

Chapter One

The bus had no business stopping where it did. We should have gone straight on across the Coldingham Moor, with Dunbar to the back of us and the English border drawing ever nearer, but instead we stopped, and the shaggy-faced cattle that lifted their heads on the far side of the fence appeared to share my surprise when the driver cut the engine to an idle.

A fierce blast of wind rocked the little ten-seater bus on its tyres and drove a splattering of cold spring rain against the driver's windscreen, but he took no notice. He shook out a well-thumbed newspaper and settled back, humming tunelessly to himself. Curious, I shifted in my seat to peer out my own fogging window.

There seemed, at first glance, nothing to stop for, only the cattle and a few uninterested sheep, picking their way across a ragged landscape that was turning green reluctantly, as if someone had told it only yesterday that spring had come. Beyond the moor, lost somewhere in the impenetrable mist, rose the wild, romantic Lammermuir Hills I'd read about as a child. And in the opposite direction, although I couldn't see it either, the cold North Sea bit deep into the coastal line of cliffs.

The wind struck again, broadside, and the little bus shuddered. I sighed, and watched my breath condense upon the chattering window glass.

Impulsiveness, my mother always said, was one of my worst flaws, second only to my habit of speaking to strangers. After twenty-nine years I'd grown accustomed to her heavy sighs and shaking head, and to her firm conviction I'd end up a sad statistic on the nightly news. But now, as I squinted out at the bleak, unwelcoming scenery, I grudgingly admitted that my mother had a point.

It had been impulse, after all, that had brought me from my London flat to Scotland in the first place. Impulse, and the slick, persuasive writing style of Adrian Sutton-Clarke. He knew me too well, did Adrian, and he had phrased his summons craftily – his promise of 'the perfect job' set like a jewel at the centre of a long letter that was so deliciously mysterious, so full of hints of grand adventure, that I couldn't possibly resist it. Adrian, for all his faults, had rarely steered me wrong. And if today was anything to go by, I decided, he hadn't been lying about the adventure.

Not that one could really blame British Rail for what had happened. My train had certainly set out from King's Cross cheerily enough, and even after we'd spent twenty minutes on a siding waiting for a points failure to be corrected, the engine had pushed ahead with vigour, determined to make up the time. It was only after our second delay north of Darlington, because of sheep on the line, that the train had begun to show signs of weariness, creaking and rolling from side to side in a rocking motion that lulled me instantly to sleep.

I had stayed sleeping right through Durham, then Newcastle,

and finally Berwick upon Tweed, where I was meant to get off. When the train lurched to a stop at Dunbar, I'd scrambled down on to the platform with the familiar resigned feeling that told me I was lost. Well, not so much lost, really, as diverted. And the fact that my train had been an hour late coming into Dunbar proved something of a complication.

'You might have taken the 5.24,' the stationmaster had informed me, in an effort to be helpful, 'or the 5.51. But they've both gone. There'll not be another train to Berwick now till 7.23.'

'I see.' Nearly an hour and a half to wait. I hated waiting. 'I don't suppose there's a bus?'

'To Berwick? Aye, there is, at...,' he'd searched his clockwork memory for the time, '...6.25. Just round the corner, there, and up the road a ways – that's where it stops.'

And so I'd wrestled my suitcase round the corner and up the road to the small bus shelter, my spirits lifting somewhat as I read the posted timetable telling me the bus to Berwick travelled via Cockburnspath and Coldingham and Eyemouth.

Eyemouth, Adrian had written in his letter, pronounced just as it looks, and not like Plymouth, if you please. You'd love it here, I think – I remember how you waxed rhapsodic about the north coast of Cornwall, and this is rather better, a real old-fashioned fishing town with smugglers' ghosts round every corner and the added lure of...but no, I shan't give the secret away. You'll just have to come and find out for yourself.

I'd have been only too happy to oblige, I thought wryly, but for the fact that I was now stuck in the middle of Coldingham Moor, with the bus idling on and the driver still reading his newspaper.

There seemed little point in questioning the stop; apart from a couple of lovestruck kids fondling each other at the rear of the bus, I was the only passenger. And the driver was bigger than me. Still, my curiosity had almost reached breaking point when he finally folded his paper with a decisive rattle, sat himself upright, and pulled on the lever to open the door.

A man was coming across the moor.

It might have been the fogged window, or the wild weather, or the rough and rolling landscape that, like all the Scottish Borderlands, held traces of the harsh and violent past – the echoed din of charging hooves, of chilling battle-cries and clashing broadswords. Whatever it was, it tricked my senses. The man, to my eyes, looked enormous, a great dark giant who moved over bracken and thorn with an effortless stride. He might have been a spectre from a bygone age, a fearless border laird come to challenge our rude intrusion on his lands – but the illusion lasted only a moment.

The stranger pulled his collar tighter against another punishing blast of wind and rain and jogged the final few steps to the bus door. No border laird, just a rather ordinary-looking man in his mid-thirties, fit and broad-shouldered and thoroughly modern in jeans and a leather jacket. Well, I amended as he smoothed back his curling black hair and grinned at the bus driver, maybe not *exactly* ordinary-looking...

‘Heyah,’ he greeted the driver, swinging himself up the final step. ‘Saw me coming, did you?’

‘Aye, well, ye do stick out, lad. Thought I might as well wait for ye, save ye the walk back.’ The doors swung shut and, joy of joys, the bus sprang forward once again as the new passenger dropped into the seat across from me, planting his

feet wide apart on the floor to brace himself.

He and the driver chatted on like old friends, which I supposed they were, about the state of the weather and the latest rebellion of the bus driver's daughter and the health of the younger man's mother. It had been some years since I'd spent time in Scotland, and I'd forgotten just how musical the accent was. This was a thicker accent than I was accustomed to, and I couldn't catch each word as it was spoken, but I did my level best to follow the conversation. Just for practice, I told myself. Not because I was interested.

The bus rattled noisily over the moor, dipped into Coldingham town and stopped for a moment to let off the teenagers. Shifting round in his seat, the bus driver sent me a courteous glance. 'You're for Eyemouth, lass, aren't ye?'

