

'No,' Renouf cut in before Charlie could commandeer her. 'You can find our friend Dixon and tell him the news. I'll let you decide how best to approach him.'

The Sarnian, St Peter Port, 9.34am

Ollie ran back up the hill. He'd given his name and number to Christine Le Page – gave her his card, too, to make sure she knew who he was – and Renouf had told him to stay by the phone.

'We'll call you later,' Christine said.

'And in the meantime,' Renouf chipped in, 'be discreet, eh?'

At least he hadn't asked him not to talk or write at all. Discretion was subjective – Renouf knew that just as well as Ollie did – and he knew, too, that trying to forbid a write up would spoon-feed *The Sarnian* an even tastier story. Freya Carlisle would relish the chance to spin it into a tale of state censorship with a side of inferred corruption.

Ollie promised he'd do all he could, knowing full well that was nothing, and then sprinted away from the bay, along the cliff path and up the uneven steps to the car park. He kept his head down, the sweat dripping from the end of his nose and spotting each tread as he climbed. Eighty, seventy, sixty steps to go. Herm rose up behind him, then Sark came into view, and across the horizon the faint grey strip of Jersey appeared through the haze. Forty, thirty, twenty, ten. At last he reached his bike. He unchained it and threw himself over the saddle, then kicked away and up the hill towards Town. By the time he crested the Val des Terres and could cruise the rest of the way, his legs were shaking,

his thighs were burning and his calves felt as though they might split.

He cruised down the hill and through the front door of the Sarnian office, braking just short of an open lift door. He wheeled the bike inside, then looked at himself in the mirrored walls as it climbed the three floors to the newsroom.

His shirt was wet through, and it clung to his back like a stranded barnacle sticks to the rocks at low tide. His hair was crispy with salt – the same salt he could taste on his lips and which dusted the hair on his arms. He looked directly into his own eyes and murmured the first few lines of his story. Freya wouldn't give him long to explain himself.

I was down on the beach and...

I was running, and went down to...

Do you know the beach at Marble Bay? Well, I was down there this morning when...

I've got a story...

Too soon, the lift slowed and stopped, its doors opened on the busy newsroom floor and he looked straight ahead at the clear glass box that sectioned off Freya Carlisle from the rest of the open plan office.

The queen bee was holding court in her hive.

She wasn't alone.

He walked to his desk and leaned his bike against it,

then knocked on the glass. She called him in with a curl of her finger.

‘This had better be good.’

She was sitting at a round wooden table with three other drones from research, sales and marketing.

‘Body on the beach,’ he said, catching his breath. ‘Dead.’ So much for planning his story.

He gripped the glass door for support.

‘You, you and you.’ Freya pointed across the table. ‘We’ll finish this later.’ She turned to Ollie. ‘Sit.’

He slipped into one of the seats as the admin people stood to gather their papers. Freya said nothing until they’d left the room.

‘Where?’ she asked as they closed the door behind them.

‘Marble Bay,’ Ollie said, regaining control of his breathing.

Freya stood up and walked to the cooler behind her desk. She poured him a beaker of water. ‘Start from the beginning,’ she said, passing it over.

Ollie drank half of it down, then sketched out the details from the moment he’d spotted the ring to the point he’d handed his card to Christine. The longer he talked, the more Freya’s face seemed to harden. When he came to the end of the story she lifted her eyebrows and opened her hands, inviting him to continue.

‘Who was she?’ she said after a few silent seconds.

Ollie pinched his lip. He didn’t know.

‘Cause of death?’ she asked. ‘Quotes...?’

He shook his head, and Freya slowly closed and then opened her eyes. ‘Never, ever leave the scene of a crime until you’ve got the full story.’ Her voice was quiet and calm, and all the more threatening for it. Ollie wished he had bypassed her office and taken the story to Alfie instead, not the paper’s overall editor, but his own line manager, and editor of the news pages.

