



DEVIL'S GARDEN

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PROLOGUE

They left at first light, just as the thin, fiery streaks of dawn edged the great peaks of the Dolomites behind them. It was still too dark to see the terrifying drops on either side as the battered taxi negotiated its way round hairpin bends on the road leading down to the valley floor.

The two women sat in the back in silence. One stared straight ahead; the other, as the road twisted, glanced back each time at the village clinging precariously to the heights, where in the huddled houses lights were starting to appear like stars on the darkness. It dwindled into the distance until at last it disappeared as if it had been a mirage. A place where secrets could be left to disappear in the same way.

Further down the road, another woman stood looking out of the window to watch the new day arrive and saw

the taxi pass on its way, though she didn't know what she was seeing, barely registering it with her mind on what lay ahead. From the bed behind her, her husband's voice spoke.

'Excited, love?'

She could tell he was smiling. A little shudder ran through her, but she said, 'Oh yes, excited,' though to her ears the words sounded as hollow as a cracked bell.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a sharp February day with a low sun; on the horizon the Eildon hills looked softly smudged against a bleakly grey sky. There was snow lingering in the ditches and behind drystone walls, a sign of more to come. They were still forecasting hard weather ahead.

Cassie Trentham stared blankly out of the window of the big black car as it swept into the drive of the Borders crematorium at Melrose behind the hearse carrying the mortal remains of her brother Felix.

Felix – an ironic name for a tortured soul. Her own, Cassandra, fitted better. Like the priestess, she had warned him and warned him and had suffered the helpless agony of seeing her warnings ignored. They'd been so close – little more than a year apart – yet there had been nothing she could do.

But then when he was at his lowest ebb she'd managed to coax him back to live with her here – in safety, as she had thought; she'd actually been sure she had saved him and the dark days were behind them, so the shock of his death had been devastating. She wouldn't have believed it could happen if she hadn't learnt from bitter experience that addiction breeds an uncanny talent for deception. However hard it might be, she had to accept that she'd been wrong.

She turned her head to glance at her mother. Anna, impassive, was coolly elegant as always in a black collarless coat with a grey silk scarf at the neck. Her make-up was flawless and there wasn't a hair out of place in her glossy angled bob. Was she feeling anything at all? Grief? Guilt?

She should be – guilt, anyway. In Cassie's eyes she was to blame for what happened to Felix. It had always been clear that Anna's children bored her. Absorbed in her own literary world she had given them money to make up for lack of love or even interest – money to leave her alone, really. Money that had subsidised Felix's quest for perdition in Edinburgh. And he had found it.

Cassie's throat constricted. She coughed, looked at her watch, changed her position; anything to distract herself and stop the tears coming. It would never do to be photographed sobbing when she emerged from the car. That would be bad for the dignity of The Brand. Because there they all were. 'Private funeral', the notice had said, but even at this early hour they were lying in wait: journalists making notes, cameras poised, someone

holding a fuzzy microphone. Not that it would be headline news; just a snippet at the soft end of the national bulletin if it was a slow news day, the local programme if not, and a short paragraph on an inside page of the dailies.

They'd come anyway, along with a contingent of people from the town who would probably claim they had come to 'support' their famous neighbour and 'show respect', but their eyes were gleaming with prurient curiosity.

The cars stopped and the doors were opened for them. Anna got out and walked to the door of the chapel, through the blitz of flashing bulbs and machine-gun rattle of shutters as if she hadn't noticed that they were there. As she went inside, the storm abated and Cassie, walking behind, heard a nearby reporter say into a microphone, her voice dripping with synthetic sympathy, 'And here is Anna Harper arriving along with her daughter to mourn the loss of a son and brother . . .' Cassie turned her head to give the woman a furious glare and had the satisfaction of hearing her stumble over her words.

The media would have been feeling cheated anyway that no famous literary names or actors who had starred in the films had appeared. Anna had seen to that – or rather, Marta had. She'd have done her 'scorched earth' act to protect Anna's privacy, like she always did when that was needed.

Marta Morelli – housekeeper, secretary, close friend and handmaiden to genius – was waiting for them now, square and sturdy, as she stood with the celebrant in the blessed quiet of the chapel vestibule. Despite the expensive tailoring of her black dress and jacket, she still looked like

an Italian peasant woman with her greying hair scraped back, though she was younger than Anna. Today her olive skin was grey-looking and she had dark shadows under her brown eyes. Beside her Anna looked ageless, Cassie thought, as they were escorted into the chapel.

