

## THE SPY WHO LOVED ME

*[It felt] very sorrowful and strange that this first night of my bright fortunes should be the loneliest I had ever known.*

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

On 3 April 2012, I moved to Bath. I took with me only a suitcase of clothes, yet felt weighed down by a nagging headache of doubt and apprehension. My remaining belongings had already been taken to Paul's flat, just a couple of streets away in Cavendish Place. Mark told me that he wanted Paul nearby, so that he would know that I was safe. Mark was already at the house, and when he opened the door to greet me was in ebullient form.

'I just love this house, darling. Isn't it cool? Aren't you happy to be living in such a great place?' He walked into the study, drawing my attention to the sales brochure for the property that lay on the desk.

'Look after this for me, will you?' he said.

I am very good at making the most of things and forced a smile. I told myself that this was only a temporary measure, as before long, I hoped, the renovations at Beach would be completed; plus, once I had settled into married life with Mark, I would know what sort of property to buy for myself too. With the right attitude, I could enjoy it – after all, we had the whole of

Bath on our doorstep and a house with four very comfortable spare bedrooms where friends could come and stay.

Our first visitors were arriving the following Saturday: my daughters, together with their boyfriends, and Anne with her son (who is like a brother to my girls) and his girlfriend. My brother, sister-in-law and nieces would also be joining us for dinner. When I'd originally asked everyone to put the date in their diaries, I had thought we'd be living in Widcombe Manor and Mark had said he'd hire a private chef to cook us a gourmet dinner, but when the venue changed at the last minute, so did the plans. Mark cancelled the chef and I, who normally liked to cook, just felt too overwhelmed and out of sorts to do it myself. Even going to the supermarket would be a hassle here as parking and trying to unload were impossible.

Paul turned up and the three of us were in the kitchen.

'Well, baby, what do you want to do?' Mark asked me.

'Couldn't we take everyone out to dinner?'

'Well, if that's what you want, but I thought you wanted everyone to come to the house.'

'Yes, darling, but you've moved the goalposts. You've changed the venue and cancelled the cook and I don't want to do it.'

'Well, come up with a suggestion, then.'

'I have. I suggest we all go out to dinner.'

'We'll never get anywhere decent for that number of people – how many is it?'

'Thirteen.'

'Exactly. We'll never get a table for thirteen people at such short notice.'

I felt harassed and was wracking my brain trying to think of a solution.

'Well, what about ordering a takeaway from that Indian restaurant you own? The one you're always telling me about – the Mint Room, didn't you say?'

‘You want an Indian takeaway? I suppose we could do that. Paul, organise that, will you? What time do you want it delivered, baby?’

I didn’t really want a takeaway at all, but I felt stressed and was trying to make the most of the situation and get something organised.

‘Eight o’clock?’

‘Eight o’clock, Paul,’ Mark repeated. ‘And Paul, go out now, will you, and get some drinks? Let’s get this wine fridge stocked up.’

When Paul returned Mark helped to fill the wine cooler, but then he announced that he had to leave.

‘I’ll see you on Saturday, baby,’ he said as he kissed me. ‘I’ll try to pop in before then, but I can’t guarantee it.’

I couldn’t believe it. I’d moved into this place so that we could spend more time together and already I was alone. I wandered through the house, wondering if I could ever feel at home there. When I reached the music room my heart sank as I saw that the piano had gone.

Saturday came around quickly and I was really looking forward to seeing my family and friends, although a nervous apprehension continued to nag at me, tugging at my sleeve all day long. Mark was due to arrive at around seven o’clock that evening and I couldn’t wait to see him. I felt a little nervous about how he would be received by my family and friends. He wasn’t like any of them and I knew they wouldn’t like his arrogance. I hoped he wouldn’t be too nervous himself, as I thought it would be quite daunting for him to meet eleven of the most important people in my life in one go like that.

Lara and Emma were the first to arrive and I felt overjoyed to see them. I gave them a tour of the house and showed them where they would be sleeping. Lara had spent a summer living and working in Bath when she was a student and she knew the city well.

‘I just can’t believe you’re living in the Circus. I used to walk through here every day on my way to and from work. I used to dream of living here – I just can’t believe you actually are. It’s amazing!’