‘Technically, we don’t know if it was a crime,’ he said, feeling the ground slipping away, dragging behind it an urgent need for an explanation. ‘It looked to me like an accident.’

‘And technically,’ she mimicked, ‘I decide what’s a crime on this paper and where I’m concerned it’s always a crime unless and until I’m proved wrong. Whatever the story.’ Her voice rose a little. ‘I mean, bloody hell, Carey, how long have you been here?’

‘Eighteen months.’

‘Eighteen months.’ She took a deep breath and calmed herself. ‘And what have you learned? Do you want to go back to laying out the sports results?’

He shook his head. He had no interest in sport, but there were reasons more pressing than that for wanting to stay on the news desk. A seat on the news desk meant he could access the files that might answer his questions – the questions that had brought him back to the island two years before.

‘That’s why I came straight here,’ he said.

‘More’s the pity.’

‘I do have these.’ Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his phone and pushed it across the desk.

Freya picked it up and looked at the screen, swiping her finger two or three times. She sat in silence and tipped her head on one side, then, throwing her glasses down on the desk, she fixed her eyes on his own.

‘Consider this your reprieve,’ she said.

St Peter Port, 9.40am

The queue for a copy of George Dixon’s book might only have been five deep, but on a working day, so soon after opening, it hinted at good things to come. Good for his publisher, at least.

He was sitting at a table, close to the front of the bookshop. Someone had draped a white cloth over it and stacked two piles of his overwritten autobiography either side of him. As Christine entered the store, he was signing the flyleaf of one of the books, smiling and laughing with the middle-aged woman who had handed it over.

‘I said as much to the Governor,’ he said, closing the cover and handing it back with great care, as though it was precious or fragile. ‘But would he listen?’ He shook his head and shrugged, then caught sight of the red-headed woman who’d interviewed him at the police station. Le Pepe? Le

Pope? He couldn't remember.

He snatched his eyes away from her, and fixed them back on the pensioner. 'You be careful out there,' he said, signalling that their meeting was over. He smiled at the next in the queue.

Christine stepped forward, around the next customer, and leant in close to his ear. 'Mr Dixon,' she said. He noticed she'd dropped the gap from his name.

He looked at her. 'I'm awfully sorry, Mrs...'

'Le Page.'

'Aah, yes. Well, you see, there's a queue, Mrs Le Page. Perhaps you'd like to wait your turn.'

'Mr Dixon, we've found -'

'Queue,' he said, flapping his hand as though she was an ivy bee buzzing about his ears. He twitched his eyebrows at the customer behind her - a tick that passed silent judgement on 'the cheek of this woman, pushing in before you'.

Christine stood up and looked down on him. He must have known why she was there, so why had he not asked the obvious question. Had she been found? Or had they at least had word she was safe? Was he really so wrapped up in his book, in this handful of fans, that their meeting was now so distant, so irrelevant, so removed from his mind?

'Mr Dixon,' she said, louder now, loud enough for the other customers to hear. If he wanted to play it that way, then she would play too. 'We've found -'

Her professional integrity got the better of her. She should manage the flow of information. She should keep it between them – for the moment, at least. ‘Very well.’ She took a book from the top of the pile and slipped it under her arm. ‘If you want to do it that way..’

She joined the back of the queue and read the blurb on the cover. It was trite and improperly punctuated, and had two erroneous apostrophes in the first four lines. It read as though Dixon had put it together himself and she wondered whether the whole production was anything more than a vanity project – something he’d paid for, or maybe talked Richelle into financing for him?

Another two people joined the back of the queue as Dixon gave a forced laugh to the one remaining customer lined up in front of Christine. She would rather not have told him what they’d found with others around them. From the way that he’d dealt with her, though, he’d made it quite clear that the signing was more important to him than anything else at that moment. The chances of getting him to leave – even briefly – were slim to non-existent.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a pen, then flipping open the cover she wrote her own inscription on the flyleaf. She had finally reached the front of the queue, so she slipped the pen back into her bag and stepped forward for her audience with George Dixon.

