

Dome of Death

by
Rigby Taylor

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Also by Rigby Taylor

The Price of Freedom
Dancing Bare
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Dome of Death

Not for the faint-hearted, *Dome of Death* is a confronting thriller; at turns shocking, funny, romantic and thought provoking.

When the director of an Art Gallery in Queensland falls to his death from the central dome, his lover, Peter, unwillingly takes over the job. However, after rescuing a strange young man from a raging sea, Peter's investigation of an art swindle puts him in great danger. He is raped and left for dead, but escapes, only to discover that he and his new friend Jon are wanted for murder. What follows is a hair-raising chase to clear their names.

Murder, torture, cyclones, tidal surges, snuff porn shows – are but a few of the complications to be navigated in their search for justice, happiness and love.

This is an alarming, amusing, romantic tale about two young men who'd love to be as cool as James Bond in the face of extreme danger, but discover reality is not like fiction.

Gay, Thriller, Love, Murder, Revenge, Romance, Australia.

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Chapter One

Exposing oneself in public is not for the faint-hearted. En masse and expertly illuminated, the paintings gave viewers rather more insight into the private spaces of my mind than I'd bargained for. The fact that the gallery's patrons were also baring their souls with every critical utterance and every painting bought was scant consolation – especially as no one was buying!

After an hour of eavesdropping among the usual crush of wine-sipping social scramblers, I wished I hadn't. Stepping back, I collided with an elderly, shapeless little woman loosely wrapped in a sari decorated with mirrors.

'Young man!' she demanded as though I'd been caught spraying graffiti, 'Are you the artist?'

How to respond? People who call themselves artists remind me of Napoleon seizing the jewelled cap, crowning himself and living to rue the day. Such accolades are for others to bestow. If, as frequently happens, a painter's efforts delight no one but himself, then the labour has been little but therapy. Only those whose works impose order on the chaos of existence and reinvigorate flagging spirits by giving the viewer a glimpse of a less imperfect world, are worthy of the title "artist". Not being entirely confident I deserved the appellation, I responded cautiously.

'I made the paintings, if that's what you mean.'

With an impatient toss of the head that set hoop earrings and several loose chins swaying, she declared, 'Everything's too expensive!'

I smiled, bowed graciously and left her squinting myopically at a couple of frolicking nudes.

'What about this one?' demanded a businesslike young woman, jabbing her fingernail at a tree-fringed lake.

'Oh c'mon Jazmyn, we've already spent a fortune on the lounge.'

'Hope it's still here tomorrow.'

'It will be. No one's buying anything. You can get a recliner for what they're asking for this thing.' He peered into his glass. 'I haven't a thirst for art, but I've an artistic thirst.' They elbowed their way to the bar.

Before films and television arrived to bewitch the world, paintings could sway multitudes, convert sceptics and provoke intellectual war. Today, they've been reduced to decoration, and the only certainty for aspiring painters is that a market for their outpourings is not assured. I slunk to a corner, sipped my drink and nibbled humble pie.

'Cheer up you miserable bastard.' Max thumped me on the shoulder and draped a heavy arm across my shoulders. 'It's my opening too, so do us a favour and look a bit more confident - you're scaring people away.'

I shook him off.

'What's the matter, Pete?'

'How many sold?'

'It's early days. Give 'em a chance. They haven't seen a decent painting before. Wait till the red dots appear – then we'll see a panic thrusting of plastic. Hey,' he continued gently, 'I wouldn't have filled my brand new gallery with anything less than the best. The place is crowded and the reaction's positive. So either play the confident prodigy or hide your miserable mug out the back before it spoils the party.'

As usual, he was right, and as usual, it irritated. People were showing plenty of interest and at that very moment Maurice, the curator and manager of Maximillian's Fine Art Gallery, was placing a red dot on the frame of one of the more expensive works. I caught Max's eye. He shook his head, punched my shoulder manfully and breezed away.

