

David

By Raymond Hopkins

PROLOGUE

A river wound its lazy way past what had been a medium sized town house in years gone by, a house converted to a modern cafe which nevertheless still retained the impression of antiquity. In the muddy brown water, large, grey backed fish flicked their tails lazily, searching for food without noticeable enthusiasm amongst the reeds. A variety of small birds chattered and squabbled in the treetops and on the ground, industriously clearing the area of tourist scattered crumbs. It could have been almost any one of a hundred similar places, pretty, popular and probably expensive. A steep cobbled street ran past, surfaced thus to give the long vanished horse a firm grip on the road in icy weather. The cobbles were new, having been put down only a few months earlier in an effort to keep, or rather to restore, what was felt to be the original character of the area. Motor cars, indeed all traffic larger or more powerful than the ordinary pedal bicycle had been banned from this stretch of road, offering a sort of oasis in the middle of thundering traffic noise. There were several people in the ever popular cafe. In a corner near to the delicately rounded bay window were two blue rinsed late middle aged women, heavily bearded, heavily made up and looking rather overdressed by the more casual fashions of the day. While not cold, they both wore furs. One leaned forward and spoke in a deliberate and purposeful stage whisper that could be heard several tables away.

'Just look at that couple over there. Talk about beauty and the beast. Have you ever seen anything like it?'

Her friend looked in the direction indicated and saw an attractive youngish woman talking earnestly to a man who was appreciably, perhaps even considerably older, holding his hand across the table and gazing with appeared to be devotion into his face.

'Can you see those scars? I don't know how she can bear to look at him. Isn't it revolting? You'd think he would sit so that other people can't see his face so readily.'

'Yes, I noticed when we came in. Dreadful, isn't it? A bit tactless, even,' answered her companion. 'He's a lot older than she is, too. You'd think he'd have more sense at his age.'

'Well, that's men for you. I suppose she is pretty.' The speaker sounded doubtful.

'I expect that some men are attracted to that sort of thing, but no, I wouldn't call her pretty. Not exactly. Not with that type of suntan. Permanent, you know, I suppose she has to take what she can get, all things considered. Of course, with a face like that, I don't suppose he has a great deal of choice either.'

The scars were certainly noticeable, one in particular crossing the man's scalp and stretching clear to his cheek bone, deep and livid in appearance. As the penetrating whispers continued, the young woman turned her head and stared at the older women, who returned the stare with arrogant interest. Resolutely she rose to her feet. The man grasped her hand and spoke in a low voice, but she simply shook her head and crossed the floor to the opposite corner. What she said nobody could hear, except for the recipients of her anger, who quickly picked up their belongings and left the cafe. The young woman came back to her companion and sat down again, while the other customers turned to their refreshments and following the usual conventions, continued their own private conversations and pretended they had witnessed nothing.

'That didn't take long,' remarked the man, mildly. 'What did you talk about?'

'I simply told them the truth. Where, and how you got those scars, and just why I think you are the most handsome man in the world.'

He raised an eyebrow, distorting his face in the area of the deepest scar. 'Is that all? They seemed to leave in a bit of a hurry.'

A flush rose on the woman's face. 'Well, I may have said one or two other things.'

'And?'

The woman's eyes looked away for a moment, gleaming with amusement, and she pursed her lips. 'They claimed they had never been so insulted in all their lives, so I invited them to listen a bit longer, as I was sure I could improve on my speech. I may have used some strong language, too.'

He gave a short, barely suppressed laugh. 'Only may?'

'Oh, all right. I know all the words, and I did use some strong language. That's when they left.'

'You didn't make friends then?'

'I didn't, but nobody abuses the man I love, not in my hearing, anyway. After what you have been through, David, I have no intention of letting you suffer that sort of foolishness.'

He took her hand, stroking her slender fingers pensively. 'I'm not as young as I was, but I'm not exactly deaf. I got the distinct impression they insulted you as well.'

'Well, yes. That doesn't matter. I've heard that sort of thing all my life. There's nothing very strange about it, you know that.'

'Yes, I know,' he replied. 'I guess you never really get used to it. If it was me, I'd be fighting back and giving as good as I got, if not a good deal better.'

'I tried that once,' she said. 'It doesn't really work. On the contrary, it tends to encourage more of the same. You just have to learn to ignore it.'

'As you just ignored our two friends just now?' he smiled at her.