‘Christine Le Page,’ he said, taking the book from her. ‘I hadn’t expected to see you so soon.’

He opened it and read her inscription.

‘We’ve found a body,’ it began. He looked up and she nodded. ‘Cards and other items suggest it to be your partner. We need you to make a formal identification.’

He paused for a moment, running his fingers up and down the book, pressing the pages flat.

He sniffed, but he didn’t cry.

He wasn’t one for crying.

He hadn’t cried when his mother had died. He’d done his dry-eyed mourning already, five years before, when they’d loaded her into an ambulance. He’d waved her off to a home and that – to him – was the day she had died. Her actual passing, half a decade, four months and eight days later, had been a mere formality.

A tidying up of loose ends.

He was used to the idea by then.

He hadn’t cried when his father had died after tripping and falling a length of the stairs at his home. The man had lived a long, indulgent and largely successful life and Dixon could see no reason to mourn it. It had ended without any pain, without the dreaded forewarning of cancer or the awkward lame years that might follow a stroke. He’d cracked his neck and died in an instant, the moment he hit the half landing. Dixon had instructed an agent that same afternoon to put the house on the market, but put him off coming to take the photos until they’d removed the body.

But here he was, in front of his public. Three real readers

and Christine Le Page, and Dixon knew he had little choice but to do what they'd all expect. He picked a point in the middle distance, somewhere between the two of them, and shifted his eyes to the left. He fixed them there and let them glaze over, and forced himself to hold them open until they started to water.

The gullible woman read it to be some kind of emotion, resting her hand on his cuff. He pretended her touch had brought him out of his daze, back to the present moment, and turned his dewy eyes back towards her. He pulled a weak smile.

'What would you like me to write?' he asked, clicking out the nib of his pen. 'Is it for you or a gift?'

The Sarnian, 9.45am

Freya Carlisle threw open the door and addressed the newsroom en masse. 'News, lifestyle and local, editorial conference in ten minutes. Sport, you can stay where you are. Art...' - she turned to look at the two-man art team - 'I want you there too. Bin the lead, I don't care what it is, and set yourselves up with a projector, head of the table, with a blank template. Empty your bladders and fill the kettle, people.' She clapped her hands. 'This could take some time.'

She turned and pointed at Ollie. 'You. Get downstairs and shower. Quickly. You're agenda points one to AOB. Don't let me get there before you.'

Ollie ran back to his desk and kicked off his trainers without untying the laces. He kept some smart clothes in a drawer, which rarely saw light unless to attend an unannounced briefing. Either way, they'd have to suffice. He pulled out his trousers and shirt and kicked the drawer closed as his desk phone started to ring.

'Carey,' he said, snatching it up.

'Oliver!' It was a female voice: familiar, but not one he could place right away.

'Speaking.'

'Oliver, Oliver, Oliver Carey.' She tumbled his name as though it were flotsam caught on a tide. 'I hear you're a bit of a hero.'

The voice was sweet. A little sharper than the feminine mean, but the way it was used to sugar his name... he could only assume it was someone he knew.

'Can I help you?' he asked, hoping she might reveal herself.

'I certainly hope so, my dear. Tell me. Who was she?'

Ollie looked up. 'Who is this?' He stood on tiptoe and turned around, trying to work out who might have leaked the story... then he realised nobody had. He and Freya Carlisle were the only two who knew what had happened that morning. Certainly as far as The Sarnian was concerned.

A short, mocking gasp from the furthest end of the line. 'Do you know how that hurts me, Oliver?'

Ollie chose not to reply.

‘That you must ask such a question...’

Still he kept quiet.