There were no more than a couple of dozen people there who had survived her mother's exclusion process: her agent, her publisher, some others Cassie didn't know. None of her own friends had been asked and none of Felix's either, though she didn't mind that considering the company he had kept.

Nor their father. Had Anna even told James Trentham? If she had, would he have come from Los Angeles for the first time in fifteen years, now when it was too late for him to have any relationship with his needy son? No, Cassie didn't mind his absence either.

They took their place in the front row. Anna folded her hands in her lap – elegant hands with slim fingers, the nails painted in a suitably muted pink – then sat entirely still throughout the short service, expressionless.

Impervious, Cassie thought as she struggled with her own composure. She didn't believe Anna was experiencing any deep emotion of any sort.

She was wrong. Inside the carapace of Anna Harper The Brand, Anna Harper the woman was very, very afraid.

Kelso Strang was standing at the farther end of the living room drinking his breakfast coffee, looking out of the window at the view over Newhaven harbour and pretending not to hear his niece.

Betsy was finishing her breakfast. ‘Want Unkie to take me to nursery today,’ she demanded again.

His sister Finella was having her usual morning panic about assembling packed lunches and collecting up papers she’d been working on to shove in her briefcase. She said wearily, ‘No, Betsy. Unkie’s too busy.’

‘No he isn’t,’ her daughter pointed out with ruthless four-year-old logic. ‘He’s just standing there. I want Unkie to take me.’

Kelso sensed his sister’s hopeful glance in his direction but ignored it. It wasn’t good for Betsy to get away with being a monster because they couldn’t face the hassle of taking her head on. He took his mug across to put in the dishwasher, then began to clear the plates from the breakfast table. If he left Fin to stack it there’d be no room for the supper dishes tonight.

He hadn’t expected to still have house guests all this time later. When Finella left her partner Mark and she and Betsy had turned up so unexpectedly on his doorstep, he’d thought it would be a week or two, a month at most, before her lawyer could get Betsy’s father out of the Morningside flat and them back in.

But that was before Mark was arrested on a charge of embezzlement. Finella had seen it coming; he hadn’t been clever enough to cover it up and it had been pitifully obvious what he was doing. Kelso had even gone round to warn him that he wouldn’t get away with it but only got sworn at for his pains.

Now, of course, there was no Morningside flat any more. Their parents had rallied round, offering Finella a

home with them in Perthshire or help with rent for a flat in Edinburgh so she could go on with her work as a solicitor. But Finella, always so calm, so reliable – stalwart, indeed – had buckled under the strain.

‘I couldn’t bear to go home to them,’ she had said pitifully. ‘Mum’s all right but Dad blames me for all of this.’

Kelso didn’t try to deny it. Major General Sir Roderick Strang had found so much to disapprove of, even before things fell apart – his daughter’s choice of Mark in the first place, and then her carelessness in failing to get respectably married before she had a baby – and it was hard to imagine him keeping his opinions to himself as details emerged at the trial.

‘Well, he’ll be glad now that you weren’t married,’ was the best he could offer.

‘It’s very good of them to say they’ll help me rent a flat, but – but I just don’t think I could cope.’ She gave a watery smile. ‘Sounds feeble, I know, but Betsy’s been so confused and unsettled, I just dread upsetting her all over again. You saw her when Mark said he was coming to take her out and didn’t turn up. I didn’t know what to do.’

Oh yes, he’d witnessed Betsy’s bewildered distress and been seized with a murderous rage; if he could have got his hands on the rotten bastard at that moment he’d have been the one up on a charge. With Finella so upset herself, it had needed Kelso to soothe the poor little thing with cuddles at first and then distraction – or bribery, to call it by its proper name. He could see what was coming.

There were tears in Finella's eyes. 'Oh I know, it's an awful cheek. But you've been wonderful and I just don't know what I'd do without you. Betsy adores you and I know you love her too. You wouldn't mind if we stayed just a bit longer, would you? Just till we find our feet again?'

'No, of course I don't mind.' What else could he say? But it shocked him to realise quite how much he did mind.