'Yes, that's right.'

The man from the moor lifted an eyebrow at my accent, and glanced over. For a moment, my mother's face rose sternly in my mind. Never talk to strangers... But I pushed the image back and sent the man a friendly smile.

The bus driver carried on speaking, over his shoulder. 'Are ye up here on holiday?'

Having received little response from the man opposite, I turned my smile on the driver instead. 'Interviewing for a job, actually.'

'Oh, aye?' He'd politely modified his speech, as most Scots did when talking to a non-Scot, and though the accent was still there I found him easier to understand. 'What kind of job?'

Well, that was just the question, wasn't it? I didn't really know, myself. 'Museum work, of sorts,' I hedged. 'I'm interviewing with a man just outside Eyemouth—'

The dark man from the moor cut me off. ‘Not Peter Quinnell, surely?’

‘Well, yes, but...’

‘Christ, you don’t mean to say you’re Adrian’s wee friend from London?’ He did smile then, and the simple act transformed his rugged face. ‘We’d not expected you till tomorrow. David Fortune,’ he held out his hand by way of introduction. ‘I work with Quinnell as well.’

I shook his hand. ‘Verity Grey.’

‘Aye, I ken fine who you are. I must say,’ he confessed, leaning back again, ‘you’re not at all as I pictured you.’

Everyone said that. Museum workers, I had learnt, were supposed to be little old ladies in spectacles, not twenty-nine-year-olds in short skirts. I nodded patiently. ‘I’m younger, you mean?’

‘No. It’s only that, with Adrian recommending you, I’d have thought to find someone...well, someone...’

‘Tall, blonde, and beautiful?’

‘Something like that.’

I couldn’t help smiling. I was, to my knowledge, the only dark-haired woman who’d ever received so much as a dinner invitation from Adrian Sutton-Clarke, and I’d held his interest only until the next blonde came along. But while our romance had proved temporary, our separate paths, by virtue of our work, kept crossing and re-crossing like some fatalistic web. Truth be told, I probably saw more of Adrian now than I had when we were dating. When one wasn’t actually in love with the man, he could be a quite enjoyable companion. Adrian, at least, understood the restless, independent streak that had made me chuck my British Museum job and strike out on my own to

freelance. And he'd learnt I never could resist a challenge.

I studied the man across from me with interest, bringing all my powers of deduction to bear. I had already assumed, since Adrian was involved, that the job for which I was being interviewed involved some sort of archaeological dig. Adrian was one of the best surveyors in the business. I glanced at David Fortune's hands, and ventured to test my theory. 'How large is the excavation, then?' I asked him. 'How many field crew members are on site?'

'Just the four of us, at the moment.'

'Oh.' For a moment I was tempted to ask what they were all digging for, and why, but I held my tongue, not eager to let on that I'd come all this way not knowing.

He looked down, at my single suitcase. 'You've just come up from London, then?'

'Yes. I'm a day early, I know, but the job did sound intriguing and I really couldn't see the point in waiting down in London when I could be waiting here, if you know what I mean...'

His eyes held understanding. 'Aye. I wouldn't worry. Quinnell's an impatient man himself.'

The sea was close beside us now. I could see the choppy froth of waves beyond the thinning wall of mist, and the jutting silhouettes of jagged rocks. The rain had stopped. Between the racing clouds a sudden gleam of sunlight flashed, and disappeared, and flashed again, and finally stretched a searching finger out to touch the clustered houses curving round the coast ahead of us.

The town of Eyemouth looked to me like a postcard view of a fishing village, its buildings tumbling in a tight cascade down to the sea wall while a gathering of gulls wheeled and dipped above

the rooftops, marking the place where the harbour, yet unseen, cut back into the greening cliffs.

The sunbeam, I decided, held a pleasant sort of promise. And somewhere, not too far away, the mysterious Peter Quinnell was looking forward to meeting me. I leant forward as the bus dived in among the houses. 'Where would you recommend I stay?' I asked my new acquaintance. 'Is there a guest house, or a nice hotel?'

'You'll not be staying in the town?' He raised his eyebrows, clearly shocked. 'Christ, Quinnell wouldn't hear of it. He's had a room made up for you at Rosehill, at the house.'

I stared at him. 'Oh, but I couldn't...'

'You want the job?'

'Yes.'

'Then don't offend the management,' was his advice. He softened it with a smile. 'Don't worry. They're all nice people, out at Rosehill. They'll make you feel at home.'

The bus driver flicked a glance up at his mirror, met my eyes, but didn't say anything.

I frowned. 'It's just that I prefer to stay on my own, that's all. I don't like to impose...'

'You'll not be imposing. Quinnell loves his company.'

'I'm sure he does. But if he doesn't hire me, it might prove awkward.'

'Oh, he'll hire you,' said David Fortune, with a nod of certainty. 'That is, he'll offer you the job, make no mistake. Whether you accept or not, well...that's for you to say.'

Something in the offhand way he said that made me tilt my head, suspicious. 'Why wouldn't I accept?'

'Have you eaten, yet?' he asked, as if I hadn't spoken. 'You

haven't, have you? And it's Thursday night, this – Jeannie's night off. There'll be no supper on at the house.' He turned to the bus driver, who was following our exchange with interest. 'Danny, do us a favour, will you, and drop us at the harbour road?'

'The Ship Hotel?' the driver checked, and glanced again at me. 'Aye, it'd be no trouble. It wouldnae do for the lass to face old Quinnell on an empty stomach.'

My suspicions growing, I slowly turned to look at David Fortune, but his expression was charmingly innocent. So charming, in fact, that I scarcely noticed when the bus stopped moving. It wasn't until I felt the sudden blast of chill from the open door that I finally stirred in my seat. Gathering up my suitcase, I tossed a word of thanks to the driver and clambered down the steps to solid ground.