Lara’s enthusiasm was infectious and I began to feel my spirits lifting. When my friends arrived, I did the tour around the house again and began to relax a little. I felt fine until my brother arrived with his family, and Annalisa seemed to barely acknowledge me when she came in.

‘The toilet doesn’t flush,’ she announced as she came into the kitchen to get a drink.

‘There’s a knack to it,’ I replied. ‘You have to be patient.’

I showed them around too. My nieces were thrilled by the house and Nick was courteous and complimentary, but I didn’t hear a positive word from Annalisa.

‘That chandelier needs dusting,’ she observed as we reached the second floor.

Mark still hadn’t arrived and the minutes ticked by with me willing him to appear. I tried calling him but there was no reply.

Paul delivered the food and I was putting it out in the kitchen when I heard the demanding ringtone that meant Mark was on the phone.

‘Where are you?’ I asked. ‘Everyone’s here and it’s embarrassing that you’re not. They’re all waiting to meet you. We’re just about to sit down to eat.’

‘Darling, I’m sorry, but I’m stuck in Ronda. I missed my flight slot and now I don’t know when I’ll be able to get out of here.’

I remember it striking me as odd that he should be stuck in Ronda of all places. I had visited the Spanish town and it seemed an unlikely place to find yourself if you were travelling by plane to the UK, but my mind was so full of other thoughts that I didn’t question Mark about it. I was wondering how I was going

to explain his absence, and I could feel a hot flush of embarrassment rising up my neck.

‘What? How could you do that to me? You know how important it is to me that you meet my family. And this was the day that you said you wanted us to get married. I can’t believe you’re letting me down like this.’

‘Darling, I told you right at the beginning, you will be let down by me a million times until we can be together properly. I’m really sorry, baby. I’ll try to get there tomorrow. Just enjoy the evening with your family and friends. I love you. I can’t wait to see you again.’

‘I love you too.’ My voice sounded small and flat as I hung up, and with a fixed smile, I made Mark’s excuses as we all sat down to eat.

‘Well, what a surprise,’ remarked Annalisa.

The evening was not going as planned and I felt horribly stressed and out of sorts. My nieces asked if they could stay the night and, in a move that was totally out of character, I said no. I hoped that Mark would show up the next day, but suddenly felt that I didn’t want him to meet my family, after all. As I said goodbye to Nick, Annalisa turned to me.

‘I always knew he wouldn’t come,’ she announced. ‘But at least we know where you are now.’ Her expression was hard as nails. I felt very upset and, if there is such a thing as a familial umbilical cord I could have reached for the scissors and cut it there and then.

The following morning, I made a big cooked breakfast for everyone and we were just clearing up when I heard the front door open.

Mark made his entrance.

He was dressed in his designer jeans, a crisp shirt, the Gucci shoes that I had paid for, and his Crombie coat. Everybody’s eyes were upon him. He paused for a second, taking in the scene

before him, then he kissed me, immediately demanded a coffee and lit a cigarette as I introduced him to everyone. We sat around the kitchen table and I felt unusually nervous as a few pleasantries were exchanged. Lara complimented him on the house, telling him that, as a student, she had dreamed of living in the Circus.

‘Yes, well luckily for me I can have just about anything I want,’ he responded. ‘I love this house, but I have properties all over the world.’

It was the first time I had seen Mark in company and he soon took over the conversation. He held court, lording it over everyone, boasting about his possessions and putting everyone else down.

‘I have my own collection of planes and I own probably the largest collection of Picassos in the world,’ he bragged, taking a drag on his cigarette and sitting back in his chair. ‘I like nice things. I had a load of gold bars once that I didn’t know what to do with, so I put a sheet of glass on top and used it as a coffee table. That was cool.’

Mark wasn’t just arrogant: he was rude and obnoxious. He sat at the table drinking espresso after espresso, and chain smoking. I was smoking too – something that my family had rarely seen me do before, and something that I knew they would hate. We sat in a fug of smoke and I felt wave after wave of embarrassment wash over me as Mark got into his stride. But I felt powerless to stop him or to steer the conversation in a different direction. I sat in stunned silence, willing Mark to be quiet, but he just wouldn’t shut up. At last, Anne’s son, Nick, managed to get a word in. I saw the colour rising in his neck and cheeks and I could tell that he was riled, even though good manners prevailed and he remained polite.