I almost relaxed. Almost, because although my paintings were good, I couldn't shake the feeling they were outdone by the architecture. The gallery was Max's proclamation that not only was he a

wealthy connoisseur of the Arts, but also an incredibly talented architect. Individual spotlights enabled one to feel alone and unobserved while viewing the works, but the complicated internal structures were also expertly illuminated and tended to overpower everything else. I'd warned him the space was going to be too complex and competing for an art gallery, but he'd merely grinned and shrugged.

'You're over sensitive, Pete. With your paintings on the walls, no one will notice the building.'

Fat chance. I was sticking to my theory as an excuse for the lack of any more red dots. From across the gallery I could hear Max belabouring a swarm of sycophants with his Recipe for a Renaissance.

'At Maximillian's there will be no minimalist shams brimming with light, space, air and understatement. No confrontations with a pile of bricks, a bunch of desiccated radishes, sheets of rusty corrugated iron smeared in bird shit, or spilt cans of paint. Nor will it be another showroom of plastic fantasy and kitsch masquerading as art!' He flicked a glance at Conias Jackson, the owner of four such emporia of bad taste, accurately named Arte Bizarres,

'In this gallery, people of discernment will be able to purchase works of real and lasting value, products of rational minds; works of art that radiate skill, intelligence, talent, insight, self-criticism and hard work. And,' he paused pointedly, 'there won't be any mass-produced reproductions passing themselves off as limited edition prints!'

Mr Jackson turned away - scowling.

Max laughed loudly, attracting the attention of the entire gallery, and cast his eyes heavenwards with a theatrical mopping of brow. All eyes followed to marvel again at the dome of crystalline carbon floating over the thirty-metre wide, octagonal central gallery.

'It's like being inside an enormous diamond,' someone whispered.

Max clapped his hands. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, not only will Maximillian's provide you with cultural fresh air, but also the more traditional sort.' He stepped back and pulled at a tasselled cord hanging behind a bronze urn. Nothing happened. He tugged a second time to the accompaniment of a slight tittering, but the glittering vault remained unmoved. He snorted impatiently, slipped off his dark-green velvet jacket, thrust both jacket and cord at me, and disappeared through an adjacent door. Thirty seconds later he could be seen through the dome, striding across the roof.

'My god but he's sexy,' an under-dressed and over-painted woman breathed to her companion, 'and so athletic. Imagine Murray getting up on the roof like that!' She paused and giggled. 'Or dressing like that!'

She wasn't exaggerating. Whenever he thought he could get away with it, Max wore his jackets over bare, brown skin, the better to display an astonishing hardness of chest and abdomen. High cheekbones, generous mouth and a shock of dead-straight brown hair jetting over his forehead, lent a look of youthful nonchalance belied by slippery hazel eyes. His naked torso was clearly visible stretched over the dome as he fiddled with something before straightening up and signalling to me to pull the cord.

Silently, the segments separated and opened, lotus-like, to reveal the night sky. Plastic glitter was replaced by that of a myriad of stars. A spontaneous burst of applause heralded Max as he balanced on the rim between two 'petals'. Godlike, he raised his arms for silence then, eyes wide, mouth agape, he toppled forward, swimming fruitlessly in the air before hitting the marble floor headfirst with a distinct thunk-crack as his skull split and neck snapped.

Those nearest instinctively jumped back to avoid the splash as the contents of his cranium exploded. Frances, Max's wife, clutched at Maurice's sleeve, knuckles white, eyes staring wildly at her husband's body. I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the office. She was pale, but in control when I sat her at the desk. Back in the gallery, one look at the mess that had been Max sent me racing for the toilet to throw up. I was alone with my nausea.

After four years as a virtual hermit, I'd forgotten how quickly human nature seeps through even the most civilised of patinas. After the first gasps of startled surprise, everyone crowded forward,

chattering and manoeuvring to get a better view, excited at their good fortune. In a world where life is usually encountered vicariously, a first-hand experience is to be treasured.

Police and ambulance were on the spot within minutes. Maurice introduced himself as the manager and trailed around behind the officers offering advice until someone told him to shut the hell up and wait in the office with Mrs Fierney.