The wind had grown colder. It struck me like a body blow and might have knocked me over if the man at my side hadn't taken the suitcase from me, placing a large hand at my back to guide me up along the harbour's edge. The tide was very high, and the fishing boats creaked at their moorings, masts and rigging swaying with the motion of the water.

If my mother saw me now she'd have a heart attack, I thought. She'd always had a thing about the seamy side of harbour life – a half-imagined paranoid world of smugglers, cutthroats, pirates and white-slavers. I took another look up at the great dark figure walking at my shoulder.

David Fortune did look a shade piratical, come to think of it, with his black unruly hair curling in the wind and the flat grey light of early evening sharpening the line of his stubborn jaw. His nose, in profile, was not quite straight, as though it had been broken in a fight. And I had only his word for it, after all,

that he had anything to do with Peter Quinnell, or with Adrian Sutton-Clarke, or with...

'Here we are,' he told me, as a sprawling white pub rose at the next corner to welcome us. He had leant down so that his voice would carry through the wind, and I caught the swift warmth of his cheek close by my face. Oh, well, I thought. Pirate or no, he was easy to look at, and I was, to be honest, in need of a drink and a plate of hot food.

There were two doorways into the Ship Hotel – one that led into the main public bar, and the other to the dining lounge. David Fortune steered me through the latter.

I felt instantly warmer, out of the wind, with the light bursting clear and inviting from rose-tinted fixtures hung high on the cream stuccoed walls. Round wooden tables hugged the wainscoting and nestled in padded alcoves that enticed one to sit and relax. Through an open door behind the bar I could just glimpse a larger, less fancified room where coarse cheerful voices competed with piped-in music, but on this side of the door even the bar held a touch of elegance, its gleaming rows of bottles artistically illumined by a line of recessed lights.

A few of the tables were already occupied. David Fortune plucked a menu from the bar and chose a table for us in a window alcove. Leaning back against the padded bench, he stretched his legs out so his feet disappeared under the bench on my side. 'Take a look at that, then,' he offered, handing the menu over. 'And order what you like; the bill's on Quinnell. He'd not want to see you starve.'

The mention of Peter Quinnell's name brought my earlier misgivings sharply into focus. 'Listen,' I began, frowning

slightly, 'there isn't anything *wrong* with the job, is there?'

He raised his eyebrows, but before he could respond the barmaid came through from the other side and sent us a welcoming smile. 'Heyah, Davy. How's your mum?'

'As much of a witch as she ever was.' His tone was indulgent. 'Is Adrian about?'

'Upstairs, I think. Do you want me to fetch him?'

'Aye, if you would. But first, give us a...'. He paused, looked at me, eyes enquiring. 'What'll you have?'

'Dry white wine, please.'

'And a pint of Deuchers for me, there's a love.'

As the barmaid departed, I gave in to my curiosity. 'Adrian's upstairs?'

'Oh, aye. We both have rooms here. There's just the one spare room at Rosehill, and Quinnell wanted to save that for you, so he's put us both up here instead.'

Our drinks arrived. I watched him down a mouthful of the dark foaming beer, and frowned again. 'Isn't that rather inconvenient?'

He shook his head. 'It's only a mile out to the house. I like the walk.'

I tried to imagine Adrian Sutton-Clarke walking a country mile to work each morning, and failed. Adrian, I knew, would use his car.

A door from the corridor opened and closed and a tall, lean-faced man with mahogany hair shook his head and came, smiling, towards us. 'Verity, my dear, you really must learn some respect for schedules,' he teased me, bending down to brush my cheek with an affectionate kiss of greeting. 'Friday, last time I checked, comes after Thursday, and you did say Friday.'

‘Hello, Adrian.’ It always took me a moment to adjust to the sheer impact of his handsome face, even now. Each time I met up with him I kept hoping, rather foolishly, that he’d have chipped one of his teeth, or that his dark, long-lashed eyes would be puffy and bloodshot, but each time he turned up just as perfect as ever, a six-foot-two package of pure sex appeal, and invariably knocked me off centre. Only for a moment, and then memory reasserted itself and I was fine.

David Fortune had misinterpreted the involuntary change in my expression. He drained his pint and rose politely. ‘Look, I’ll leave you to it, shall I? I could do with a shower and a lie-down, myself. See you both tomorrow.’ Slanting a brief look down at me, he stabbed the menu with a knowing finger. ‘Try the lemon sole, it’s magic.’

Adrian slid into the vacant seat opposite and favoured me with a curious stare. ‘Just how,’ he asked me, when we were alone, ‘did you come to meet Fortune? Or do I want to know?’

‘We were on the same bus. We got talking.’

‘Ah.’ He nodded. ‘The bus from Berwick.’

‘Dunbar, actually.’

The waitress came. I closed my menu, and ordered the lemon sole.

Adrian leant back, contentedly. ‘I know I’m going to regret asking this,’ he said. ‘But how, if you came up from London, presumably on the train, did you end up on a Berwickshire bus from Dunbar?’

I explained. It took some time, and I was nearly finished with my meal by the time I’d told him everything, beginning with the sheep on the line at Darlington. Adrian shook his head in disbelief and reached for his cup of coffee. ‘You see? If you’d

waited until tomorrow, like you were supposed to, none of that would have happened.'

I shrugged. 'Something worse might have happened. You never know.'

'True. Confusion does rather seem to follow you around, doesn't it?'

'So tell me,' I changed the subject, balancing my knife and fork on my empty plate, 'what exactly is this job you've recommended me for?'

Adrian folded his arms and smiled like the devil. 'As I recall, I told you I'd explain everything on Friday.'

'When I arrived, you said.'

'On Friday. And today's only Thursday.'

'Oh, give it up...'

'But I'm sure Quinnell will be happy to tell you anything you want to know, when you meet him.'

'That's hardly fair,' I pointed out. 'I'm meeting him tonight.'

'So you are. Finished with that, have you? Good. Then let's get you out to Rosehill so you can settle in.'

'Rat,' I called him, holding back my smile.

Ten minutes later, seated in his car and speeding inland from the harbour, I tried again. 'The least you can do,' I said evenly, 'is tell me what's wrong with the job.'

