



I have never kept a secret from Peter before. There have been misunderstandings and white lies, of course. Like the time I told him I couldn't go to the Coldplay concert at Wembley because the auditors needed me to work late. Or last summer, when my wedding ring vanished from the windowsill by the kitchen sink and I swore he must have moved it. And the less said about the hotel in Salcombe, the better. But no secrets of the *larger* variety, the kind whose sharp edges might snag on the fabric of life and tear it.

Until now, anyway.

You see, the wheel of life turns.

Today, there are things that people best not know for their own good. Facts whose ideal circulation is a list of one. Hazy, swirling possibilities beginning to take shape—

'Can you hear me?' James' voice said.

It materialised from the air around me, the words tumbling out of space. Which is how it was meant to happen, as we were sitting on opposite sides of the Whispering Gallery in St Paul's Cathedral. The chamber was designed so that words spoken quietly on one side carried along the curved walls round to a person sat on the other.

James was speaking again.

'The tourists are all gone,' he said. 'We're alone now.'

'We are,' I said. 'This is strange. You sound so very close.'

I glanced across to where he was, a hundred and fifty feet away, looking buff and out of place, with a chasm that dropped away to the cathedral floor below in between us. He raised his hand to wave.

'If we were back in the office,' James said, 'Boudicca would be talking about changes to the LIBOR rules by now.'

'There but for the grace of God,' I said under my breath.

'Instead, you and I are here,' he went on. 'Having the world's smallest adventure together.'

'That, I like the sound of,' I said. 'As if we've escaped from the drudgery of

corporate takeovers and are somehow on the run.'

'The Thelma and Louise of CMA-approved M&A activity.'

'I had us more down as Bonnie and Clyde,' I said, chuckling.

'Desperadoes whose names will echo down the ages.'

'Legends for future generations to talk about in hushed tones.'

A bus passed by outside, off to places unknown, packed with strangers who each had their own tangle of secrets and half-truths to unravel.

'Do you know the history of this place?' I said.

'No,' James said, barely audible. 'I know it's old.'

'London was ravaged by plague in 1665,' I explained. 'The city burnt down and in the ruins Christopher Wren built ... *this*.' I waved my hands upwards at the magnificent dome. 'An almost perfect cathedral. All the great people of the past three hundred years have come here, sitting where we are, having conversations like this.'

'Does that make us part of history?'

'I guess it does.' I said, smiling to myself. 'Isaac Newton. Winston Churchill. And now Ailsa and James.'

I waited for his words to come, but none did.

Velvety silence blanketed the cool, dark interior.

A stillness born of centuries.

Then images from a stolen night flickered across my mind. Green valleys glistening in rain. Laughter-filled corridors. A hotel room door and a keycard, with one of the fingers holding it bound in a ring.

Events from *our* history.

Muddled, magical and surprisingly fresh.

'Imagine if your husband was with us now,' James said quietly.

The light in the chamber dimmed, brightened again.

'Now, that's a leap from Isaac Newton,' I said.

'I'm just saying, it might bring ... *clarity*,' James continued.

'Clarity is one word for what it would bring. You might also find that Peter has big fists and knows what to do with them,' I said slowly. 'We don't need to rush.'

'I know that. Still, I like the idea of clarity.'

'The *now* is enough for me,' I said. 'Two of us. Here. *Together*.' I glanced at

my watch. 'And I like the idea that if I go now,' I continued, 'I can wolf down the Pret sandwich on my desk before my two o'clock call with New York.'

'You have to?'

'Time and tide wait for no woman. And I'm solid all day after this. You know what Mondays are like.'

'Sure,' James said. 'And here was me, just getting settled.'

'*Tempus fugit*,' I said, rising and smoothing down my dress.

'Story of my life,' I heard him say.

A glint of light caught the place where the Italian tourist's ice cream had dripped on to the floor ten minutes before. A fragment from another time and place, flotsam washed in from the hectic city outside. I stepped forward and sideways. James was speaking again, his words mere noise now. I walked on, left following right. A body in motion. Advancing toward the office. New York at 2pm. The serious business of making money.

Then my foot began to slide.

And, after that ... *oblivion*.

Marcia, Jane and Kirstin were huddled by Kirstin's desk, a hive of inactivity amidst the bustle of a world class financial services firm.

'Did you hear what happened?' Kirstin said, as we approached.

Her eyes jumped from me to James and back again, starting to form a question but then getting distracted by the news she wanted to share herself. The room throbbed around her, going slowly in and out of focus.