During the following hour, names were taken, questions asked, the guests released to scatter and spread the news, and the roof and dome inspected with the aid of torches and a portable floodlight.

When I took a police officer to see Frances, her voice was slurred. She'd been drinking with Maurice and the sari-draped crone who glared suspiciously, drained her glass, and ordered Maurice to escort her to a taxi.

No one objected when I asked if I could be the one to inform Max's parents. The police didn't care for the task; neither did Frances who had never hit it off with her in-laws. The bagged body was removed, the floor cleaned, and, as Maurice was nowhere to be found, I locked the gallery and set alarms. Frances was standing in the office staring at her feet when I popped my head in to say goodbye. She looked up with a frown and asked me to come in for a minute. Exhausted, I flopped into a chair.

She leaned against the desk and said pathetically, 'Darling Peter. You're Max's best friend. You can't leave me alone in this barn. Stay the night.'

I wanted to go home, not spend the night under the same roof as a woman I despised.

She gave a dramatic shudder and dabbed at smudged mascara. 'Please? Pretty please? For Max?' She reached across, grasped my hand and sniffled disgustingly.

I pulled roughly away. I had disliked Frances at our first meeting, and nothing had happened in the interim to change my opinion. Sly flirtatious eyes, too much make-up, lank bleached hair, pushy tits, calculated little-girl charm and gushing, counterfeit innocence. I also suspected a grasping nature. The fact that most men were drawn to her like fruit flies to a rotten peach confounded me.

Max had never been open about their relationship, refusing to discuss it. I split with him as soon as he announced his marriage - an attitude he reckoned irrational. In fact, we had only seen each other two or three times a year since Frances took over his life. It was only the offer of a solo exhibition at the opening of his new gallery that had induced me to spend so much time with him over the last few months. As he well knew, it was an offer few painters would be able to resist. When I asked why he was being so generous, he'd changed the subject.

Laziness rather than compassion induced me to stay the night in the upstairs flat at the gallery. Like Frances, I was required first thing in the morning at the police station so it would save me the eighty-kilometre return trip home.

In an unsuccessful attempt to clear my mind of thoughts of untimely death, I wandered down to the beach and jogged up and down the narrow strip of sand. It didn't help, so I returned, reset the alarms, locks and security lights, and dragged myself upstairs. On the landing, I hesitated. Could I get away with simply yelling 'goodnight', or should I poke my head into her room?

Lamplight and sobs spilled into the passageway. Perhaps she really was upset? Unsure whether I was offering a shoulder to cry on or looking for one, I tiptoed to the open doorway and choked on well-intentioned words of comfort. Maurice was sprawled on his back over the king-sized bed, cursing softly while Frances struggled to bring his manhood to life. The heartfelt sobs were those of a woman mightily frustrated - her own swollen desires alarmingly on view as she bent to her toil. Maurice looked up, stretched out a hand and yelled, 'Get this drunken nymphomaniac off me!'

Frances sat back on her haunches and growled, 'This crappy little turd has been playing around with his master for the last six months, but can't bloody well raise it for his mistress. Jesus Christ! Where are the real men? Look at his pathetic little dick!' She grabbed hold of the shrunken thing and flapped it from side to side before turning to face me. Lipstick, saliva, and a scattering of her victim's pubic hairs smeared the lower half of her face. Normally sleek hair had suffered what

looked like a high voltage discharge, and a scarlet flush of anger suffused breasts and shoulders. Paradoxically, she looked more potent than ridiculous.

Maurice had been cool to the point of offensiveness while setting up the exhibition, so I derived a certain pleasure from the spectacle, but was saddened to note that a virile body did not support his manly, square-jawed face. With a greater work-to-food ratio he might have been athletic, but he had let himself go. Skin and muscles were slack and a spare tyre burgeoned where once a slender waist had surely prevailed.