‘Your silence speaks volumes, my darling. You cannot speak. I know. You feel ashamed of yourself. Very well, I shall forgive you. But on one condition.’ A pause, no more than a beat, and then: ‘I need a quick description. Something personal. I don’t care about her clothes or her hair. I want to know about you. What it was like to find her. Human interest.’

‘Amy Sloane,’ he said, working it out from the way she said ‘darling’.

‘My love...’

‘How naïve do you think I am?’

‘Darling, that stings. It hurts me right here.’ Ollie could hear her beating her breast. ‘I simply couldn’t call you naïve. Unsophisticated, perhaps. A touch too trusting. Maybe a little, dare I say it, jejune...? No. I just want some colour, that’s all. Everything else, we can negotiate.’

‘Wouldn’t negotiation rely on you having something to give in return?’

‘Oh, but I do.’

‘Yes?’

‘Contacts, my dear. Lots of lovely contacts, and lots of favours as ripe as a lemon that’s ready to fall from the tree. Could be awfully zesty, couldn’t they... if we pooled our resources.’

‘Amy,’ he said, kicking his chair back under his desk.

‘What use are your zesty contacts if they weren’t there? Whoever gave you this tip-off has left you half informed, or you wouldn’t be calling me.’

‘Well that’s as maybe, my dear, but this reticence of yours would make me suspect that they’ve tasted no less of the meat than yourself. All you have is your own experience. You are the story, my dear. What you saw, what you felt, how it made you feel. Sick, I hear... The rest of it is just facts. Stats and incontrovertible facts on which, you know as well as I do, there’s no such thing as copyright.’

Ollie said nothing.

‘Am I right?’

‘The answer’s no, Amy. No to all you could ask and no to the little you might have to offer.’

‘My darling...’

‘No. My own employer would be mighty interested in getting this story itself, don’t you think? Even if it wasn’t, the chances I’d share anything with a gossip rag mag like yours are slimmer than your dwindling page count.’

‘Now Oliver -’ Amy Sloane began, business-like this time, but that was as far as she got. Freya Carlisle had stood up from her desk and looked through the glass of the hive. She gave an attention-grabbing cough and caught his eye. Ollie threw down the phone as though it had just burned his fingers.

The Sarnian, 10am

Editorial Conference

They were sitting around the long wooden table. Harry Ozanne – art – had plugged his notebook into a whirring projector. It cast an empty front page on the conference room wall. That morning’s lead, a flabby story about a BBC team investigating shipwrecks off Sark, had been swiftly wiped from the page.

Ollie was sitting beside him, Freya Carlisle on the other side, and all eyes were turned towards them as Ollie brought his story to its climax: the arrival of Marc Renouf and his stand-in deputy, Christine Le Page.

‘It took about twenty minutes, I’d guess. I’d gone back up and sat on a bench. They said not to let anyone down to the beach, but I didn’t see anyone anyhow.’

‘Harry, can you get their pictures?’ Freya turned to the art editor. ‘Check the States Police website.’

Harry minimised the empty front page and clicked on his browser while Ollie went on.

‘I don’t know whether they believed me or not.’

‘Did you show them the photos?’ Freya asked.

Ollie shook his head.

‘Good,’ she said.

‘They asked what I did, why I was down there. She took notes while he asked questions. They were a bit... cagey, I

guess, when they heard I worked for the paper. Asked if it was the Press, of course, but I said no. They didn't want to ask many questions after that – took my details and sent me away. I think they wanted to get to the beach without me seeing what they were up to.'

'Which was?'

'Not much. He stuck a hankie over his nose and bent down for a closer look. She kept back. I think she was drawing how it was all laid out, but I guess they'd have a photographer on the way. He made some calls. Probably calling for backup. There was only them and some other guy they left on the path blocking the way. Oh, and a blond guy on his mobile a bit further up the hill.'

'Marc Renouf,' Harry said, enlarging a file photo. 'Fifteen years on the force. Made DCI three years ago.'

'That's him,' Ollie said.