He loved kids. He and Alexa had been on their way to having their own, before the accident that had killed them both and left Kelso with a scar down the side of his face as a memento. The emptiness of the house – an old fisherman's cottage on the shore at Newhaven in Edinburgh – had oppressed him at first, but in time he had come to relish it as an oasis in his stressful professional life. Having been an army sniper he had always been comfortable enough with his own company, and being DCI of the Serious Rural Crime Squad was a maverick job that could mean being sent solo anywhere in Scotland to direct operations at the local level where there was only a scaled-down CID.

Your own child is one thing; someone else's child quite another. He'd never felt inclined to create a shrine of any sort, but in the little yellow-painted bedroom, so hopefully prepared as a nursery, there had lingered if not quite a ghost then the gentle spirit of the child who had never been. Now it resounded to Betsy's cheerful chattering and her toys lay so thick on the ground that you could hardly see the carpet.

And when he had come home after being away on a job to find that Finella had emptied out all the kitchen cupboards and reorganised them, he'd had to get out of the room so that he wouldn't explode.

'It's much easier for breakfast now,' she had said happily to his retreating back. 'Much more logical. I can't imagine why you would want to have the coffee in this one, and the cereal right along there at the other end.'

Because that was where my darling Alexa put it, he said silently and savagely to himself in his bedroom. It was ridiculous to find tears in his eyes over something like this. When was the last time he'd actually cried? But he had so little left of Alexa now, and yes, cereal at the far end was illogical. He'd said that himself but she'd ignored him; leaving it where it was had meant that now when he wanted cereal he'd often thought of her with a little smile. Bit by bit, the house was being scourged of the past he and Alexa had shared.

He put the cereal packet back in its sensible place on the shelf below the coffee. Betsy was scowling now, the big blue eyes stormy. 'Mummy, I said I – want – Unkie – to – take – me,' she whined.

It was Finella's turn to become absorbed at the far end of the room. Kelso could perfectly understand why she ducked confrontations. Having got away with far too much recently, Betsy had become adept at escalating a whine into a full-blown tempest of tears, which would leave everyone exhausted apart from her.

With an inward sigh, Kelso said, 'Why don't you ask me, Betsy?'

The storm clouds vanished and she beamed. ‘Please, Unkie, will you take me?’

He sat down opposite. ‘Well, Betsy, I can take you. But if I do, I will be in a very bad temper because you know you’re being naughty. I won’t speak to you, I won’t put on the radio so you’ll just have to sit and think about whether this has been a good idea. Or you can go with Mummy as usual and I’m sure she’ll be much nicer.’

Betsy looked comically crestfallen. She shot him a look under her lashes and then got down from her chair and went over to her mother without saying anything, her thumb in her mouth.

It was no fun having to be the bad cop, but it worked. ‘That’s a good girl,’ he said cheerfully. ‘And I tell you what – I’ll even read you a Peppa Pig story at bedtime tonight.’

Finella gave him a grateful look. ‘Now that really is heroic,’ she said. ‘Thanks, kid. And thanks too for—’

‘Aw, shucks,’ he said, and smiled at Betsy. ‘Am I forgiven?’

Still pouting a little but pragmatic, she came across to kiss him goodbye. ‘*Two* stories?’ she said, with a cajoling smile.

‘It’ll depend how good you’ve been,’ he warned as she set off with her mother.

Kelso looked at his watch and sighed. Time he was off too. It went without saying that he loved his sister and his wilful little niece had a firm hold on his heart, but he couldn’t help hoping that another investigation would come up soon to take him away from Edinburgh. Preferably to the Outer Isles.

* * *

As they drove back from the crematorium along the high street in Halliburgh, Cassie Trentham leant forward to the driver. ‘Let me off here, please. I’m not going up to the house.’

For the first time since they had left that morning, Anna Harper had a spontaneous reaction. Her head whipped round to look at her daughter. ‘We have guests coming back. As Chair of the Foundation, you’re a hostess.’ The car was slowing down; she raised her voice to say to the driver, ‘You have your instructions already. Drive on.’

‘Your guests, not mine. I’ve done enough for The Brand today and that’s it.’ Cassie turned to the driver. ‘I’m getting out here whether you stop or not so I think it would be wiser if you did.’

She could see him stifling a smile. ‘Right you are, miss. I’ll pull in further along there.’

Anna said coldly, ‘I’m not going to have an argument with you—’

‘No, you’re not,’ Cassie said with something of her mother’s hauteur. ‘Thanks very much,’ she added to the driver, reaching for the door handle as the car stopped.