Frances gave his diminutive organ of desire a last vicious tug and my eyes watered in sympathy. Maurice lunged forward, pinched one of Frances's large nipples between finger and thumb, eliciting a curse of agony, thrust his tormenter onto the floor and joined me in the doorway, hysterical with pain and embarrassment.

'You stupid, ugly whore!' he shouted, 'I'd sooner eat my own shit than fuck you! If that's the price of staying on as curator of your pitiful little provincial gallery, then forget it! Keep your fucking job. Unlike you, I am not a fucking prostitute!'

It was a moderately grand exit.

'You're fired!' shouted the furious Frances from the floor to the empty door-way, before clambering back, turning to me without the slightest embarrassment, patting the sheet beside her in invitation and throwing herself petulantly on to her back. 'Get my pillow will you, Pete?'

Almost gagging on the combined stench of lust and alcohol, I remained at the door trying not to look as critical as I felt. Only Max had ever called me Pete. She glared, leaned over the edge of the bed, scabbled for the pillow, tucked it behind her head and lay back panting. 'Christ I'll be glad to see the end of that fuck-wit.'

'Why were you trying to screw him?'

'Max did,' she snapped defiantly. 'Now I'm boss he should do the same for me.'

'It seldom works like that.'

'Shit, men are wimps!'

I let that one go, then asked innocently, 'Weren't you jealous?'

She looked at me warily. 'I thought you and Max told each other everything. Bosom buddies and all that male-bonding crap?'

I shook my head.

'Of course I wasn't jealous! We didn't have that sort of marriage.'

I must have looked even more gormless than usual because she uttered an incredulous half-laugh and stared at me in disbelief. 'You really didn't know about our arrangement?'

I shook my head.

'You've got to be the only person on the Coast who didn't!' She gave me a strange look - a compound of pity and mild anger. 'Sit here,' she patted the bed, 'and talk to me. I'm too fired up to sleep.'

'Talk about what?'

'Max, me, you, the world.'

The last person I wanted to talk about Max with was his unlovely widow. But neither did I want to go to bed and lie awake thinking. 'Ok,' I sighed, sitting on the end of the bed. 'Tell me what everyone else on the Coast knows.'

'Four years ago,' she said with complacent pride, 'I learned about a very dodgy swindle Max had got himself embroiled in. I gave him a choice - either marry me with a legally binding contract making us joint tenants of everything, or lose everything, including his freedom and good name in a corruption scandal and criminal proceedings. He wasn't stupid, so took the first option. It's been a profitable arrangement for both of us.' She hiccupped noisily, burped, giggled and scratched lewdly at her crotch. 'It was purely business. Sexually, we were often competitors.' Her voice was slurred but she didn't seem drunk. She was definitely enjoying herself.

'I've no doubt the arrangement was immensely profitable - for you.'

‘Don’t be like that. I was very useful, especially with a certain type of male client. We had to be careful though.’ She gave a sad little shake of the head and frowned at some private thought before lifting her eyes back to mine. ‘Have you ever wondered where some of the thousands of missing young men and women end up?’

I shook my head.

‘They’ve been too greedy.’ A slight shudder, and her attention wandered. After a tentative laugh she focussed her thoughts on me once more and continued brightly, ‘Now we, I mean I, am rich. Very rich and completely respectable.’

‘Respectable?’ I snorted. ‘Dirt doesn’t wash off that easily.’

She frowned angrily. ‘We were neither too dirty, nor too greedy! And we were smart enough to realise that the longer you stay on the wrong side of the law the more likely you are to get caught. We off-loaded every dodgy operation, and are now strictly legit.’

She indicated the gallery, smiling strangely. ‘This place will boost finances, give us the seal of cultural approval and, after tonight’s accident, will certainly be on the map! Anyway, whatever you or anyone else may think, I’ve earned my passage. I have arrived and there’s not the slightest worry about inheritance. Everything’s mine. All the money, all the property and all the pleasure those things can bring.’

Curbing a desire to smash her face in, I said sweetly, ‘You’ve been a clever girl. However it wasn’t very smart to lose your curator and manager within a couple of hours of losing your husband.’