‘So if you’ve got so much and can have anything you want, what motivates you?’ he asked.

‘Well, it used to be money, but now it’s power and control. I could press a button and shut down the UK economy. There are only about five hundred of us in the world with that sort of power,’ Mark replied. He picked up another cigarette. ‘To get on in this world you have to be prepared to sacrifice everything. The way to make sure you beat the casino is to have more money than the casino. You have to be prepared to lose everything you have, then take your clothes off and be fucked in the arse. Not many people are prepared to do that.’

I sat motionless – shocked. Why was he being so unpleasant and foul-mouthed? And why couldn’t I speak up and change the conversation? I felt completely disempowered and disorientated, as though I had no will of my own. Then Mark was talking again.

‘You live in Kentish Town?’ He was looking at Nick, his mouth curled up in what looked more like a smirk than a smile. ‘I like Kentish Town. Too many blacks though. You take any other group and they work – the Jews, the Chinese, the Poles – but there is something genetically lazy about black people. They need to go away, educate themselves and come back in fifty years. I drove in London recently – never again. There are all these black guys that can’t drive. There should be one lane for us – the politicians, the diplomats, the educated people – and another for the common people. That’s why I get around by helicopter.’ There was a second’s lull in his verbal outpouring – just long enough for him to flip the ring-pull on a can of Coke and take a swig. Then he lit another cigarette and started again.

‘All immigrants should be put on an island and pushed out to sea or shot. In Switzerland they would take the guy that didn’t want to work and say you’re out of the country. He’d soon take the toilet-cleaning job. God, I hate this country! Switzerland’s great because everything works. I have absolutely no sympathy for poor people. I sleep three hours a day max. I don’t eat lunch – eating makes your productivity nosedive. I live on coffee, Coke

and cigarettes. I had a heart attack a few years ago. It was fun! I woke up in hospital, pulled the wires out and went straight back to work. If I stopped, I'd die. We need another war to make this country great. We need another Thatcher.'

What was happening? I had never seen Mark like this. True, his language could be a little ripe at times, but when I first met him, I had been struck by his good manners. Why was he behaving like this now? He had always told me that he was motivated by the desire to help others. Yes, he was wealthy and he liked his money; and yes, he had mentioned owning some Picassos. But what was this about 'power and control'? Somewhere in the distant recesses of my mind I heard a faint alarm bell, but the sound of it was drowned out by more ravings from Mark.

'I know a lot of things. I was there the day Princess Diana died. It was all planned. And I know what happened on 9/11. The important people all got a warning not to be there that day. It was a conspiracy dreamed up by the American government. The people who died were only medium- and low-skilled people.'

He ranted on and I felt as though I was in another world. It was like being in one of those bad dreams when you want to shout out, but you can't make a sound; when you want to run, but your legs feel so heavy that you can't put one foot in front of the other. Still Mark raved on.

'You know I used to go to the opera at Covent Garden, but I can't do that any more. I can't stand it. Last time I was there I sat in my box watching the idiots below drinking champagne. They don't have a right to be there. It used to be exclusive, but now it's just ruined – and people just wander about in jeans. No, I can't stand this country any more. The climate's terrible and the food is just about inedible. I import all my beef from Galicia, you know. The restaurants here are crap too. Luckily for me if I don't like the restaurants near my properties, I can just buy one.'



Everyone was too polite to say what they were thinking, but I could sense how uncomfortable they all felt. Eventually, someone suggested a round of crazy golf in Victoria Park. Thank God, I thought. I felt ashamed. My family and friends had been insulted and I had done nothing to step in and stop it. What was wrong with Mark? It must be because he was so stressed at work; that's all it could be. But surely he must be aware of the damage he'd done. Nobody there would ever want to meet him again. I felt terribly sad, and my usual optimism was overridden by an unusual feeling of confusion. I felt burdened with the weight of responsibility of trying to keep everyone happy – and knowing I had failed – and masking my own uncertainty. I was utterly miserable.

'Are you coming, Carolyn?' Anne was smiling encouragingly at me.

'I'll join you shortly.' I smiled wanly back. 'I'd just like to have a bit of time with Mark before he goes.' The others departed and Mark and I were left alone.

'I've got to go too, baby,' he said, as bright as a button. 'I shouldn't be here at all. You can't imagine what I had to do to get here.'