'Wrong with the job?' He flashed me a quick sideways glance, eyebrows raised. 'Nothing's wrong with the job. It's a great opportunity, wonderful benefits – Quinnell's a disgustingly wealthy man, so the pay is obscene. And you get room and board with it, holidays, travel allowances...it's a marvellous job.'

'You're certain of that?'

‘Lord, yes. You don’t think I’d have lured you up here otherwise, do you?’ Again the rapid glance. ‘Why the sudden lack of trust?’

I shrugged. ‘Just something your Mr Fortune said, in passing.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘He was sure that I’d be offered the job,’ I explained. ‘He wasn’t so sure I’d accept.’

Adrian digested this thoughtfully. We were well out of town, now, and the road was dark. I couldn’t see his eyes. ‘I suppose,’ he said slowly, ‘that he might have been thinking of Quinnell himself. Of how you’d react.’

‘React to what?’

‘To Quinnell.’

I sighed, tight-lipped. ‘Adrian...’

‘Peter Quinnell,’ he told me, ‘is a fascinating old character – well-read, intelligent, one of a kind.’ He turned his head so I could see the half-apologetic smile. ‘But I’m afraid that he’s also quite mad.’

Chapter Two

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Darling, you can look positively Victorian at times,’ was Adrian’s response. He was grinning. ‘Those eyes...and anyhow, it isn’t what you think. He’s not the murderous sort of madman, nor even the creeping-round-the-back-stairs sort.’

I lowered my eyebrows, cautiously. ‘What sort is he?’

‘You’ll be able to judge for yourself, in a minute. That’s Rosehill up ahead.’

I looked, but saw only a tiny, low-slung cottage set practically at the road’s edge, its windows blazing warmth and light. ‘What, *that*?’

‘No. That,’ he said, with a tutor’s patience, ‘is the groundskeeper’s cottage. The drive runs up from there, do you see? It runs right up the hill to that *big* house, there in the trees...’

‘Rosehill,’ I guessed.

‘Correct.’

It didn’t look a house at all, to begin with – just a looming block of darkness screened by darker, twisted trees, but then the wind blew and the branches shifted and I saw a twinkling

gleam of yellow light. It wasn't as welcoming as the light coming from the cosy little cottage at the foot of the drive. There'd be a family in that cottage, I thought, as Adrian turned the car in and we swept on past the beaming windows. A young family, perhaps, all cuddled round the telly.

But the light from Rosehill wasn't like that. It spoke to me of work, of intellect, of solitude – a student's candle burning in a lonely garret. It didn't want us there, that light. It wanted privacy.

The strange impression was made stronger by the simple fact that, though the house was huge, a great square fortress of a place, only the one ground-floor window was showing light. I frowned. It looks as if he's gone to bed.'

'At nine o'clock? Not likely. No, I'd be willing to bet that since it's Thursday – the cook's night off – our Fabia's gone out somewhere, to have supper, while the old man makes do with egg and chips in his study.'

'Fabia?'

'Quinnell's granddaughter. Quite a fetching young thing. Blonde. At least,' he amended, 'Quinnell says she's his granddaughter.' He saw my face and grinned again, urging the car up the final gasping bit of drive. 'Don't worry, darling, the old boy's as harmless as I am.'

'Ah.'

'And don't go saying "ah" in that superior little tone.' He killed the engine, shifting round to face me. 'Really, Verity, your lack of trust in me is quite appalling. Whatever did I do to deserve this?'

It was my turn to smile. 'You want a list?'

'Ooh,' he inhaled, feigning pain, 'a fatal blow. My ego

doesn't stand a chance when you're around, does it? Still,' he conceded, leaning over to reach across me and unlatch my door, testing the physical power of his close contact with my body, 'I am glad we're going to be working together again. We did make a wonderful team.' The dashing smile came close to my own mouth, in the near-darkness. Three years ago I might have fallen for it; now I was quite blissfully immune.

'Yes, well,' I said, 'I haven't got the job yet.' I pushed open my door and the cold night air swirled in around us both, breaking the intimate mood. He laughed and made some comment that I didn't catch because the wind stole it, and then I heard the slam of the driver's door as he came round to join me on the level sweep of ground approaching Rosehill House.

I was grateful that I didn't stumble as I walked towards the great solid shadow looming just ahead. Without the benefit of light, I couldn't see the house in any detail. I had to rely on Adrian to lead me up a sideways flight of stone steps to the front door. At least, I presumed it was the front door, because he knocked on it, and after what seemed an age I heard the bolt slide back and watched the door swing heavily inwards. An elegant curse, a sharp click, and the hallway beyond exploded into brilliant light.

It was fitting, I suppose, that in the instant I first saw Peter Quinnell my eyes were dazzled.

I tried desperately to focus in the sudden blinding glare, while spots flashed crazily across my vision and the tall black figure at the door leant in closer still, and spoke. An English voice – a smooth poetic voice that made me think of West End theatres, of words that floated upwards from a semi-darkened stage and built an image with their melody alone.

‘What...Adrian, my boy,’ the voice said, in delighted tones. ‘Do come in. The wind is foul tonight, you’ll both be blown away if you’re not careful. Please.’ The figure stepped aside, in invitation. ‘And dare I hope that this lovely young woman is who I think she is?’

‘Verity Grey,’ confirmed Adrian, as we moved from darkness into light and shut the door upon the violent wind.

Visible at last, my host reached down to take my hand, and smiled. ‘I am so very glad to meet you, my dear. I’m Peter Quinnell.’

My first thought, on the step outside, had been that I’d been misinformed, somehow – that Peter Quinnell wasn’t old at all. He fairly towered over me, loose-limbed and lean, not stooping, and the voice and movements were those of a much younger man than the one I’d expected. Only now, standing in the clearer light of the vestibule, could I see the weary lines the world had carved into the long, still-handsome face; the whitened hair that might once have been gold; the evidence of age upon the beautifully formed hand clasping mine. His eyes, too, were the eyes of a man who had lived for many years. They were long, like the rest of him, and languid, and the lids drooped as though the effort of holding them open was too much for him.