‘Huh! Creeps like him are two-a-penny. He’ll be replaced by lunch-time tomorrow.’

‘It’ll be hard to find someone who shares Max’s ideas on what constitutes art.’

‘Who cares?’

‘I do.’

‘Enough to screw me?’ The woman had a one-track mind.

‘Sorry, I’m discriminating.’ I couldn’t keep the sneer out of my voice. ‘You’re not into mourning the dead, I gather.’

‘My sex-life has never had anything to do with Max! And I’ll thank you to keep your nose out of my personal feelings. But if I don’t get a fuck soon I’ll tear this bloody place apart and there’ll be no gallery to worry about.’ She certainly looked ready to rampage.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ I felt mildly chastened. My own feelings were still fragile and I’d not given vent to any loud protestations of grief. I ran downstairs for a copy of the local newspaper, found the ‘escort’ ads and used her bedside phone.

‘It’ll cost you,’ I warned, passing the handset. ‘Tell him what you want and how to get here.’

She took the receiver, shoved it at her ear, cleared her throat and in a husky voice I hadn’t heard before growled, ‘I need a fuck... How much?... You’ve got to be joking, boyo! Two hundred cash and two hours non-stop. I never pay more than that... Maximillian’s Art Gallery. Know it?... Well get on your fucking bike. You’ve got four minutes!’ Turning to me, ‘Get down to the front and bring him up, I’ve an urgent repair job to see to.’

I stared at the ceiling.

She laughed and in a sweet-little-girl voice lisped, ‘Pretty pleathe?’

I waited outside the door to the small foyer at the bottom of the private stairs leading to the flat, feeling cold and used. Exactly four minutes later a motorbike roared up bearing a leather-clad, helmeted Martian who jumped off, locked his machine and panted over.

‘I’m not too late am I? She sounded pretty awesome.’

‘No, you’re fine. Rather you than me, though.’

Upstairs, water was still splashing around in the bathroom. ‘Is that him?’ Frances yelled.

‘Yes.’

‘Well get him up and running. He’s got one minute!’

The young man was already undressed and rummaging in a small purse. He was not handsome, his nose was too small, but he was solidly built, lightly bronzed, and wore his long hair in a thick plait at the back. A gold chain and nose stud were unnecessary ornaments. The all-important instrument of pleasure, though, looked uninspiring.

‘She’s not going to be too thrilled with that.’

‘No worries,’ he grinned, extracting a small syringe from his purse. An obviously well practiced jab embedded the needle nearly a centimetre into the side of his penis before he pressed home the plunger. It hurt to watch, but he didn’t flick an eyelash. By the time he’d replaced the syringe, folded his clothes and thrown himself onto the bed, he was ready.

‘Clever trick. Do you also respond to cries for help from men?’

‘You got the money, honey, I got the tool,’ he laughed, completely relaxed.

‘How long’s it going to last?’

He pulled it away from his belly and let it slap back. ‘Two and a half hours minimum, whether or not I come. Guaranteed to satisfy.’

‘Surely you’ve got to be careful with those injections?’

‘You bet! A corkscrew cock’s just one of the hazards. One bloke I know kept it up so long that everything burst inside – he’ll never get another hard-on as long as he lives.’

‘Rather you than me!’

A transformed Frances reclaimed centre-stage by slamming the door to the bathroom. Hair sleek and glossy, face made up, stomach sucked in, nipples hard – she almost looked sexy. Taking two, hundred-dollar notes, a couple of condoms and three white tablets from a pot on the dressing table, she flapped the money in front of her reclining paramour before tucking it into the purse sitting on top of his clothes.

‘Want to feel good?’ she smiled, offering me one of the tabs. ‘Ecstasy,’ she explained to my look of incomprehension. ‘Get shot of all that aggression.’

‘No thanks. I like to remain in control of my emotions.’

She shrugged, tossed the condoms and one of the tablets to her escort who swallowed it with a swig of wine from the opened bottle beside the bed, did the same herself and dropped the remaining tab back in the pot.