'That's completely different,' she said. 'I was complaining for you, not for myself.'

They sat silent for a while, remembering the experiences of the recent, and not so recent past.

CHAPTER 1

If he had ever looked back upon his life, David Howard might have realised that it fell rather neatly into three stages. There was the period of his youth, when he had been left in the care of his sister after the death of their mother. She had survived her husband by several years, but her heart had clearly never been in it. David remembered his father, but not as well as he would have liked, relying on Fiona to keep his memory alive. Fiona was his one anchor in life at that time. As brother and sister, they had always been close, and drew closer together still as David climbed through boyhood into youth. The transition had not always been easy, as sister acted sometimes as a sister, more often as a parent, a task made no simpler by the few years there were between them in their respective ages. There were the inevitable strains as Fiona grew up herself and learned to cope with the occasional young man calling on her, a learning process often made difficult by a boy, not quite a child, but not yet adult, who was always there in the background. Not every young man understood the situation. Not every young man had enough patience to cope with it. Those who couldn't understand were never asked to visit again.

Fiona had her own life now and a family of her own. Training to be a concert pianist, she had met Greg, a pleasant young American, who had swept her off her feet. Aware of her self imposed obligations, she kept him waiting until David was old enough to go to university. Greg had understood. Greg had been patience itself. Generous almost to a fault, he had loaded both Fiona and David with so many tactfully given presents that their financial situation eased considerably. Never actually poor, brother and sister had always been keenly aware of the need to make their stock of money stretch to take in the essentials of life. After Greg appeared, nothing was ever quite the same again for Fiona. Even then, it had been an effort to get her to accept changing circumstances. David recalled the situation well.

'You'll hardly see me any more, Fiona,' he had told her. 'I'll be studying most of the time. You're the one I have to thank for getting me to university in the first place, and I'll not be wasting the opportunity.'

'That's nonsense,' protested Fiona. 'You're going there on your own merits.'

'Well, I should hope so. Just the same, if it hadn't been for you taking over when mum died, I'd have got nowhere, merits or not. It's not been easy for you, I know that. In any case, you'll not want to have me at home every weekend. You should have some time for yourself. If you're lonely, invite Greg to stay.' He grinned. 'I'm broadminded. Let him stay overnight if you like. I always wanted to be an uncle.'

David dodged the cushion thrown at him with practised ease and continued speaking. 'Seriously though, he's a nice fellow. You should marry him, he'd take you like a shot, you know that.'

'Yes, I do know. In fact, brother dear, he's asked me more than once.'

'I'm glad to hear it. I just thought he was being a bit slow, which doesn't sound a bit like him. Well?'

Fiona sighed. 'I'm not sure, David.'

'Don't you want to marry him? I always got the impression you wouldn't say no if he had asked.'

'Yes I do. I'll admit that much. But it's not as simple as that, is it? I mean, we've been together now since mum died. I can't just sweep seven years away as though it had never happened.'

David smiled fondly at his sister. 'You're not capable of it, but that's not the point. You have a right to a life of your own. You haven't had all that much, what with me being in the way. And no comments about that, either. I know you've done what you felt you had to do, and done it willingly. Just the same, you do have a right to your own life. If you don't believe that, then accept that I have a right to a life of my own. I'll always be grateful to you for what you've done for me, but it's time I struck out. I know what I want to do, and I can't do that with a spinster sister hanging round my neck every time I want to bring a harem home, can I? Go on, marry Greg before he gets tired of waiting.'

Fiona smiled at her brother with affection and relief. 'But he wants me to move to America with him. Not immediately perhaps, but when his job here is finished. That may not be for some time yet, but he won't be here for ever.'

'So? It is civilised, I understand. More or less. Practically. Well, almost bound to be.'

'But you'll be on your own if I do that.'

He grinned at her. 'I don't expect to spend all my time studying. I understand there are creatures of the female persuasion in university. Creatures with brains as well as, hopefully, good looks. There should be a few minutes in the week I can spare to do a bit of chatting up. If not, it won't be for want of trying.'

There had been more, but eventually, Fiona had been persuaded. Neither she nor David had regretted her moving away, although he often felt he would like to see her more often. Greg, he felt, was a thoroughly pleasant man, and a patient one, hard working and sensible. Just the sort of man David thought Fiona deserved.