I wasn’t fooled. Behind the languor burnt an intellect that could not be disguised, and though his eyes moved slowly they were sharp. They wouldn’t miss much, eyes like that.

I smiled back. ‘How do you do?’

‘I was about to ask you the same question,’ Quinnell said. ‘You must be rather tired, if you’ve come up today from London. We actually weren’t expecting you until tomorrow.’

I flushed a little. ‘I know. Sorry. I just...well, the truth is I’m

not very good at waiting. I've been packed and ready to come since Monday, and when I woke up this morning it felt like such a good day for travelling...' I stopped, aware that I was rambling on. 'I thought, you see, that I'd be staying at a B & B, or something...'

'What?' His look of horror was quite genuine. 'Oh, my dear girl, that would never do. No, no, we have a room all ready for you, and my granddaughter's been fussing over it for days, buying curtains to match the coverlet, and that sort of thing. You'd not want to disappoint her, surely? Besides,' he added, 'I was rather hoping to hold you captive here until I'd managed to persuade you to join our motley little team.' The hooded eyes touched mine, with stunning charm, and he smiled again. 'You have your luggage with you?'

'Just one bag. It's in the car.'

'Good.' Still charming, the smile slid to Adrian. 'Fetch it for her, will you? There's a good chap. You can put it in the guest room at the head of the stairs – you know the one? Then come and join us for a drink in the sitting room.'

Adrian hadn't planned on staying – I could tell as much from the tiny frown that creased his forehead for the span of a single heartbeat. He had simply meant to deliver me, and make the necessary introductions, and then get back to whatever it was he'd been doing when I'd interrupted him. Chivalry, I thought drily, was a word that Adrian Sutton-Clarke had never learnt to spell. He'd been the same when we were dating, always vanishing from parties when it suited him, and leaving me to find my own way home.

He hesitated, looked at Quinnell, looked at me, and turned away obediently. 'Right. Won't be a moment.'

When the front door had opened and closed again, Peter Quinnell drew back a pace to study me with interest. I pretended not to notice the appraisal, letting my own eyes wander round the little vestibule in which we stood. There was nothing in it, really, save a few pairs of tumbled boots and shoes and a leaning stack of empty flowerpots. I gathered that the proper entrance hall lay somewhere in the dark behind my host, beyond the French doors flanked by matching window panels that reflected my own image back to me. My reflection, thankfully, didn't look the least bit nervous.

Peter Quinnell finished his inspection and tipped his head to one side. 'I must say, I am surprised. You don't look anything like I expected.'

I smiled. 'That's just what Mr Fortune said. I met him on the bus,' I explained, as Quinnell raised an enquiring eyebrow. 'I gather everyone thought I'd be tall and blonde, and more... well, more...'

'Quite. Our Mr Sutton-Clarke does have a certain reputation,' he agreed. 'And he did say, my dear, that he knew you rather well, so naturally one builds a certain image in one's mind...'

He smiled, and shrugged.

'Sorry to disappoint.'

'Good heavens, I'm not at all disappointed. And no more, I suspect, was David Fortune. You met him on the bus, you say? Out visiting his mother, was he?'

I admitted I had no idea where he'd been. 'Is he a local man, then?'

'David? Oh yes. Eyemouth born and bred, is David. He hasn't lived here for some years, mind, but his mother has a cottage on the coast, north of St Abbs.' He turned away to pull

the French doors open, letting the light creep uncertainly into the large front hall beyond. ‘Please, do come through. I’ll put the light on...there.’ A switch clicked somewhere and a warm lamp glowed as if by magic from atop a Spanish chest; glowed again within the mirror hung behind it, and in all the frames of all the prints and sketches grouped around the great square entrance hall.

In fact, one scarcely saw the wallpaper, there were so many pictures, and with the weathered Oriental carpet on the floor the overall effect was one of cultured and eclectic taste.

Ahead I saw the glimmer of a window, and a gaping darkness that might have been a stairway, and the corner of a passage, but my host didn’t force me into a guided tour. Of the three closed doorways leading off the entrance hall he chose the nearest on my left. ‘The sitting room,’ he told me, as he fumbled for the wall switch. ‘Not the posh one, I’m afraid – that’s over there,’ he nodded across the hall, ‘but it isn’t very comfortable for sitting. I much prefer this one.’

When the light snapped on, I saw why. Deep red walls hugged round on every side, set off by more Oriental carpeting and a leather sofa, creased and weathered from years of use, on which two cats were curled around each other, sleeping. A matching armchair sat surrounded in its corner by bookshelves crammed with volumes old and new, and more prints and drawings hung haphazardly about the room. The one large window had been simply hung with panels of a floral-patterned chintz, worn in spots and faded from the sun. When the curtains were open, I thought, one would be able to look out over the drive.

Even as I formed the thought, the front door banged and Adrian went thumping past with my suitcase. His

footsteps faded up an unseen flight of stairs.

‘Please, do sit down.’ Peter Quinnell waited until I had settled myself on the sofa beside the cats before he folded his own long frame into the armchair, slinging one loose-jointed leg over the other and tilting his head back to rest against the leather.

This was his room, I thought – it had the stamp of him, somehow, in all its corners. Not pristine and tidy, but comfortably masculine, the sort of room that men of old had taken refuge in when wives began to scurry round the house with purpose. Here papers could be left spread out on chairs without reproach, and one could smoke, or drop a biscuit crumb on to the carpet.

‘Don’t mind the cats,’ he told me, ‘they’re quite harmless. Stupid creatures, really, but I’m fond of them. Murphy – that’s the big black beast, there – he’s been with me seven years now, and his girlfriend Charlie came to us last winter, when we bought this house.’ A sudden thought struck him, and he frowned. ‘You’re not allergic, are you?’

I assured him I was not.

