

## ONE

Voices were raised and it took several seconds before he realised the loudest was his. 'Brad was crap in *Ocean's Thirteen*. There's no story and he couldn't act for toffee.'

'Of course he can act,' Jack Monaghan said in his soft Dublin drawl, more pronounced than ever after numerous glasses of red wine. 'He and the rest of them only made the film so the studios would let Clooney direct *Good Night and Good Luck*. It was a bloody put-up job.'

'I loved him in *Fight Club*,' their host Brian Langton said, the wine glass engulfed in his big hand. 'I went to a couple of bare knuckle fights and I think they caught the raw, aggressive atmosphere about right.'

Ricky Wood sat back and lifted his glass; he'd said enough. He'd probably drunk enough as well, but what the hell. From across the table his beautiful girlfriend, Celia, looked radiant in a summer dress, revealing plenty of cleavage. He found it an arousing spectacle, in spite of the distance and range of obstacles between them: empty and part-empty glasses, candles, plates, a roll basket and a large plant thing, more suited to a garden centre than a dinner party table. She gave him 'the look' and mouthed something, but if it was a criticism of his drunken behaviour, he didn't care.

While the men dissected the movie careers of Brad, George and Matt with a fine toothcomb or a ragged fence brush, as they were all too pissed to think straight, the women talked about schools. Correction, Brian's wife, Kelly, talked about schools while Celia and Jack's girlfriend, Olivia, listened with a little more interest than was good for two single women.

In so many ways, Kelly and Brian Langton were a modern, 'post-celebrity' couple. He used to be the rude television interviewer who shoved a microphone into the faces of gang bosses, corrupt police officers and drug dealers, exposing their dirty deeds to the nation. Less than a decade later, he had been pushed aside by perkier and scruffier lads who were said to relate better to their younger audience. He now owned a television production company with a number of successful shows under his belt and was making way more money behind a camera than in front of it.

Since the age of seventeen, 'Kelly,' as she was known then, was a constant presence in newspaper and television ads as the jilted woman in a stylish car advert, the body for a well-known maker of tights, and the main model for a high street store's clothing collection. She gave up her career for much the same reasons as Brian and now spent her time managing her fashion and perfume businesses under the 'Kelly Kreations' brand name.

Despite the intervening years, their fame remained undiminished. Rarely a week went by without her face adorning the weekend magazines or appearing in a feature in the Sunday supplements talking about her dogs, make-up and children, or the pair of them being photographed at the races or watching polo at Goodwood.

'So what do you do, Ricky? I don't think Celia mentioned it.'

He turned. For the first time, he looked closely at Kelly Langton and even though the lights in the dining room were dimmed, he could see tanned skin, straw-coloured hair, all neatly trimmed and curled, with deep green eyes twinkling in flickering candlelight. Bloody gorgeous for a 38-year-old mother of two, but how did a rough diamond like Brian Langton, twenty-odd years her senior with a pockmarked face and bags under his eyes, manage to snare such a beauty? His mother used to say attraction was more than skin-deep; here was the living proof.

'I'm a journalist.'

'What kind of things do you write about?'

‘Oh, I investigate respectable people with dark pasts or those openly involved in doing something illegal.

‘You won’t find anything like that around here.’

He laughed. ‘I didn’t think I would and anyway, I’m not on duty.’

‘When people say ‘journalist’ to me, I assume they must be a feature writer or a gossip columnist, as that’s the only sort I ever seem to meet.’

He picked up his glass; good food, good wine, and chatting to a beautiful woman, what more did a man want? ‘I couldn’t do it, I’m not empathetic enough, according to my editor.’

‘Maybe not, but I bet there is a good book in some of the subjects you investigate.’

‘You think so? I’ve often thought of writing one.’

‘You should. I read a lot, especially when Brian’s away and the children are in bed.’

‘What type of books do you read?’

‘Everything and anything,’ she said, laughing and showing two rows of even, pearly white teeth; amazing. In early pictures of her, about the age of eighteen, he remembered she had a noticeable gap between the two top incisors with a protruding lateral incisor on the left side.

‘I like romance and crime novels, but now I’m into relationship thrillers, although some people call them Domestic Noir.’

Celia was trying to attract his attention above the hubbub and this time her demeanour seemed warm, evidence perhaps that he had not yet disgraced himself in front of her friends, but on turning back a minute or so later to resume his conversation with Kelly, the seat lay empty.

She was on her feet, clearing away plates with the assistance of Irish Jack, who was not only helpful, handsome, and ruggedly unshaven, but also the owner of an IT business. He didn’t know what he did but obviously it paid well as he had arrived at the Langton house tonight in a Porsche and wore a gold Rolex.

Ricky missed his chance to help the delectable Kelly, perhaps just as well, as he could be a clumsy sod when it came to crockery, and instead went to the loo. Like everything else in this house, set in its own grounds in a beautiful location on the fringes of Hurstpierpoint, a village to the north of Brighton, the ‘smallest room in the house’ was large and well appointed, down to the well-stocked bookcase and thick towels which could double as pillows, useful if he couldn’t make it all the way back to the dining room.

Ablutions complete, he walked into the hall and for a moment he felt disorientated, or that’s what he would say if anyone asked him why he was snooping around. The study was the size of his lounge with a substantial light oak desk, leather chair and an Apple IMac with a massive screen, making his pokey alcove with rickety Ikea desk and old laptop seem poor by comparison.

He ignored the sitting room, as they all had sat in there earlier, and since the conservatory appeared unused he headed for the kitchen. With the door closed, he decided to open it slowly, as he didn’t want to scare anyone and cause them to drop those big, fancy dinner plates. He looked in, and looked again to make sure his eyes did not deceive him.

Yes, Jack Monaghan was in there helping Kelly, but not in the way he expected. The Irishman’s arms were around her waist, his hands fondling those famous breasts and his tongue exploring the deep recesses of her throat.