‘Thanks, Pete,’ she laughed over her shoulder.

Her gigolo waved goodbye from the bed as she lunged.

The calculating bitch! All she’d wanted from me was the security of having someone in the place while she was being screwed.

Sadness sucked at life as I trudged the ten metres to Max’s room, the twin of Frances’s.

Maurice was sprawled in the middle of the double bed. Why the hell hadn’t he gone back to his own place? Surely he didn’t think...? I jettisoned the idea. My own thoughts were too jumbled to want to get inside someone else’s. A walk-through dressing room separated bedroom from bathroom. Suits, shirts, trousers and jackets on hangers. A small pile of used clothes slumped outside the bathroom door. I picked up a handful and buried my face. Remembered odours that transported me back four years to our flat. We had shared everything - bed, food, clothes, even a toothbrush. Reckoned we were one being in two bodies. With eyes closed, Max was with me. Then the horror slammed into me and I sagged to the floor. Loneliness welled and I stuffed a T-shirt into my mouth to stifle the moan, before ripping the sweet-smelling reminder of loss to shreds with my teeth. Eventually, feeling cold and stupid, I stripped and showered.

Maurice was still hogging the centre of the bed.

‘Shove over, Maurice,’ I growled when he continued to lie like a dead dog. He turned, smiled seductively and threw back the covers to display a body about a quarter as attractive as the one at that moment hammering into Frances. I nearly chundered. I was in no mood for empty lust. I was in

no mood for anything! Did no one have any feelings? What motivated these people? I felt like an alien and stared down at his flabby, repellent flesh. A careless approach to what should be our most prized possession turns me off. In no circumstances would I find Maurice's body appealing. I lay on my back trying to control swirling images of death. Maurice stretched out a hand. Repressing an urge to pummel his face to a pulp, I shoved it away.

'Are you in a shitty because I ignored you during the setting up of your exhibition?'

I leaped from the bed, ripped the blankets off him and shouted, 'What the fuck's the matter with you people? The only real friend I've ever had fell to his death three hours ago, and all you and his wife want to do is screw. What is it? Violent and messy deaths turn you on? You're sick, you know that? Sick, sick, sick! Now your lover's been dead a few hours it's OK to try and fuck someone else?'

'What's the matter with you? I didn't love him, I just wanted the job.'

'You make me puke! Did Max know that?'

Maurice gave me a look of total incomprehension and continued speaking as though explaining the obvious to a dim-witted child. 'I haven't the slightest idea, Peter. What's love got to do with it? I know Max wasn't in love with me! But it would certainly have annoyed him if I'd shown any interest in you.'

'You're mad!'

'Cut the dumb act! Everyone noticed the way he trailed around after you, laughing at your jokes, making sure you were happy with all the arrangements. He never let you out of his sight. You sure know how to string a guy along.'

I didn't want to hear that so stuck to the present. 'Well, despite your plans and self-denial, you've lost your job.'

'I hoped that if I was nice to you, you'd put in a good word for me with Frances in the morning.'

'What was that crack you made to her about prostitution?'

Maurice shrugged. 'I also think you're sexy.'

'Well I certainly don't feel the same about you,' I stated bluntly. 'Having seen you with your clothes off, I'm turned off!'

He drew a tart little breath, turned an unpleasant shade of puce, dragged up the doona and sneered, 'You're just a pathetic little cock-teaser, jealous that I was getting what you wanted.'

A fuse blew somewhere deep in my head. So angry I could scarcely breathe, I reached across, grabbed an arm and a handful of hair and hurled him violently to the floor. 'Fuck off home you flabby, cretinous lump of shit and stay there! Frances will send you anything you're owed.'