'No,' I said, rubbing my brow. 'Did the hot guy at Pret ask you out again?'

'Did *you* ask the hot guy at Pret out?' James added.

'A bomb went off,' Kirstin said flatly.

'Not actually off,' Marcia added. '*Almost* went off.'

'Same difference,' Kirstin continued indignantly. 'Smoke came out of it, then stopped. You can see on the video camera footage. A bloody great bomb ... right in the middle of the Westgate Shopping Centre. In Oxford.'

My heart beat faster. Hairs on my neck rose. Pulse doubled.

'That's where you live, Ailsa, isn't it?' Jane asked. 'In Oxford?'

'It is,' I said. 'We're in Grandpont, half a mile from the Westgate. Was anyone hurt?'

'No, no.' Marcia took centre stage now. 'The bomb *almost* went off. It didn't actually blow up.'

I tried to think where Peter would be at this time of day. At school, almost certainly. Two miles from the Westgate. Unless, of course—

'But if it did,' Kirstin continued, elbowing her way back in, 'it was enormous. The whole place would have been blown sky high. Hundreds would have died. Thousands even.'

'But no-one was hurt, though?' I asked again.

Kirsten opened her mouth to speak, then stopped.

'What are you all standing around gossiping for,' a voice barked behind me, 'when I need those numbers on my desk in less than three hours.'

I turned to see Boudicca marching towards us, like the sheriff in a cowboy movie who has discovered Butch Cassidy's Hole in the Wall gang by the railroad

tracks as a train laden with banknotes approached. Only a sheriff in a black Oscar de la Renta suit with greying hair sculpted into a perfect piecey bob.

'We were telling Ailsa about the bomb,' Kirstin said defiantly. 'Because she lives in Oxford and all.'

'What bomb?' Boudicca said.

'A huge great bomb,' Kirstin explained, 'two hundred pounds of explosive.'

'Two hundred pounds of *PBX*, I read,' Marcia added.

'The whole shopping centre would have gone up in smoke if it went off,' Kirstin galloped on. 'Everyone inside would have been killed. *Literally* ... everyone.'

She mimed a volcanic explosion with her hands.

'But it didn't go off?' Boudicca said. 'They're all safe?'

'That's what I was asking,' I said.

'Yes, everyone is safe,' Marcia said. 'I'm just saying if it had gone off—'

'What's that behind your ear, Ailsa?' Boudicca cut in.

'Behind?' My head felt suddenly groggy. 'I got these ear-rings two months ago. I'm sure you've seen them before.'

'No, *behind* your ear. Is that blood?'

Then I was moving backwards and sitting down at the same time. James, somehow, rolled a chair beneath me which caught me as I went. A fluorescent bulb blinked in the ceiling. On, then off. Off, and on. I had a feeling it was telling me something.

'You're bleeding,' Boudicca went on. If anything, she was even more stentorian than normal. 'Has something happened? Did you fall over?'

'I—' I began. The words became congested in my head as I tried to put them in the right order. 'There was an ice cream ... the boy dripped it on the floor—'

'Ailsa fell over and banged her head,' James said suavely. 'We were in St Paul's Cathedral. The boy's ice cream melted. Ailsa must have slipped on it.' He stopped for a moment. 'She may have cracked her head on the paving stones. I couldn't see what happened exactly.'

'Oh dear, there's blood streaming all down your neck,' Kirstin said. 'Lots of blood. I'm terrible with blood.'

She fanned herself with her hand melodramatically and shot an anguished glance at Jane.

'Who let a boy into the cathedral with an ice cream?' Boudicca asked, fixing James with a stare that would have felled Attila the Hun.

'I don't know. It was certainly ... *strange* that he was allowed in with it.'

'Well, I suppose that's water under the bridge.' Her laser gaze came back to me. 'How do you feel, Ailsa?'

'I'm okay.' The room was spinning slowly around me. My eyes wouldn't quite focus right. I tried to fix them on Marcia's outsize belt buckle and failed. 'I am sure I'm fine,' I went on. My words slurred a little at the end. 'Give me five minutes ... sitting down ... and I'll be alright.'

'How many fingers am I holding up?'

She held two fingers up in the pose that Instagram was created to record, the 'peace' sign beloved by Asian tourists the world over. Her pugnacious features didn't match the happy expression that usually went with it.

'You look like Winston Churchill,' I said woozily. 'Are we playing charades now?'

'That's it,' Boudicca said decisively. 'You're going home.'

'Nonsense, the Stark & Läcker financials, I have to complete them.'