Then there was the period of hectic work, not altogether unconnected to the first period. It was a time he always thought of with pleasure, albeit a time long since past. It remained in the past because of circumstances he wouldn't want to repeat,

even though he had many happy memories of that stage in his life. It had been a time when he was young and worked for the sake of working, when work was a pleasure that needed no excuse, carving out a career for himself in a near frantic explosion of activity. Not only for himself. At first there had been Stella. Stella, who had taken him for a ride, a ride he had been only too willing to accept. Foolish of him, he knew, and had known even then. Stella, for whom even the best was never enough. Stella, who would have stripped him of his wealth, his self respect and his dignity before casting him off like a well worn piece of clothing, as she had done to so many others.

That was before Laura. Laura had come later. Laura, who had taught him to slow down, to accept life as it came, to see instead of simply looking. Laura, who had taught him first to look. Laura, who had given him many reasons to slow down. Laura, who had taken their daughter to their shared grave after so few, so pitifully few years together.

After Laura there had come a long, slow period of settled living, in which he had transformed boredom almost into an art form. A life which was very different from that he had known earlier. A life in which he deliberately turned his back on society and lived with his own dark thoughts until some sort of life became liveable if not exactly bearable. He had rejected the repeated offers of sister and brother in law to move in with them, wanting to suffer the agonies of a too sharp memory entirely on his own. He had felt that he didn't need people, especially understanding and helpful people. Even a brief visit had convinced him of the rightness of the decision. His decision, right or wrong. America was a great place, with friendly, if somewhat overpowering people. Nevertheless, it was still a foreign country, and the idea of foreign countries brought back too many happy memories of a type he had no wish to recall, but rather to wallow in the misery of dark and dreadful thoughts. England, at that time, was the only place he wished to be in, if he wished to be anywhere at all.

It had been a settled life disturbed by nothing very much at all, until he met Alison. Alison, who had brought him back to life again. Alison, so unlike Laura, yet strangely having so much in common with her. It had all started so long ago, with a man he hardly recognised, a man that at this end of his life seemed to be quite a different person altogether.

CHAPTER 2

The day had started off well for David Howard. He had been on his way to a computer trade fair, an event he had been looking forward to for a long time. He smiled happily as he eased the silver blue Bentley with the black leather seats and bright, but dignified flame red trim out into the traffic and turned its elegant bonnet westwards to the event. The sky was clear and bright, with only a few light fluffy clouds to spoil the otherwise perfect azure. In such conditions, the elegant bonnet gleamed with a hue that seemed to be deeper than anything the manufacturers had intended, reflecting objects almost as perfectly as a purpose made mirror. As so often before, drivers made room for him in a way they didn't for other, lesser vehicles, although the thought of possible insurance claims may have sharpened awareness. Even the traffic lights seemed to have jammed on to a permanent green. The car was one of his luxuries, along with first class travel by rail and air. He didn't even pretend that he needed it. It was a vehicle that unashamedly he liked driving. However, long before he got to his destination, the smile was wiped from his face. A small delivery van in too much of a hurry had overtaken him on a blind bend, and had squeezed sharply in front in the face of oncoming traffic, mounted the kerb and wrapped itself neatly around a nearby lamp post. Rolls Royce made excellent brakes, but only a solid brick wall or a stone cliff would have stopped him in time. Apart from shock and a few bruises, the driver of the van was miraculously unhurt, even though the van itself was a near write off. It was unfortunate from David's viewpoint, to judge by the small but steady trickle of water that came from the front end, it would be some time before the Bentley could be driven again. He viewed the damage with almost dispassionate interest and shook his head in sorrow. It was a most unusual shape for a Bentley. Unusual and unattractive. He preferred it the way it had been.

The garage that took his car away for repair also took money from David in exchange for a hire car. Like many hire cars, it had seen better days, but at least it was transport. It got him to the trade fair without being more than just a little late. Regrettably, that is all it did do. On leaving the fair, there was a flat tyre to deal with. With dirty hands, David climbed into the driver's seat, inserted the ignition key and turned it. There was a faint clonk, but otherwise nothing happened. He tried again. This time, the engine turned rapidly, but failed to start. The failure continued until the battery showed decided signs of running flat. David understood computers, but when a car wouldn't start, he was at a complete loss. In a bad temper, he used his mobile phone to ring the car hire agency. There was no answer. He rang again. Again

there was no answer. Clearly, work had finished for the day. By then it had been dark for a long time, and he decided to take a hotel room for the night.