‘Good. I had an aunt once who was. Most distressing for her. Ah,’ he said, as Adrian appeared in the doorway, ‘that’s done, is it? I don’t suppose, my boy, that you’d be kind enough to fetch us all a drink? I’m afraid I am forgetting my manners, and no doubt Miss Grey is parched.’

I caught the faint stiffening of Adrian’s shoulders, but again he surprised me by taking the request in his stride. Peter Quinnell’s pay, I reflected, must be very good indeed. Adrian hated playing butler. Still, he sent me a winning smile. ‘Gin and it for you, darling? And Peter, what will you have? Vodka?’

‘Please. And perhaps a cheese biscuit or two?’ He waited until Adrian had gone again before he slid his long eyes slowly back

to me. Once again I was reminded of an actor in the theatre, not just because of the artistic setting, the elegant arrangement of man-in-armchair and the rolling, cultured voice, but because I had the strong impression more was going on behind those eyes than I was meant to think. ‘Adrian,’ he said, ‘did mention, I believe, that you and he were once an item.’

Adrian, I thought, deserved a swift kick, sometimes. I forced a smile. ‘Yes, of sorts.’

‘But not now?’

‘No.’

‘I thought not. Friends, though?’

‘Yes, great friends.’

He paused, and narrowed his eyes as though trying to remember something. ‘You met in Suffolk, did you not? On one of Lazenby’s digs?’

‘Yes. Though I’m afraid I didn’t spend much time at the dig, myself. I’d just started working for Dr Lazenby, then, at the British Museum, and I was rather green when it came to fieldwork.’

‘Suffolk,’ he said again, thinking harder. ‘That was the Roman fort?’

‘It was. They built a bypass over it.’

‘Ah.’ The great black tomcat stretched and shifted, looked about, and arched to its feet, yawning. With a placid look in my direction it stepped neatly to the carpet and marched a little stiffly towards Peter Quinnell’s corner. Quinnell moved his hand aside so the cat could jump on to his lap, but he didn’t take his quiet gaze from my face.

‘How much have you been told,’ he asked, ‘about the job?’

I answered honestly. ‘Not much.’

‘And about myself?’

‘A little less.’

The shrewd eyes smiled. ‘You needn’t spare my feelings, my dear. Surely someone will have mentioned that I’m mad?’

What did one say to that, I wondered? Luckily, he didn’t appear to expect an answer, for he went on stroking the black cat and speaking pleasantly.

‘It was your work with Lazenby, you see, that caught my attention in the first place. He trains only the best. Adrian says you did most of the cataloguing yourself, for the Suffolk dig – and the drawings. Is that right? Impressive,’ he said, when I nodded. ‘Very impressive. I’d be thrilled if you could do the same for us, here at Rosehill. Of course, we won’t have quite the range of artefacts that Lazenby turned up – the Romans weren’t here that long – but we’re bound to find a few good pieces in among the everyday, and a battlefield does have an interest all its own, don’t you agree?’

I didn’t answer straight away. I was too busy trying to sort out my whirling thoughts. A battlefield? A...good God, not a *Roman* battlefield? Right here in Eyemouth? It seemed incredible, and yet...my stomach flipped excitedly. I took a breath. ‘I hope you don’t mind my asking,’ I began, ‘but what exactly is your team excavating?’

The hand upon the black cat stilled, surprised. ‘I am so sorry,’ Peter Quinnell said. ‘I thought you knew. It’s a marching camp, my dear. A Roman marching camp. Early second-century. Though in actual fact I suppose it’s more of a burial ground, really.’ His eyes captured mine, intense, and for the first time I believed, truly believed, that he might indeed be mad. ‘We’ve found the final resting place of *Legio IX Hispana*.’

Chapter Three

If he'd told me they had found the Holy Grail, I couldn't have been more astonished. The Ninth Legion – the *Hispana* – here! It hardly seemed credible. Not when so many people had searched for so long, and in vain. I myself had come to believe that the fate of the lost legion would remain one of the great unsolved mysteries of our time.

Historians the world over had hotly debated dozens of theories, but the facts themselves were few. All anyone could say for certain was that, some time in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, *Legio IX Hispana* had been ordered north from its fortress at York.

The soldiers of the Ninth, already veterans of the long campaigns in Wales and the brutal war with Boudicca, were crack troops, rarely called upon to deal with minor skirmishes – the task of day-to-day front-line defence was left to the auxiliaries. It took a true emergency to set a legion on the march.

And when several thousand men marched out to do battle, the spectacle would have been stunning. At dawn would come the auxiliary units of archers and cavalry, forming an all-seeing shield for the legion behind. Then the standard-bearer, holding

high the sacred golden Eagle of the Empire, symbol of honour and victory. If an enemy touched the eagle he disgraced the legion; if a legion lost the eagle it disgraced Rome. Close round the eagle marched the other standard-bearers, followed by the trumpeters, and then, in ordered ranks, six men abreast, came the legionaries, ripe for war.

They'd been trained to march twenty-four Roman miles in five hours, fully armoured, weighted with weapons and tools and heavy packs, and then at the end of the day's march to build the night's camp – no small task, since a camp needed trenches and ramparts and palisades to protect the leather tents inside.

These were hard men, hard fighting men, and a legion on the march with all its baggage train and brilliant armour would have been a sight that one remembered.

Which made the disappearance of the Ninth Legion all the more puzzling, I thought. Because nobody *had* remembered. At least, no one had bothered to keep a record of what became of the Ninth in its northern battle, and the legion itself had been struck from the military lists. Modern historians offered several explanations – the men of the *Hispana* might have mutinied, or disgraced themselves by losing the eagle in battle...or else, in that barbaric wilderness, they'd met an end so terrible that the survivors could not bear to speak of it.

Those few survivors – a pitiable scattering of them, identified by stray tombstones crumbling at the farthest corners of the fallen Empire – had kept their secret well. So well, in fact, that nearly two thousand years later, the full fate of *Legio IX Hispana* – all those thousands of men – continued to elude historians like a ghost in the mist of a barren moor.

I looked at Peter Quinnell, cleared my throat. ‘The *Hispana*? Are you sure?’