'Yes, we know him.' Freya spoke in a way that suggested there had been a story behind their encounter – a rocky one. 'The woman?'

'Still looking,' Harry said. 'Nothing yet.'

Freya nodded. 'See if you can identify this blond guy, too.' She cleared her throat. 'Right then. Who, when, what, how, and most importantly why? Let's start from the top.' She pulled her own laptop towards her and, logging into her account, opened a folder of pictures. 'Mr Carey here showed uncharacteristic initiative this morning..' – she spun the laptop around as the pictures of the bloated grey

woman cascaded onto the screen – ‘and took these on his mobile phone. The lighting and framing could be better, but they’re useable. Just. Harry, these are your front-page assets. Run them full bleed. Strap the headline across them. “BEACH BODY: FOUL PLAY SUSPECTED”’

Harry switched back to his template and started typing the headline, adjusting the text size to fit. His brother, Tony, who worked the lifestyle pages, raised his hand to speak. ‘Shouldn’t we find out how she died first?’

‘Why would we do that?’ Freya asked.

‘Well, I mean, we don’t really know what the police think yet.’

Freya twitched. ‘I see no mention of the police.’ She nodded towards the screen.

‘Foul play suspected,’ he quoted back.

‘Yes,’ said Freya. ‘I suspect foul play. I doubt I’d have much trouble convincing half this island the same thing. Ergo, foul play suspected. What I want to know, though, is who she is. Don’t you?’

‘Yes, but...’ Tony trailed off as Freya turned back towards Harry, who was placing the best of the pictures onto the page.

‘Go closer on her face,’ she told him.

Harry tapped a couple of keys and enlarged the distended face until it filled the projected page. The pictures were better than Ollie had thought, and they showed the gruesome state of a body that had spent some days on the

beach. Her blue lips were starting to bloat and there were black marks on her teeth. Her eyes were open and lifeless; a streak of hair from her fringe rested on one of the eyeballs with nothing to blink it away. Her skin was unbroken but had lost its colour, and now looked a yellowing grey.

The gruesome pictures brought back to his nostrils the foetid smell that had caused him to retch on the beach. Two of the others sitting around the table dropped their eyes to the desk.

‘Anyone?’ Freya asked. ‘Nobody?’

Ella Brouard, who worked with Tony on lifestyle and entertainment, pulled herself up to the front of her seat. She put her head on one side and squinted. ‘It’s hard to make out. She’s so bloated, but it looks...’

Freya raised her eyebrows. ‘Yes?’

‘Does anyone here know Richelle Ibbott?’

The two sets of downcast eyes looked back towards the projection.

‘You know, I think you’re right,’ said Alfie Erne, the paper’s news editor, and Ollie’s immediate boss. They’d poached him from the Press two days before their own launch. ‘I met her last year at the air display. I’m pretty sure she was at the reception that evening on behalf of some charity or other.’

‘Good,’ said Freya, jotting down Richelle’s first and last name, a slash between them, ‘charity’ in tidy, cursive script, and a question mark. ‘Was anyone else at that reception?’

The twelve staff sitting around the table shook their heads in unison.

‘Alfie’s right, though,’ Ella said. ‘She does stuff for Ormers, the orphan charity. They organise trips and pay for essentials. School stuff and sports kit. I’m sure it’s her.’

Harry Ozanne had pulled up a browser and tapped in her name. ‘Ormer Orphans works to... blah blah... here we go. Co-founders: Richelle Ibbott and some other guy.’ He dragged his pointer across the words: ‘Patron – George Dixon.’

‘Her husband,’ Ella explained.

‘She’s single,’ Alfie said.

‘Partner, then.’

‘Rather incestuous, isn’t it?’ Freya asked. ‘Partners in arms, partners in alms.’ She pointed at Alfie. ‘I like that. Run that as a cross-head somewhere in the main copy.’