Marta, sitting between them, put a hand on Cassie’s arm. ‘This is a very difficult day for your mother, Cassie. Don’t make it worse.’ She still retained an Italian accent but her English was perfectly fluent.

Cassie’s dark blue eyes blazed with anger. ‘A difficult day for my *mother*? When she’s arranged to have a party while my brother is even at this moment being reduced to ashes? Oh puh-lease!’

‘You know she has a duty,’ Marta said stiffly, but she was speaking to empty air. Cassie had jumped out and was hurrying away. She turned to look anxiously at Anna. ‘Are you all right, *cara*?’ she said, lowering her voice so that the driver could not hear.

Anna bit her lip. ‘It doesn’t look good. We should be presenting a united front. You know how the press picks up on these things.’

Trying to reassure her, Marta said, ‘It’s only your friends coming back to the house, after all.’

Anna gave her a level look. ‘Friends? You’re the only friend I have. These are potential enemies who must be neutralised before the next gossip party.’ She sighed. ‘I’ll just have to say I could see how distressed Cassie was and I ordered her home to rest. That’s the best I can do.’

Blinded by tears, Cassie stumbled away from the car and heard it move off behind her. How *dare* Marta talk to her about Anna’s ‘difficult day’? Not that she was surprised. Marta saw everything through the prism of Anna’s wishes.

She was warm-hearted enough: in many ways she’d been more of a mother to Cassie and Felix than Anna had ever been, but it was affection at second hand. Children need to be loved for themselves, but Marta only loved them because they were Anna’s. In any clash of wills – and there were plenty of those – there was never any doubt whose side Marta was on. She might listen to their complaints, might even sympathise, but her advice would

always be the same: do what your mother says. By and large, Cassie had. Felix hadn't.

And look what came of that, she thought.

They'd be arriving back at the house now, ready to greet the 'mourners' – and that was a joke. Cassie doubted if any of them had even met Felix and she knew what their immediate reaction had been to the news of his death: damage limitation. She'd actually overheard a publicist saying, 'Last thing we need just before the launch of *Jacob's Angel*.'

By now they'd be accepting carefully judged canapés along with some suitably unfestive, but of course expensive, choice of wine. Marta would be sure to have found the appropriate ones to accompany the hostess's son's body being burned.

God, she wished she hadn't thought of that. She couldn't get it out of her mind now – Felix, the flames, the smell . . . She gagged, afraid she would vomit, right there on the street.

She'd turned off the high street into a side street that led uphill and out of the town towards her cottage. A sullen sleety rain had set in now and the rounded hills circling the valley where the little town lay felt oppressive today, as if they were coming in closer, closer.

She was passing the Foundation building on the other side of the road now, closed today of course. It was very stark, very modern compared to its traditional neighbours; there had been a lot of opposition at first but of course Anna had got what she wanted. She always did.

Cassie's hair was soaking but she barely noticed. Walking with her head down she'd been aware of one or two passers-by glancing at her, but only briefly; the ghouls wouldn't have had time to get back from the crematorium and now she'd reached the thirty-mile sign she should be safe enough.

After the turn-off it was another steep and very wet half-mile along a narrower road before she reached her cottage, standing on its own in a little walled garden. Today it looked grim but on a sunny day the position was idyllic, looking out over the valley to the gentle hills on the other side. Cassie had been charmed when first she saw it. It was built of old grey stone with a rustic porch and a slate roof and had arched dormer windows like eyebrows that gave it, she thought, a rather fetching quizzical look.

'Small, but perfectly formed,' she had said to Felix.

'Oh bijou, darling, positively bijou,' he had drawled, and then said, 'Gilded cage?'

She had flushed. She knew exactly what he meant; Anna was luring her back to take charge of running the Foundation and this was the bribe: her very own home, no strings attached. The thing was, it was an alluring job – liaising with publishers and film-makers, answering enquiries, overseeing the charity side – and the alternative was job-hunting on her own merits with an unexciting arts degree.

She'd let herself be bought and she hadn't regretted it. She loved the work and if she was honest it had satisfied, too, the craving for her mother's attention that she still hadn't managed to kick even as an adult. But if she'd

turned it down, she thought now as she unlocked the front door – tastefully painted in Farrow and Ball Dix Blue – she’d have been in Edinburgh with Felix, perhaps might have been able to curb his self-destruction.

