

# Arctic Prison

Jo put the 'phone down with shaking fingers. Shocked, she sat back in her chair and tried to marshal her chaotic thoughts. The art catalogue she had been browsing fell from her hands as she recalled the conversation she had just had with the owner of the gallery. Suzanne knew that Jo had a passion for anything to do with the garden and had bought several such paintings from her gallery, where she was now a valued customer. She had rung her to advise that she would soon be hosting an exhibition for a well-known artist of horticultural and botanical subjects in a variety of media and that she would be sure to see that a complimentary ticket for an invitation to the private view would be sent to her.

"I was pleased to see your husband in here last week", she said to Jo in her attractive French accent, "and I was delighted to see your daughter for the first time. What beautiful hair she has – so long and dark".

Apart from the shock of wondering what David would be doing at the gallery, when he wasn't particularly interested in art, Jo's mind homed in on the words "your daughter" and "long dark hair". Elaine, her only daughter, had short fair hair so it couldn't possibly be her and the implications of this were devastating to her. One thing was certain – David was cheating on her and he must pay! She picked up the phone.

"Paul", she managed to gasp. "You will absolutely not believe what I have to tell you", and she recounted Suzanne's world-shattering revelation.

"But darling", said Paul, "Isn't this what you and I have been hoping for: a good reason for our relationship to become an upfront one, when we don't have to behave in the cloak and dagger manner like we do now".

"Yes, of course, that would be wonderful", murmured Jo, having got her voice under more control. "But I just never thought that he would be the one to cheat on me. What are we going to do? Can you suggest something that would not involve us in a messy, long-drawn-out divorce? But it must be something that can never be traced back to me".

Paul thought about this. He had never meant to become involved with Jo but she had had a run of bad luck with the second-hand car she had recently bought and that he had serviced for her. Over the time

he had been drawn to her sophistication as much as she had fancied his cheerful Cockney manner and the attraction had become serious.

“Are you sure it would be messy?” enquired Paul hesitantly.

“If he is this devious, taking his mistress or girlfriend of whatever out so brazenly, I feel sure he would be only too pleased to make it very difficult so that I don’t get too good a deal out of any divorce,” she said bitterly.

“Okay then”, agreed Paul. I’ll see what I come up with, but a more immediate sure-fire idea would be to disable the brakes at a suitable time before he has some driving to do. Living on the hill, with that lake at the bottom, would seem to be quite a good idea, I would think.” He paused. “You really are serious about this, then?” he queried.

“Deadly”, breathed Jo. “That would be fantastic. I’ll make some excuse to get him to bring his car in for a check and you can do the business.”

“It won’t be immediate”, advised Paul, “I will have to create something that could happen over a period of time. And I’d like you to give me a call again in a few days just to confirm exactly what I have to do”.

Across the town David closed the door and was making a call from his office. “What I was talking about earlier. I’ve been thinking. We should go away for a fortnight. What do you think?”

“I quite agree. That’s a wonderful idea”, was the reply, “Just what the doctor ordered”.

Having set her plan in motion Jo only had to wait until David announced that he would take the car out later that morning to visit the bank in the nearby town. Keeping her nerve she thought it best to be out of the home when the ‘accident’ happened and ‘phoned Elaine asking if she could pop round to her flat for a coffee. When she arrived Elaine seemed to be in a state of bubbly nervous excitement but when Jo enquired as to the reason she brushed it aside and said she would talk about it later. The mother-daughter conversation progressed on the usual lines of Jo enquiring about the grandchildren and Elaine complaining about how her husband never took much notice of the children and how she felt that this imbalance of parental attention might affect them.

Jo made the right noises and some suggestions but then both the women's attention was arrested by the well-known blaring of 'blues and twos', indicating an accident. They looked at each other and then Jo's 'phone rang. The voice at the other end announced himself to be Inspector Mulford, a police officer responding to a road traffic accident. In a grave tone he advised that he had found her 'phone number, listed as 'Home', on the mobile 'phone of the victim whose body had been removed and taken to the local hospital.

In a flurry, and hoping she looked as distraught as she was expected to be, Jo said she would soon be at the hospital to carry out a formal identification.

"I'll come with you, of course, Mum", said Elaine.

Jo gathered her bag and coat and started walking to the door. On the threshold she paused. "Before we go, darling, are you all right?" asked Jo gently. "I mean, just before this you seemed to be in rather a nervous state. Is everything OK?"

Elaine was taken aback at this trivial question in view of the enormity of the task about to be undertaken but she forced herself to reply.

"Oh well, it's hardly something that matters now, but I'll tell you. You know the amateur drama society that I act with? Well, they are going to put on 'Antony and Cleopatra'. It's a huge step for them, to attempt Shakespeare when we've mostly been doing modern authors: I can't imagine what our usual audience will think about it. But – guess what – they have asked me to be Cleopatra. It's a wonderful accolade, because I've not worked with them long, and the fun thing is that they've given me this gorgeous black wig to wear. I had it on when I met Dad last week and ..... Oh dear" and she broke down in tears.

Jo was poleaxed. "What do you mean?" she managed to croak.

"Oh dear", Elaine repeated as she dabbed her eyes and sighed. "It's really so trivial now, but Dad was really worried that you weren't doing all that well after the 'flu that you'd had. So he thought he'd take you away for a couple of weeks and part of the treat was that he was going to see Suzanne at that gallery you like to arrange for you to have a picture if you really liked one at the forthcoming exhibition. Well, that part was secret, but just to give him a bit of a surprise I put on the black wig to see if I could fool him into thinking I was someone else. That bit wasn't part of the surprise. "

Jo was staring at Elaine in absolute horror.

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“What’s the matter, Mum,” asked Elaine.

“The wig” Jo managed to stutter.

“Mum. Don’t even think about it. It was all a bit of fun.” She paused and looked at her mother in some concern. “Didn’t Daddy tell you? Anyway, come on: we must hurry. They’re expecting us”.

“Oh my God” gasped Jo as the full implication of this revelation sank in and now the tears were those of fear and pouring down Jo’s cheeks.

The atmosphere in Elaine’s car was tense as she drove down to the hospital and Jo fumbled continually with her handbag and keys.

Arriving at the hospital she was met by Inspector Mulford, who had notified Jo of the accident. She clung to Elaine and was ushered along a corridor. To her surprise she was shown not into the morgue but into a cubicle with curtains drawn around it where a figure was lying on its side on the bed shrouded in a white blanket. The figure sat up.

“You utter bitch”, said David and glared at her ferociously.

Jo’s legs gave way beneath her and she sat down on the plastic chair that was at the side of the bed. She stared at David uncomprehendingly.

“How ....?” she began weakly. “I don’t understand”.

“Well”, responded David in a tone dripping with contempt, “Your boyfriend isn’t quite the hardened murderer you thought he was going to be and he had the guts to come to me and tell me what was in the pipeline. So we contacted the police and between us we concocted a little drama. Paul already had your conversation on tape – you know the thing - “this conversation might be recorded” - and the police were only too happy to make it happen.”

“Come along Madam” said Inspector Mulford and snapped the handcuffs on Jo. Just before she left the room David called out to her.

“Oh, by the way,” he sneered. “When I was in the gallery I saw a picture that I thought you would like. I know how much you like snow and winter scenes and I had my eye on one where fish have been trapped under the ice where they exist in the water until spring returns. It’s a glorious contrast of icy blue sky, crisp white ice and the orange of the fish. It’s called “Arctic Prison” – very appropriate, in the circumstances, I would think”. And he lay back while on shaking legs Jo was led unceremoniously outside and bundled into a waiting police car.