The situation didn't get worse. It just signally failed to improve. It wasn't the sort of hotel he would normally have wasted time in. It wasn't a town he would normally have wasted time in, other than the computer fair, and that, he considered, was no waste. He knew it, of course. Or rather, he knew of it, this being where Stella had come to live. Was that six years ago? More? Ruefully, he realised he couldn't really remember. It was a long time ago anyway, and much had happened since then.

He glanced at his briefcase and gave a wry smile as he considered the paperwork. The computer age was supposed to free the modern businessman from all that. Instead, there seemed to be more paper than ever, most of it generated by the machine that was intended to replace it. He closed the case again, fiddled with his laptop computer, then closed that as well. Clearly he would do nothing useful tonight, even though new ideas were buzzing in his fertile and imaginative thoughts. For the first time in many months a little rest was enforced. The mind could, perhaps, clear itself of incessant work. Not that he was complaining. Work brought its own rewards in the shape of material wealth, and while he wasn't fool enough to believe that that was the most important aspect of life, he did enjoy the things that money could buy. Even a broken Bentley could be replaced if necessary. Even that was nothing to go into deep mourning for.

The night was unusually warm for the time of year, the room ill cleaned and stuffy. He felt tired and it was difficult to stay awake. Neither was it possible to sleep properly as images buzzed in his mind insistently, memories from the past that he thought he had long since forgotten. Stella. The only girl he had ever wanted. He recalled their first meeting, not long after starting at university, both young and inexperienced in the ways of the world. She was more the confident of the two at that time, always had been, probably always would be, although he developed confidence of his own in due course.

The first meeting could hardly have been more inauspicious. He was riding his bicycle, admittedly lost in academic thought, when the blare of a car horn startled him.

'Look out!' came a sudden shout.

Too late. He flinched, lost control of his machine, and fell heavily against the side of the car. He lay on the pavement, momentarily dazed. As his vision cleared, he became aware of a shapely pair of legs standing beside him, a sight which might have pleased him under different circumstances. Dimples in the knees, he noticed. A high, well modulated voice spoke.

'I do hope there's no damage.'

'No,' mumbled David. 'I don't think so.'

'Not you,' said the voice with some scorn. 'I mean the car. I hope you haven't scratched it.'

The accusation stung him to action. He scrambled to his feet, picking up his bicycle as he did so, leaning on it for support without appearing to need it.

'I might point out,' he said, 'that you are the one that caused this little accident. I mean, you might have swung out a good deal further and missed me altogether. The road is wide enough after all.'

The girl waved her hand imperiously. 'Never mind all that,' she said, after inspecting her paintwork. 'There seems to be no harm done.'

'I wouldn't exactly say that,' said David. 'My front wheel is buckled. The bike is unridable.'

'Is it? Perhaps you should get yourself a car then.'

'Perhaps I would, if I had a rich daddy to buy me one. Anyway, I prefer a bicycle. It's a good deal more healthy, not to mention sensible. And I stress the word sensible.'

'I see. I was going to suggest you lock it up and I'd give you a lift to wherever you were going, but after that crack, I don't think I'll take the trouble.'

'Under the circumstances that suits me. I think I'd prefer to walk anyway, certainly after seeing the way you drive. One accident in the day is quite sufficient, thank you very much. I can well do without another.'

'Suit yourself,' the girl replied, angrily. She got into the car, and moved away, tyres squealing more than a little on the hot tarmac.

David looked after her with what he felt was justified annoyance. All the same, that was certainly some car she had. An open topped sports model, as scarlet as he felt his angry face to be. Somehow, it seemed to match the character of the lady herself. Come to think of it, that was certainly some girl as well, although at the moment, his feelings were more for the vehicle than the owner. He knew who she was, of course. Coming from the same town, as they did, it would be difficult not to recognise the only daughter of the town's Chief Executive. They used to be called Town Clerks, he mused with some bitterness. The increased title seemed to have gone to somebody's head. Of course, there was wealth there as well. Maybe that made a difference when talking to the peasants.

The man in the hotel bed shifted and wriggled, seeking a more comfortable position. Yes, he thought, that was not a very good beginning. Things had improved later, though. They had met again shortly afterwards, during a social evening organised by the Students' Union. Unwilling to tear himself away from a particularly interesting part of his studies, he had arrived when the celebrations had been in

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