‘Actually,’ Ollie chipped in, ‘I think I know who he is. He’s an actor.’ He looked around the table at a row of blank faces. ‘The Fleet?’ There was no sign of recognition. ‘Well, he’s pretty well known. It’s only logical they should want to have someone there who could stand up and speak on their behalf.’

‘And why not her partner?’ Tony asked. ‘I suppose he’d do it for free.’

‘George Dixon, actor, sixty-two,’ Harry read out. ‘Born and raised in Southampton. It looks like he’s had a few bit-parts in some soaps but nothing major. Came to Guernsey

eight years ago to take the lead in a radio drama called The Fleet...' He nodded across at Ollie. 'Seems his character had some kind of accident a couple of months back. Typical audience bait for the tenth anniversary... yada yada. Want me to go on?'

'I think we've got the gist,' Freya said. 'I'm more interested in this Ibbott woman. Alfie, what do you know about her?'

'Met her a few times. Nice enough sort. Wealthy, I think. No kids, never married, so no one to leave it to, which probably explains the orphans.'

'Could it be a motive, do you think? The money, I mean.'

Alfie shrugged. 'Don't see why not. Depends how much she carried on her, how much jewellery she wore. That kind of thing.'

'She had a ring,' Ollie said. 'That's the first thing I saw when I -'

'Assuming it wasn't an accident,' Ella interrupted.

'I'm sorry?' Freya said.

'Assuming it wasn't an accident. You're still presuming she was murdered - looking for some kind of motive. She could have fallen from the cliff is all I'm saying. Doesn't the fact she was still wearing a ring suggest it was an accident? If she'd been murdered for money, the ring would be gone, too. Wouldn't it?'

'Your objection is noted,' Freya said. 'For the sake of selling some papers, though, let's assume it was something more dramatic. At least until we know any different.'

Ella lifted her eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breath through her nose. Freya clocked her frustration but chose to ignore it.

‘So, contacts,’ she said, turning her laptop back towards her and pulling up the shared address book. She scrolled through to the Ds and Is, but neither section listed Dixon or Ibbott’s numbers. ‘Alfie,’ she called down the table. ‘You seem to know Miss Ibbott better than the rest of us. Find out whatever you can. No – find out all you can. Who she had lunch with, what she ate, what she spent her money on. Talk to her friends and work colleagues. Dig up some long-lost aunt and see if you can get her blubbing. I want quotes and gossip and a motive on my desk by lunch. This one goes to bed at half two.’

Alfie pulled a crooked smile and nodded his assent. He tapped his forehead as though in salute.

‘Carey,’ Freya said, turning to Ollie. ‘You found the body. Now find me Dixon. Better yet, find me a murderer, if they aren’t one and the same.’ She slapped down the lid of the laptop. ‘Class dismissed.’

Rousse Kiosk, 11.20am

Dixon dialled a familiar number. The line was picked up on the second ring.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘You’re there. Stay where you are. I’m coming in.’

Kira Spooner looked around the production office to see if she was alone. ‘George,’ she said, recognising his voice. She turned her back to the room and dropped her voice to a whisper. They had an intern in that day, and she was sitting close enough to Kira’s desk that she might easily have heard him leaking out of the earpiece.

‘Of course it’s me.’

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea, do you?’

‘Why ever not?’

‘You know why.’

‘But you’re my employer, Kira.’

She could almost believe that he knew she was shielding the phone, perhaps from the way she was hissing at him, and so was booming every word for the sake of her discomfort.

‘It’s working hours,’ he said. ‘I still have my BBC pass. I should think it’s perfectly reasonable.’

‘No. No, it’s not. Don’t you remember the trouble I went to?’

‘Personally, no.’

‘Don’t play games, George.’

She heard him sigh at the other end of the line. ‘Fine. Then where do you suggest?’

‘Rousse,’ she said, and the word had barely left her mouth before she wished she could claw it back.