I couldn't bring myself to tell him how disappointed and let down I felt, and I couldn't raise a smile. He kissed me goodbye and left.

I looked blankly out of the window. I felt done in and on the verge of tears, but I knew I had to pull myself together and go and find the others in the park. I cleared away the coffee cups, half-empty Coke can and overflowing ashtray – Mark's calling cards – and picked up my keys. As I left the house, I heard a helicopter flying overhead and wondered if it was him. I soon found the others.

'We saw a helicopter,' remarked Anne. 'Was that him?'

'I expect so,' I replied. 'I'll ask him when he calls.' As I spoke, my phone rang. It was him.

‘What did they think of me?’ he enquired eagerly. I felt a lump rise in my throat.

‘We haven’t discussed you. I’ll tell you later. We saw a helicopter. Was that you?’

‘Yeah, did you see me?’

‘We saw you,’ I replied wearily.

‘Darling, I’ll try to see you tomorrow. I love you loads.’

‘I love you too,’ I whispered, fighting back the tears.

Nobody said anything to me about Mark, but I knew that the whole encounter had been a disaster. I experienced a pang of loneliness as I felt the cold, thin edge of a wedge embed itself between me, and my family and friends.

The following week, my old cat stopped eating. A visit to the vet confirmed that she had a tumour in her mouth. There was nothing they could do and so, to put her out of her misery, I had her put to sleep. When I returned to Brock Street later that day, I closed the door behind me and burst into tears. I had never felt more alone.

During the first few weeks in Brock Street I saw Mark most days, but he only ever stayed for an hour or so, usually turning up late morning.

He was busy expanding his business empire and told me about InOrg, a new company he was forming, for which he showed me an impressive-looking website. InOrg was an umbrella company involved in many lucrative and diverse ventures – InResidence, InMotorsport, InAviation, InMaritime, InConcert, InTheMedia – the list went on and on. And knowing what I know now, I believe that every subsidiary was a lure, designed to suck in a real, unsuspecting person to manage whichever part of the company was their passion, with Mark promising the investment for them to build their part of the InOrg empire. Additionally, Mark said that he was continuing

his work with the Prince's Trust, and also taking responsibility for the fund-raising at Clifton College, Bristol. He showed me a promotional video, filmed at the Cotswold Airport, for a fund-raising event at Clifton, featuring representatives of the Prince's Trust, the Air Ambulance Service, Clifton College and various other sponsors. Mark was on camera, sometimes giving a voice-over. He also told me he was planning a Spitfire flypast as a highlight of the fund-raising event.

'You see, baby, I told you things would get better,' he said, as we sat in the kitchen, discussing all his latest ventures.

'We've seen each other nearly every day since you moved here.'

'But we still haven't even spent one night together – and you nearly always have Paul in tow. I thought that with the beginning of the new tax year you'd be able to spend a few nights here.'

It was true: Mark and I had had virtually no time alone together, and even when we had there were constant interruptions.

One afternoon, Mark led me upstairs to the bedroom. He started kissing me.

'Darling, for once do you think you could just turn your phones off for a while?' I whispered as I played with his hair.

'Baby, I've told you – I know it's going to really irritate you, but I have to keep them turned on and I have to answer them. I know it drives you mad, but you're going to have to put up with it for now.'

I sighed, but Mark soon distracted me. We were making love, and in my head and in my heart I was a million miles away from Bath. But I was soon brought back down to earth by the insistent ring of one of Mark's phones.

'Leave it,' I whispered. He was about to come, but I felt him falter. 'Just leave it, Bubba you can't stop now!' But he did. He withdrew and reached over for his phone.

'Fuck!' he exclaimed. 'This is important. I have to take it.'

He started talking to someone in Spanish and I played with him, determined to keep his mind on the business in hand.

‘Stop it!’ he mouthed at me, listening to whoever was on the other end of the phone. He tried to pull away, but I would not be put off. I was enjoying spending some time with him. This was a rare moment alone together, and even now I could hear the drone of the Hoover from another part of the house as the cleaners went about their business.

Mark was trying to get away from me as he continued his conversation, but we were both stifling a laugh. Eventually, holding his phone behind the headboard, he hung up.