‘Oh, yes. Quite sure. Adrian can show you the results of his initial survey. Can’t you, my boy?’

‘What?’ Adrian, just coming through the door with our drinks, glanced round in mild enquiry.

‘Your radar survey,’ Quinnell elaborated, ‘down in the south-west corner.’

‘Ah.’ His eyes came to rest on my face, trying to gauge my reaction. ‘You’ve told her, then.’

‘Well, naturally. Quite unforgivable, your keeping her in the dark like that. I was just telling her that you could show her what you’d found.’

‘Certainly,’ said Adrian. ‘It’s all on computer. I’ll show you tomorrow,’ he promised, pressing a glass into my waiting hand.

He must have known I’d hear about the *Hispana* while he was out of the room – he’d made my drink a double. Relaxing back into the sofa, I took a long sip of cool gin and vermouth and looked across at Peter Quinnell. ‘You have a lab set up, then, here on site?’

‘Oh, yes. I’ve converted the old stables, behind the house. Plenty of room up there.’

‘You’ll die, you know,’ Adrian warned me. ‘Not one but two microscopes, *and* the computers – I’ve never seen anything like it, on a field excavation.’

Quinnell’s eyes slid sideways to Adrian, and again I caught the canny glint behind the old man’s indulgent gaze. He knew, I thought, exactly what made Adrian tick – the clink of coins, the smell of money, the promise of a comfortable position. ‘Yes, well,’ he said, in a mild voice, ‘I do like my little gadgets, you

know. Sit down, my boy, for heaven's sake – you're making my neck stiff. And mind the cat,' he added, as Adrian narrowly missed sitting on the still-sleeping tabby. I shifted over, making space on the sofa.

'You realise, of course,' Adrian informed me, 'that we'll have to shoot you, now, if you don't join our little digging team. Can't risk having our secret leak out.'

They had kept the secret remarkably well, I thought, and told them so. 'I haven't heard so much as a whisper of it, in London, and I don't remember reading anything in any of the journals.'

'The journals, my dear, are singularly uninterested in where I choose to dig.' Peter Quinnell stroked the black cat's ears, smiling. 'Forty years ago they thought my theories fascinating, but now most of my colleagues couldn't care less. The ones who shared my faith are dead, and the younger set are slaves of modern science, I'm afraid. No place for instinct, in their books. No place for hunches.' His lazy eyes forgave my youthful ignorance as he lifted his glass of vodka. 'These days, I'm considered a rather less successful Schliemann, chasing after fairytales. Except where Schliemann had his Homer, I have nothing.' He paused and drank, letting his chin droop thoughtfully down to his chest. 'No, that's not exactly true,' he said, at length. 'I do have Robbie.'

Adrian shot me a watchful glance, and leant back against the cushions of the sofa, nearly crushing the sleeping cat. Indignantly, the little grey tabby stood and stretched and marched straight over Adrian on to my knees, where she settled herself with an irritable thump.

Adrian glanced pointedly from my face to the cat, and back again. 'I don't know which of the two of you looks the more

exhausted,' he commented. I had the oddest impression that he was making a calculated manoeuvre, and a moment later, when Quinnell looked over and said, 'Oh, quite,' in tones of vague concern, I knew my suspicions were right. Adrian, in his smooth and wholly manipulative way, was trying to bring the evening to a close.

No doubt he'd had something more exciting planned for his own Thursday night, and since Quinnell seemed fully capable of chatting on for hours yet, Adrian had boldly decided to move things along.

I sent him a guileless smile. 'I'm not the least bit tired.'

Undaunted, he tried another tack. 'You want to be sharp for your interview tomorrow, don't you?'

Quinnell appeared shocked by the idea. 'My dear boy,' he cut in, eyebrows raised, 'there isn't going to be an interview. Good heavens, no. No,' he said again, with emphasis, as I raised my startled gaze to his, 'the job is yours, if you'll have it. But I expect you'd like to take a day or so to look around, to think it over. You can give me your answer this weekend, all right?'

The job was mine, I thought. A legendary battlefield and steady pay besides. I already knew what my answer would be, but I tried to keep my reaction professional. 'All right,' I said, and nodded.

'Good. And now, though you've been terribly polite to sit here listening to me, I'm sure you really are quite tired from your travels. I'll show you to your room.'

'I'll take her up,' Adrian offered.

'You most certainly will not.' Quinnell's voice was firm. 'I'd be a thoughtless cad to deliver any woman into your clutches, even one familiar with your Casanova ways. No, you may

say goodnight to her, and *I* will take her upstairs, when she's ready.'

Adrian was still smiling several minutes later, as he shrugged his coat on in the vestibule and bent to brush my cheek with a chaste kiss. 'So,' he murmured, with a quick glance over my shoulder to where Quinnell stood waiting in the entrance hall, 'what do you think?'

'I think he's rather marvellous.'

'I'm glad. Verity...'

'Yes?'

'Nothing.' He tossed his dark head back and fastened the final snap of his coat. 'Never mind. I'll see you in the morning, then.'

I watched him go, then turned and followed Peter Quinnell through the hall and up a winding stone stairway to the first floor. My footsteps dragged a little on the hard steps, and I realised that I actually *was* tired. By the time Quinnell had shown me where the bathroom was and introduced me to the plumbing, I was stifling yawns. And although his granddaughter had no doubt taken great pains to match my curtains to my coverlet, I'm afraid that when the door to my spacious back bedroom swung open, I saw only the plump twin beds.

Quinnell fussed around for a few minutes longer, demonstrating drawers and cupboard doors and making certain I had everything I needed for the night, and then with a final weary smile he gallantly withdrew and left me on my own.

Well, not entirely on my own.

One of the cats had come upstairs with us, and when I'd finished in the bathroom I returned to find it perched upon my window ledge, long tail twitching as it stared transfixed at the

ink-black pane of glass. It was the tomcat, the big black one, and not the dainty grey tabby that had slept on my lap earlier. The grey one was Charlie, I remembered, and...oh, *what* was the black one called? The name was vaguely Irish, I thought. Mickey? Mooney? 'Murphy,' I pronounced, with satisfaction, and the cat flicked an ear in response.