He stared up, uncomprehending, face grey. I grasped his arm, twisted it up his back, frogmarched him downstairs and thrust him out into the car park. The gutless creep offered no resistance. From the lounge window I could see him huddling against the doorway to escape the chill wind. Pathetic, naked, stupid. Impossible to feel anything other than contempt. I didn't want him hanging around till morning, so threw his clothes, wallet and car keys out the window. He raced around picking everything up, got into his car and drove noisily away. It made me feel better, but didn't make me sleep. What did these people value? I had no point of contact. Throughout the night, a dark puddle of unwelcome thoughts churned in my head.

At breakfast, Frances's face was a picture of serenity. With the bemused grin of the truly satisfied, she chomped her way through four thick slices of toast, two fried eggs, a mountain of fried tomatoes and cheese, three cups of strong tea and five passionfruit. I've never learnt the knack of thought concealment, so wasn't surprised when she answered the unspoken question.

'Enough exercise, and the acid in the fruit shoves everything through before it can turn to ugly flab. Anyway, you've eaten as much as I have.'

'I'm twice as big and usually work hard to burn it off. Today I've got to keep my strength up for the interview with the cops.'

'I was coming round to that excuse myself.' She looked down at her plate, began one of her 'little-girl' looks from under her eyelashes, thought better of it, laughed unselfconsciously and looked me straight in the eyes.

'Peter - I know it seemed as though I was using you last night, and I suppose I was, but I really appreciated your staying. In fact, I hope you'll hang around a bit longer. After all, someone's got to run the gallery.' The smile was shrewd.

'Is that an offer of employment?'

'Yes. Now that poor little Maurice has scampered off leaving us in the lurch, it seems the obvious solution.'

'I have the distinct impression that poor little Maurice was caught in a rather sly little trap,' I said quietly. There was no reaction, unless a sunny smile indicated something other than a guiltless conscience. I was wary of becoming involved with the woman, and too upset and tired to make a commitment, so procrastinated. 'I'll hang around till the inquest and funeral are over, then let you know.'

'That'll be perfect.' She scrutinised my face for a full minute, took my hand in hers and, visibly suppressing a smile, whispered, 'Don't ever try your hand at poker or politics. You're as transparent as air.'

Despite myself, I was starting to like her. Maybe Max hadn't been so stupid after all.

'Max wasn't a fool,' she announced with alarming prescience. 'It's only today I realise why he was so much in love with you. I was jealous, you know. All that time he spent with you.'

'You've got the wrong bloke. I hardly saw him after he married you.'

Her jaw dropped. 'But, he never stopped talking about you.' Suddenly less sure of herself she stared at me. 'Surely you realised our marriage was just a front?'

'No. I told you last night.'

'But - that's terrible,' she whispered. 'Poor Max. Poor you. What a confusion. But why?' Her eyes searched mine.

I returned the look calmly for as long as I could, but the awful realisation of what I'd refused to accept for four years slowly flooded my heart, drowning me in sadness. I had never stopped loving Max. That was why I had stuck myself out the back of beyond. That was why I spent my days alone and miserable. Why I was on anti-depressants. Why my whole life was fucked. Clouds of self-pity gathered.

Frances continued to hold my hand and gaze at me with such compassion that the lies could no longer be sustained. It hadn't been Max who refused to explain about Frances, it was me who'd refused to listen. I had rejected his approaches; blaming him for leaving me. Cold misery filled my belly. The irreplaceable loss that was Max. The void never to be filled. The years of loneliness ahead. The wasted years gone by.

Sadness, a thousand times worse because it was of my own making, engulfed my being and I dropped my head onto my arms and howled.

Chapter Two

Having seen little point in giving Max's parents a sleepless night, I telephoned them immediately after breakfast. Hank and Celia were my best, just about my only friends, although I'd seen little of them over the preceding four years. At the sound of Hank's voice my throat dried and the awful news had to be flushed out with tears. And then it was Hank consoling me.

By eight o'clock a covey of policemen were swarming over the roof, peering at the dome, admiring its construction, shouting to have it opened and closed, bustling around with knowing mouths. I went up to watch. A bucket of metal fastenings, off-cuts, screws and similar objects had been piled beside a carton of cigarette butts, lunch-wrappers, plastic drink bottles, pieces of string,

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