‘Baby, what the hell are you doing? That was the king of Spain on the phone. Fuck, Bubba. I can’t come when I’m talking to the king of Spain! He wants my advice. His son’s in trouble and I said I’d help him. Sweetie, you’ve got to let me take calls without trying to make me come. I mean, I hope he didn’t hear anything – I had to hold the phone down behind the headboard!’

I was laughing.

‘Darling, I’m not going to play second fiddle to anyone – not even the king of Spain. But honestly, Bubba, it does irritate me that you can’t even turn your phones off for a few minutes.’

‘Don’t fret, sweetheart. I’m doing everything I can. Remember – the big picture. I’ve told you, the best things in life are worth waiting for.’

Ever since moving to Bath I had woken up on my own, got up and pulled back the curtains on leaden skies and another wet day. I had never known rain like it, and with no job to go to I found it difficult to motivate myself to do anything. I hated the rain at the best of times, but at least in the country, even if you didn’t venture out in it, it wasn’t so depressing. It was just part of the scenery, and I had always enjoyed viewing the rural landscape at

different times of year and under different-coloured skies. The same didn't apply to the town.

I looked out at the rain as it transformed the honey-toned Bath stone to drab grey, and I felt cooped up and depressed. I made myself walk into town every day, but although I had previously always enjoyed trips to Bath, now it was as much as I could do to tolerate the place. The hordes of tourists were unbearable. There were swarms of them in the Circus, often photographing my front courtyard or, worse still, peering into the study or dining room. Now when I was in the study, I closed the shutters and sat there in the semi-gloom. The tourist bus that drove around the Circus and along Brock Street to the Royal Crescent frequently stopped right outside the front door, waiting for a gap in the oncoming traffic, and on a number of occasions I found myself on the first-floor landing, face to face with strangers sitting on the open-top deck of the bus. I took to keeping the blind down on the landing window in order to afford myself some privacy. Likewise, when I was in the bathroom, I would keep the blind on the north side down, as I was sure that otherwise I could be seen from the windows of the house on the other side of the street.

One wet Saturday afternoon, the doorbell rang. Even though Mark had told me not to answer the door to anyone I wasn't expecting, I went to answer it. As I opened it, four people lost their balance and stumbled backwards into the hall. They had been sheltering from the rain in the doorway and one of them had been leaning up against the bell. I snapped.

'What the hell do you think you're doing? This is my house. Get out!' I slammed the door shut behind them, but the sound of the slamming only made me feel like a prisoner in my own home.

The day of that fateful encounter between Mark and my daughters and friends was the only other time the doorbell had

sounded unexpectedly, and Mark had got up to answer it. When he came back he said it was the woman from the flat next door, complaining that there had been a lot of noise coming from the house the previous evening.

‘What on earth were you all up to?’ he had asked me. ‘She told me she heard the scraping of chairs on the floor. Look what she gave me – it’s a funny sort of house-warming present.’ Mark held out some felt pads to put on the bottom of the chair legs. I couldn’t believe it. It had been a Saturday night, we had been chatting, we had had dinner, but that was it. No loud music, no nothing – and it had all been over by midnight. It was not a good start.

I didn’t know anyone in Bath and now, unlike when I had moved to Tetbury, I felt no desire to socialise. Perhaps more tellingly, despite living in a house that needed to be full of people, I didn’t want to have my old friends to stay. The very idea of it filled me with dread, and although I initially made the effort to invite a few close friends over, after only a few weeks at 1 Brock Street I found myself spending nearly all my time in solitude, behind closed doors, often with the shutters closed and the blinds down. I felt my natural sparkle going flat, as I filled the hours reading and listening to the radio.

On 20 April, it was my birthday. My family loved birthdays and I couldn’t remember a time when I hadn’t celebrated mine with my daughters, but this time I spent the day alone, with no plans to see them. I had hoped that Mark and I could be together, but I hoped in vain. I waited all day for him, but it was evening before he appeared, much to my dismay with Paul in tow.

‘Happy birthday, darling.’

Mark kissed me cheerfully as he swaggered in. He was wearing his usual Crombie coat over jeans and a pink shirt with a frill down the front, and he was carrying a bottle of Cristal champagne, which he put down on the kitchen table. Paul was carrying

a cake. Mark handed me a present and a card and then walked over to the kitchen bin.