Of all the kiosks that dotted the coast, Rousse was the one she held dear. Her mother had taken the lease there and

had run it for close to two decades, from the year that Kira turned four, to the month she returned from three years on the mainland with an honours degree to her name.

It was fifteen years since she'd handed back the lease, but Kira's childhood memories still centred on that kiosk – its pebble-dashed beach and the narrow granite jetty that tiptoed into the shallows – and she didn't want them sullied by a fractious meeting with Dixon.

He agreed far too quickly and rang off before she could change her mind. She almost called him back. She could refuse to meet him at all, or at least to change the venue – but hadn't his opening gambit been worse?

If she pulled out now, he'd arrive at the studio, pass in hand, making noise... allowing himself to be seen.

People would think he still worked there.

So there they were. It was late morning, still less than two hours after his second talk with Christine Le Page: George Dixon and Kira Spooner, facing each other with two mugs of tea, Dixon's already half drunk.

Kira had wondered, on taking the helm at The Fleet, whether they'd brought her in to shake things up – behind the scenes, at least, if not on the air. Ratings were up, the reviews were consistently good, but certain elements – that had been Rosalynd's word, not hers – certain elements were proving to be disruptive.

And here was one of those elements: the only one, as far as Kira could see, for she had no trouble with the rest of

the cast. George Dixon, with his plucked eyebrows and false hair and a corset under his shirt that he thought nobody knew about. She was pretty sure it was George's behaviour that had forced Rosalynd Holdbrook into early retirement ten years after she'd devised The Fleet.

It had taken her less than half an hour to get from the studios north of Town to the kiosk she knew so well. Yet there he was already, grinding the stub of a cigarette into the grain of the table.

And why - of all the tables - why had he chosen that one?

To give him his due, he couldn't have sat any further away from the kiosk, but hadn't he noticed the wind? It was coming across from St Sampson that morning, and Kira knew far too well from summers spent working behind the counter that even the lightest of breezes would carry hushed words as far as the kiosk.

The whispered accusations she'd overheard each June and July of her teens would have filled The Sarnian's lifestyle pages week after week after week. And now here she was, and so was he, and she cringed as he outlined his simple demand and leaned back to await her response.

'You want what?' She wasn't sure that she'd heard him right - or if she had, that she'd quite understood what he'd said. The words were English, the sentences perfect, but the request...

'A raise,' George repeated, the way that someone might

ask to borrow a book.

‘More money?’

‘Mmm-hmmm,’ he nodded. ‘My circumstances have... changed, so I need to review our arrangement.’

‘Our arrangement?’ She leaned closer and dropped her voice to a loud whisper. ‘George, who do you think is in charge here?’

‘You tell me, Kira,’ he said, making no effort to match her muted tone. ‘I rather thought we’d agreed that your nudging and budging of the schedules was to our mutual benefit.’

‘Well, yes, George, but you can’t just demand a raise. I have a budget. A very small budget.’

‘Stretch it.’

‘How would it seem if I... I don’t even know how I’d do it, but to find some way to pay you more in light of what’s happened to your character...’

Dixon shrugged. ‘You edit the scripts. You’re the creative force. Think of something.’

‘Can you imagine what questions might be asked? It could – no, would – it would put all we’ve done at risk.’

‘Call it compensation, then.’

‘I can’t, George. It can’t be done.’

Dixon sat back and pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. ‘Now that’s a shame,’ he said, flipping open the lid. ‘Because I’ve been doing some thinking. I have an awful lot of time for that these days. You not needing me

in, and all.' He paused while he tapped out two cigarettes, letting the implication sink in. He tucked one behind his ear and pinched the second between his lips. 'An awful lot more time, which is why it occurred to me that one of us...' - he pointed across the table - 'one of us has far more to lose than the other.' He lit the cigarette. 'However mutually beneficial our arrangement might be.'

Kira narrowed her eyes. 'What are you saying?'

'Nothing much,' he shrugged. 'Only, what's in it for me, really?'