'You like that window, do you, Murphy? What is it you see?'

I myself could see only my own reflection, and the cat's, until I switched the lamp off. Even then, the view looked ordinary enough. Close by, a large tree shuddered with the wind, above a sea of ghostly daffodils that dipped and danced in waves. And beyond that, the fickle moonlight caught a sweep of field that slanted gently up to meet a darkly cresting ridge. 'You see?' I said. 'There's nothing...'

The cat's hair bristled suddenly as it arched itself upon the window ledge, eyes flaming as its lips curled sharply back, fangs baring in a vicious hiss.

I know I jumped. And though the hiss had not been aimed at me, I felt my goose-flesh rising in response and fought to calm the jerky rhythm of my heart. 'Murphy,' I said sternly, 'stop that.'

He swivelled his head to stare at me, eyes glowing, then turned away again to watch the night. The second hiss came fiercer than the first, and rattled me so badly that I snapped the window blind down and nudged the black cat from the ledge with a less than steady hand.

Murphy settled benignly at the foot of my bed and blinked without expression. Stupid animal, I thought. There had been nothing out there, nothing at all. Only the tree and the daffodils, and the dark, deserted field.

Nevertheless, I was glad of the tomcat's company when I crawled beneath my blankets, having chosen the twin bed further from the window. And for the first time since my nursery days, I didn't reach to turn off the bedside lamp.

'Do you always sleep with your light on?' Fabia Quinnell asked me next morning, at breakfast. Waiting for me to finish my toast and coffee, she leant an elbow on the kitchen counter and nibbled a dried apricot.

I hadn't yet made up my mind about Fabia. She was of an age with my sister Alison, not quite twenty, but where Alison was sensible and unaffected, Fabia Quinnell wore the deliberately bored look of an adolescent, and called her grandfather 'Peter'.

She was, as Adrian had said, a fetching young woman – quite stunning, in fact. And decidedly blonde. Her pale hair, baby-fine, swung against her soft jaw at an artful angle, leaving the nape of her fragile neck bare. Small-boned and doe-eyed, she looked nothing like her grandfather. Nor did she appear to share his hospitable nature. The greeting she had given me was anything but warm.

I rather doubted she'd done anything to decorate my bedroom, despite what Quinnell had told me last night. More likely the old man himself had selected the curtains and coverlet, made things look comfortable. Fabia, I suspected, wasn't the sort of young woman to concern herself with someone else's comfort.

It surprised me that she'd even noticed my bedroom light, last night.

In answer to her question I replied, through a mouthful of cold toast, that I normally slept in the dark, like everyone else. 'I just have a foolish imagination, sometimes – things that go

bump in the night. Especially in strange houses. So I find it helps to leave the light on.'

'Well, you gave me quite a turn, last night,' she said. 'I thought it might be Peter, waiting up for me. He drinks, you know, and then he wants to talk.' She rolled her eyes with feeling. 'A typical Irishman.'

I wouldn't have guessed Peter Quinnell was Irish. He had, after all, that beautifully elegant voice, with no trace of a brogue whatsoever – but now that I'd had the fact pointed out to me I could recognise that indefinable quality, the faint hint of horses and hounds, that marked a certain segment of the Anglo-Irish gentry.

Taking another sip of coffee, I turned in my chair so I could see out the narrow kitchen window. From the treeless ridge behind the house a lush green field sloped gently downwards, bounded at its bottom edge by the thick tangle of thorn and briar that hid the road from view. Two men were standing in the centre of the field, eyes fixed upon the ridge. One of the men was Peter Quinnell. The other was larger, broader about the shoulders, with curling jet-black hair. 'They've started early,' I commented.

'Who?' Her uninterested grey eyes flicked towards the window. 'Oh, Peter and Davy, yes. They're always puttering around.'

'What does David Fortune do, exactly?'

'He's an archaeologist, the same as Peter. Lectures at the University of Edinburgh.'

'But surely...' I frowned. 'I mean, wouldn't your grandfather prefer to manage the excavation on his own?'

'I doubt it,' she said, flatly. 'And anyway, he needs Davy. Or

rather, he needs Davy's name on his publications, to make the dig legitimate. Peter's name simply doesn't impress people, these days,' she explained, her tone offhand. 'Most people think he's past it.' Pushing herself away from the counter, she nodded at my empty plate. 'Are you finished with that? Good. Come on, then – I've been ordered to give you the grand tour.'

Shrugging on my crumpled anorak, I followed Fabia outside. The morning was crisp for late April, clear and sunny, with a brisk breeze blowing from the south-west.

I turned my back to the breeze for a moment, and took a good long look at Rosehill, pleased to find it looked less ominous by daylight. Pinkish-grey plaster that in places didn't cover all the rose-coloured brick made the plain house seem prettier. A graceful flight of steps curved up sideways to meet the front door, trailing a delicate handrail that softened the sterner angles, and the narrow white-painted window frames held an abundance of little square panes that reflected the sunlight like glittering faceted gems.

'Why is it called Rosehill?' I asked.

Fabia Quinnell shrugged. 'You'll have to ask Peter about that; he has his own theories. There aren't any roses, to speak of. Plenty of daffodils, though.' She pointed behind me, at the little hill that edged the drive. It was yellow with daffodils, hundreds of them, all nodding their heads in agreement. Like the daffodils that grew beneath my bedroom window, these gently blew beneath a spreading horse chestnut whose tender folded leaves were freshly green.

Fabia idly plucked a leaf as we passed, and smoothed it between her fingers, turning her head to look beyond the house to a corner of the sunlit field just coming into view.

'Did anything go bump in the night?' she asked me, slowly.
'Last night?'

I glanced at her. 'Only the cats. Why?'

'Just curious.' She pulled her gaze from the field with another shrug and let the flattened leaf fall from her fingers. 'This way,' she said, and started up the hill towards the stables.