‘We called in at your cottage on our way over, to collect any post. There was a card for you. I opened it. It’s from Dickhead.’ Dickhead was the name he used for an ex-boyfriend.

‘I hate to admit it,’ he continued, ‘but the card he sent you is better than the one I got you. Can I bin it?’

‘Please do.’

I was sick and tired of this unwanted attention from an ex, but at the mention of my cottage I felt overwhelmed by a feeling of deep homesickness. I had been so happy there. Mark tore the card in two and put it in the bin.

‘Now, are you going to open your card and your present from me? Paul, open the champagne and put out the cake, will you? It’s a token gesture, Bubba. I haven’t had time to go shopping. I had to send Paul out to get it.’

I felt my heart sink, but I forced a smile. I opened the card. It was from Marks & Spencer and was perfectly ordinary – not at all what you would expect from someone who owned a collection of Picassos. Inside, in his distinctive spidery scrawl, Mark had scribbled, ‘To My Darling Wife, I wish you the best birthday ever, I adore you. Yours, Mark. xxxxxx’ Then I opened my present. It was an iPod. True, I had expressed a passing wish for an iPod, but this wasn’t the romantic, personal sort of present I had hoped to receive on my first birthday with Mark – just something that he could send anyone out to pick up (and did). I smiled and thanked him and the three of us sat at the table with the champagne and a Marks & Spencer birthday cake.

‘What do you think of the champagne, darling? I only ever drink Cristal. I keep a few bottles up at the Priory, just to make sure they’ve always got some.’

‘It’s lovely, thank you, but I can’t drink the whole bottle by myself.’

‘I love it when you drink. You’re funny. Have some more. And have a cigarette.’

The champagne was good. I love champagne and usually find it makes me feel bubbly myself, but not this time. I felt decidedly flat. It was not long before Paul reminded Mark that it was time to go. They left and I sat alone, feeling sad and very lonely. I poured another drink and lit another cigarette. It was the worst birthday I had ever had. I consoled myself with yet another glass of champagne and another cigarette. And then another. But if I thought this was bad, things were about to get much worse.

A couple of days later, there was a strange voicemail on my phone. It was from a female police officer – PC Harding from Cirencester police station – saying that she had been to my cottage looking for me. She said that she had met my landlady who had told her that I had moved to Bath, and she asked me to contact her. I immediately returned the call, but PC Harding was out, so I left a message to say I had called. I wondered what on earth it could be about. It must be something to do with a complaint I had recently made to Barclays Bank, I thought. Some money had gone missing from my account and I had been furious. Mark told me that the same thing had happened to Paul and he had written a letter of complaint too. Still, it seemed strange that the police should be involved. Oh well, I would just have to wait and see. But when Mark turned up later that day, I told him about the phone call.

‘I mean I don’t understand why they turned up at my cottage. It’s a bit embarrassing; I’m sure my landlady won’t have liked it. I mean nobody likes the police appearing on their doorstep.’

Mark was frowning.

‘I don’t like the sound of this, baby. Someone’s keeping tabs on you and they’ll be trying to unsettle you and fuck us up. Let me know when you get another call from them. This needs to be



sorted out now. Listen, Bubba, we've got to get married. Once we're married, they can't come between us. We'll go to the church I go to when I'm in London. I have a marriage licence, and the priest there will marry us. All I have to do is give him a few Cuban cigars – he does like his cigars! Baby, did you get a copy of your decree absolute like I told you to? You'll need to bring it.'

'Yes, darling, but I don't want to get married like that – in some sort of Romeo-and-Juliet-style wedding. This is all turning into a nightmare.'

'You love me, don't you, darling?'

I nodded. 'You know I do.'

'You've got to trust me, baby. Those cunts will do anything to come between us. We've got to get married as soon as possible. We'll go and see the priest as soon as we can.'

A few days later I put on my navy Armani shift dress and the edge-to-edge tweed jacket with the silver thread running through it. Mark arrived with Paul to pick me up and we set off in the car for London. Mark was wearing a designer suit under his Crombie coat. As always, he was impeccably groomed and his fingernails were manicured. When we got to London Paul dropped us off at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, a Catholic church in Farm Street, Mayfair. The rain was torrential, and we were drenched in the time it took to get across the pavement from the car to the door. We walked inside. Mass was taking place and we took our seats at the back. Mark crossed himself and kneeled down to pray. I sat staring ahead of me, quite overawed by the gilded splendour of the interior of the church, but impassive, watching, while the congregation, including Mark, took communion. When the service ended Mark turned to me.