'Don't you dare, George. Don't you dare go back on our agreement.'

'Why not? What would happen to me if the truth came out? And what might happen to you?'

'You'd lose -'

'My stipend? Because that's all it is.'

'Your respect.'

He laughed. 'I lost that two months ago when you threw Thomas Thoumine into Little Russell and left him mentally crippled.'

'It's fiction, George. Do you really think people believe you're one and the same? Thomas Thoumine isn't real. Thomas Thoumine is a character.'

'That's right, Kira. My character, my life on this island,' he hissed. 'My public face.'

'Oh, grow up, George.' She turned and saw the new kiosk tenant watching them.

George took a long drag from his cigarette and exhaled as slowly as he could. ‘Do you know what I discovered this morning?’ he asked, flicking ash towards her.

‘Your lack of integrity?’

‘Richelle,’ Dixon said. ‘She’s dead. I haven’t seen her since Friday night.’ He held out his cigarette and examined the glowing end. He reached towards it and plucked at the air, as though whipping away a hair from the ash that only he could see. ‘They found her body this morning.’

‘George,’ she stammered. She felt her breath catch. Was it trite to tell him she was sorry? To ask if there was anything she could do. ‘That’s -’

‘Laid out on the beach,’ he interrupted. ‘Like she was sunbathing.’

‘How did she...’

‘Die?’ He shrugged. ‘I suppose they’ll find out soon enough.’

He waited for a moment, watching her. It was clear that she didn’t know how to reply. He enjoyed her discomfort.

‘So you see,’ he said at length. ‘I’d rather not have been compelled to tell you this, but my circumstances are somewhat refocused. Until her estate is settled my resources might be rather restricted, and you know how long probate can take.’

Kira looked at him, raising her eyebrows. ‘That’s rather presumptive, don’t you think?’

‘What?’

‘Assuming you’ll get anything.’

He shook his head. ‘Not really.’ He dragged on the cigarette.

‘You’ve read her will?’

‘She gave it to me for safekeeping.’

Now it was Kira who shook her head, slowly this time, with a look of disgust on her face.

‘So if you could stretch your budget just... Well...’ Dixon thought for a moment. ‘Shall we say a couple of hundred a week?’

‘A couple of hundred? Is that all she was worth to you? Two hundred pounds?’

‘Oh, no,’ he said, leaning across the table. ‘Not at all, Kira. But I’m not the one who’s fretting about the BBC budget, am I? I’m not the one who can’t afford to make proper reparations.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Reparations, Kira. If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t be here, would we?’

‘If it wasn’t for me?’ she said, loudly enough to be heard. She looked across at the kiosk hatch and saw the tenant duck down below the counter. They used to keep the condiments there and Kira knew quite well that though he was out of sight he would still be able to hear them clearly unless they quietened down.

‘Well, as you say, you did spend all those weeks nudging my hours,’ Dixon said. ‘Isn’t that what you called it? – so

no one suspected? And all the while I did...' He paused, as though he was thinking, trying to recall what it was he had done. 'Ah, yes. Nothing. Nothing but make your life that little bit easier. So don't talk to me about who has the most to lose, because I assure you, it's you.'

Kira stood up. She didn't care now whether the tenant could hear them. The revulsion she felt for Dixon was stronger than any desire for privacy. She almost wanted to make a spectacle - to draw attention to him, let everyone see him for what he was: heartless, cold, entirely self-serving.

And right.

She had more to lose than he did. Had he not lost all he could already? There was nothing more she could take from him without losing far more herself.

She picked up the tea she had still barely touched.

'You make me sick,' she said. 'You disgust me.'

She plucked the cigarette from his lips and set it afloat in the tepid drink, then tossed it into his face. She took the mug back to the counter and marched to her car without turning.

She was angry with Dixon and angry, too, with herself, and she wondered whether she'd ever be able to take herself back to Rouse kiosk.

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