It was undeniably charming inside too. Marta had found the interior decorator for her with some skill; somehow the woman had known just what Cassie wanted but wouldn’t have been able to organise for herself and she’d always felt a little buzz of pleasure as she came into the sitting room that now ran right across the front of the house – a calm, welcoming room with big glass lamps on low tables and a couple of squashy sofas with white loose covers and scatter cushions that provided clever accents of colour.

She didn’t feel that now. The whole house was tainted with the memory of Felix’s death.

A couple of men had brought him there from the bus shelter in the village where he’d been found collapsed, comatose, drooling, snoring; the ambulance, they said, was on its way but it didn’t arrive in the half-hour it took him to die while Cassie screamed at him, weeping, as she tried to get some response. Her screams seemed somehow to have permeated the very fabric of the place, even though Marta had seen to it immediately that all visible signs be removed.

Cassie walked straight through to the kitchen at the back, sleek and modern with its polished granite worktops, and extended into a glass conservatory looking out at the hillside rising just behind. The sleet was heavier now and despite the heating the room felt

cold and she shuddered. She didn't know what she wanted – a cup of tea, a glass of wine? Brandy, probably, only she didn't have any. She hardly had the energy to fill the kettle or open the fridge.

She sank down on to a chair beside the dining table. She could just sit here and cry some more, though she felt dry, shrivelled, as if she'd no tears left. Her mobile was lying on the table in front of her and she picked it up listlessly, by way of distraction.

There had been a number of calls and texts from friends, three from Gil Paton, but she swiped through them all. The last one was from Kate Graham. She hesitated, then clicked on the name and read the text message, which was brief. 'Here if you want me. Free until eleven.'

Cassie looked at it for a long moment, then texted, 'Thanks. Yes please.' She sat staring out at the sleet while she waited for Kate to arrive.

The media packed up and departed and the crowd around the crematorium dispersed. A Ford Fiesta was trundling out in the stream of cars leaving the car park.

'Lady Muck didn't seem too upset, did she?' the driver said acidly.

There were two other women in the car. Her front-seat passenger sniffed. 'That's right, Moira. Just looked straight through us when she came out – not even a smile to thank us for bothering to come.'

'Cassie looked really upset, though, Denise,' the woman in the back seat said. 'I thought she was going to burst into tears.'

‘I didn’t say anything against Cassie, Sally. She’s all right – and Felix too, poor laddie. Terrible thing. All that money, and this is where he ends up. Just shows you.’

‘You get what’s coming to you,’ Moira said wisely.

Denise nodded. ‘Right enough. It’s all about money, with Anna. Shoves it in our faces, to show what she’s got compared to us peasants. It sticks in my throat the way we have to grovel just to get a bit of it for the community.’

‘Well don’t take it, then,’ Sally said tartly. ‘She’s a right to do what she wants with her money – she’s earned it.’

A chill descended on the car. After a pointed silence Moira said, ‘Well, I suppose, if you call it earning just to sit down and scribble a load of rubbish. Sally, I’ll drop you off first.’

‘That’s great. Thanks, Moira.’ It would mean driving past Denise’s door but Sally was unsurprised. She’d gone along out of genuine sympathy with the bereaved family and her unhelpful remarks were spoiling their fun. Once they got rid of her they could go back to slagging Anna off as much as they liked.

She was a relative newcomer to the area and had been naively shocked that a nice, friendly wee town like Halliburgh could harbour so much animosity towards someone who was so much their benefactor. The trouble, she supposed, was that Anna gave the impression that she’d bought a fiefdom where she could behave as she chose. Objections had poured in to the plans for her house and the Harper Foundation building which were totally out of keeping with the local architecture but the council seemed to be putty in her hands. There were rumours, too,

that a housing development application by a local builder – Moira’s husband, in fact – had been turned down because Anna had felt it encroached on her privacy.

No one expected a world-famous author to base her social life here, but if she’d actually turned up to even some of the events that kept the heart of the community beating strongly, instead of sending a cheque or authorising a grant when asked, it might have been different. But she didn’t; she wasn’t interested in Halliburgh except on her own terms as a country retreat where her money could ensure that her privacy was ruthlessly protected.

Death didn’t respect the power of money, though, and now Sally thought about it, too much probably did every bit as much harm as too little – and being rich and famous was no consolation if it led to losing your only son.

For once she didn’t sigh over the state of the paintwork and the sagging gutter that dripped water on her head as she let herself into her modest semi.