'Do you like the church? I love it here. I always come here when I'm in London. My faith is very important to me.'

'Well, as you know, I'm an atheist.'

‘Bubba, we’ve got to get married as soon as possible, and I want to do it here – today.’

‘Well, you’d better see what your priest says. I need the loo.’

Mark showed me where to go. He went to speak to the priest, and when I returned he was waiting for me.

‘It’s all arranged, baby. We’ll come back this evening and he’ll marry us.’

It all seemed so bizarre. I didn’t know what to think. This wasn’t how I wanted to get married. But I said nothing and decided to see what happened when we returned that evening. Mark continued talking.

‘Let’s go and get some lunch. I’m starving.’

He guided me back outside where Paul was waiting in the car.

‘We’ll drive over to Pimlico. I’ve got to call in to see my boss this afternoon. I’m in trouble.’

The rain abated and we ate a light lunch at a small café. I was cold because we were sitting outside so that Mark could smoke. I was smoking too. It was about the only thing we did together. Mark continued to smoke Marlboro Reds, but they were too strong for me, so he had taken to keeping me supplied with Camel Blues.

‘We’d better go, darling. Paul’s going to drive us over.’ We settled down in the back of the car and were just about to drive off when my phone rang. I stared at the screen.

‘I don’t recognise the number. Perhaps it’s the police.’

‘Baby, this is really important. I’m in a lot of trouble about this. Answer the phone. Put it on speaker. We need to hear what’s going on. I’ll tell you what to say. Paul, hang on a minute, just stay put while we take this call.’

Paul turned off the engine and I did as I was told. I put the phone on speaker and picked up.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, is that Carolyn Woods?’

'It is.'

'This is PC Harding. I left a message on your voicemail. I need to speak to you about something.'

'Yes, I know, I returned your call, but you weren't available. Can you please tell me what all this is about?'

'I'm afraid I can't talk about it on the phone. I'd like to come and see you in person. I met your landlady; she told me you've moved to Bath.'

Mark was shaking his head vigorously and scribbling a message on a piece of paper.

*No! No meeting!*

'I'm between houses at the moment. I still have my cottage in Tetbury, but I spend most of my time in Bath. But why can't you tell me what this is all about now? I think I know what it's about anyway.'

'I'm sorry, but I need to meet you face to face. I can come to Bath or meet you at your cottage in Tetbury. Whatever's easier for you.'

Mark was scribbling again.

*NOT Bath. Tetbury. Delay. Say you're going away.*

'OK, can we meet at my cottage? But I can't do anything for a week or so.'

'Well how about a week on Friday? Would that be any good? About eleven o'clock?'

Mark was nodding.

'Yes, that should be fine. I'll see you then.'

'Thank you. I'll see you a week on Friday, then.'

'Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

I hung up. Paul and Mark were both staring at me.

'Thank you, Bubba. Well done. That was great.' Mark took my hand. 'I'm in deep shit about all of this.' There was obvious relief in his voice.

‘Well, do you know what it’s all about?’

‘No, darling, but whatever it is, it’s drawn attention to you and therefore to me. I’ve been called in. We’ve got to go there now.’  
My phone rang again.

‘It’s her again.’

I looked at Mark.

‘Answer it.’

I picked up.

‘Ms Woods? It’s PC Harding again. I’ve spoken to my supervisor about this and he says I *can* discuss the matter with you on the phone, after all.’

‘I’m so glad you’ve called back. As I said, I think I know what this is all about.’

‘We’ve been contacted by Barclays Bank in Cirencester who are concerned about unusual activity on your account. Are you aware of this?’

‘Well, yes, that’s what I thought it was about. I’ve written a letter of complaint to Barclays’ head office. Some money went missing from my account.’

‘The bank is concerned about a number of payments that have been made from your account to a Paul Deol. Are you aware of these payments?’

‘Well, yes, of course. I made the payments. I have to say that I don’t understand why the bank called the police about that. Why hasn’t the bank contacted me in the first instance, if they’ve got any concerns?’

‘Where the bank has a particular concern, they do sometimes contact the police. So, you’re saying that you’re aware of all these payments that have been made to Paul Deol? There have been very substantial sums of money transferred to him.’

‘Yes, I’m aware of those transfers. As I said, I thought your call might be related to some sort of wrongdoing at the bank. I understand that Paul Deol has also had money gone missing

from his account, and my concern was that there might be some sort of fraud going on at the bank.'

'I'm not aware of any of that, but if you say you are aware of the transactions between yourself and Mr Deol, I don't need to take this matter any further.'

'And you won't need to see me a week on Friday?'

'No, there's no need. Thank you for clarifying the situation.'

'Thank you. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

I hung up again. Mark was looking at me and as he did so, another wave of relief seemed to wash over him.

'Thank you so much, Bubba. You've saved me. You were brilliant.'

I was bemused. What the hell was all that about? And I was furious. What on earth did the bank think they were doing contacting the police? They should have contacted me. I wished I'd never moved my banking to Barclays. When Mark repaid me, I would put my money back into NatWest, where I'd been a customer for thirty years.

'We'd better go. We don't want to keep Little Sister waiting,' said Paul.

He started the car and we drove off towards Vauxhall Bridge. The MI6 building loomed ahead. We drove away from the river and passed along the south side of the building. Then we looped around, eventually turning into a side street past some brown-field wasteland. The landscape here looked pretty desolate. We rounded another corner and Paul stopped the car. Ahead I could see what looked like the entrance to an underground car park. Two armed guards were on duty, dressed in black, wearing flak jackets and carrying what looked like machine guns.

'Wait for me here,' ordered Mark, opening the car door. 'They're expecting me, they'll be watching. I'll be as quick as I can – it shouldn't take long.'

He got out of the car and walked towards the guards, and then past them, unchallenged, into the building. I was left alone in the car with Paul. We waited, and about twenty-five minutes later Mark reappeared, smiling and looking relaxed. He got into the car and lit a cigarette.

‘Thank God! I’m off the hook. You were brilliant, Bubba.’

The relief he was experiencing was palpable and infectious and I felt my spirits lifting. Mark continued talking.

‘They played back your telephone conversation – they’d been listening in – and what was it he said, what was the word he used? He said you were staunch. Staunch, that was it. You’ll meet him one day – my boss. You’ll like him. Luckily, he likes me. He’s had problems himself because he’s married to an Iranian. Can you believe it? Imagine the trouble that caused! Thanks, Bubba, you were brilliant. Let’s go and get a coffee somewhere and then we’ll get back to Farm Street.’

Later that afternoon we made our way back to the church at Farm Street, but the traffic was terrible and we were snarled up for what seemed like an eternity. When we arrived at the church another service was in progress. Mark was beside himself.

‘Fuck! We’re too late. We’ve missed him. It’s too late now. Fucking traffic! Come on, darling. We’ve got to get out of here now. I’m sorry.’

Thank God, I thought. I felt out of my depth and confused. The phone calls from the police, the bank, MI6, an aborted clandestine wedding, it was all too much for me. Thank God we’d arrived too late at the church. I didn’t want a Catholic wedding. I didn’t really want a church wedding. I wasn’t even sure that I wanted a wedding at all. I would have to tell Mark – but not now. Just now I wanted to go home, except that I didn’t really feel I had one.

\* \* \*

The visit to my cottage by the police remained a mystery for a very long time. My landlady confirmed that two police officers had indeed come to the cottage and spoken to her. For years, as I tried to work the whole thing out, I believed that the visit by the 'police officers' and the subsequent telephone call were staged by Mark to test my loyalty to him, and to frighten me, but more light was to be shed on this later on.

The MI6 visit I am sure was staged to convince me that Mark was an MI6 agent. Who the armed men were, I have no idea; neither do I understand how anybody who wasn't a bona-fide armed guard could get anywhere near the MI6 building, and if they were real guards, how could Mark walk straight past them unless they were expecting him? It was all utterly convincing, and once I believed that Mark was a secret agent, everything was so outside my realm of experience that I took whatever he said about it on trust. It never crossed my mind at the time that the whole thing was staged, but I now know that this type of theatrical performance was typical of the way Mark acted out a number of charades to test me, or to back up some of the more extraordinary claims that he made.