'James is doing that now.' Boudicca looked him in the eye. 'Right?'

'Yes. Sure. Whatever you say.'

'You're helping him, Kirstin. And get Srinath from Purchase Ledger to assist you. Drop everything else you're doing, and I need those numbers by 4pm.' Everyone looked at her expectantly. 'Which means start now.'

She clapped her hands together, and Kirstin, Marcia and Jane scattered to the four corners of the earth.

'That was great with the chair, James,' Marcia said over her shoulder. She winked at him as she scuttled away. James watched her skirt-stretching figure disappear around the corner.

'And you, young lady, are going home and going to see a doctor.'

'I could go with Ailsa to the doctor?' James began.

'You're on Stark & Läcker. Chop chop.'

He vanished in the direction Kirstin had gone, moving faster than I had ever seen him go before.

'I really am fine,' I said. I started to stand, got halfway up, then my legs buckled and I was sitting down again. 'I just need ... a minute or two.'

'I am going to put a dressing from the First Aid box on that cut, then it's home for you,' Boudicca said, softly, maternally. That was slightly unnerving on its own. 'And straight to the doctor when you get there. Do you need to go to A&E here? I can take you.'

'No, thanks. Could you book me a taxi to Paddington?'

'Sure. Violène will call an Uber.'

'I can take it from there.' I focused my eyes on what was normally EC4's most fearsome woman, now confusingly kind and supportive. Like a lioness in a natural history documentary, tenderly licking a cub's head with those huge fangs in her mouth. 'Thanks for helping. You're a real star.'

'Text me when you've seen the doctor and let me know what he says.'

'I can't text,' I explained. 'I'm on digital detox this month.'

Her face contorted into a puzzled frown.

'I sometimes wonder what century you live in, Ailsa.' She put her hand on my arm. 'Just let me know that you're alright, by telegram, carrier pigeon or whatever antiquated communication media takes your fancy. Okay?'

I nodded fractionally. That was enough to start the room spinning again.



Paddington station has if not exactly personality, then certainly attitude. It doesn't care how long you wait staring at orange letters on the Departures Board saying *Delayed* until it is time for your train to leave. Then it's a race for the ticket barriers and Devil take the hindmost.

Today the station was putting in a vintage performance.

Every train was late or cancelled, and I was packed alongside my fellow commuters so tightly it would make a sardine squirm. Oblivious to that, a man shoved through a non-existent gap beside me, catching my arm with the protruding corner of his bag and treading on my toe. He disappeared into the throng without glancing in my direction. I shuffled closer to one of the cast iron pillars that supported the roof, hoping it might be out of the path of through traffic.

The station must have been magnificent when it was new, I mused. A Victorian cathedral dedicated to speed and motion and modernity. The vaulted glass roof soared high above and beneath it stretched a concourse as large as any space you could find inside a building. The whole thing was framed by filigreed metalwork. Only some bright spark had redesigned the station with the apparent goal of maximising disruption to human movement with ugly retail units and wipeclean furniture. The result was a vast space where someone was always about to walk into you, no matter where you stood or what you did.

The wonders of modern life.

A man in a Jamiroquai hat barged past, leaving a greasy miasma of hamburger and fries in his wake. My stomach did a somersault as he went and I steadied myself against the pillar. As my fingers touched it, the light in the station shimmered. People were suddenly further away and smoke filled my nose. I sneezed and my eyes began to sting.

The sound of a steam locomotive carried through the air.

A shrill whistle followed.

Two women shouted to each other.

Bawdy laughter rippled up to the station's roof.

I blinked to clear my vision and saw a different man standing beside me, talking expansively. A man like no other I had seen today. He had on a stovepipe hat, tall and black and shiny, which pointed up to the roof like the chimney on an old-fashioned train. He wore a penguin coat and had great mutton chop sideburns down each side of his face.

Hipsters these days were something else.

'If you're entering a fancy dress competition,' I said, 'top marks for trying. You look fantastic.' As I spoke, he stuck a cigar in his mouth that was as long as a saveloy sausage and vanished into a cloud of smoke. 'Only you can't smoke here,' I said urgently. 'It's against the law in the station.'

The man however was talking to a companion and paid no attention to me.

'I had at first thought that all the trains would arrive in one glorious mêlée at Euston station, two miles east of here,' he said in a stage Cockney accent.

'That would naturally have been a great convenience for the people of London,' the second man said. He too wore oddly dated Victorian clothes.

'For the Londoners, yes,' the first replied. 'But less so for others, and less so again for the common wealth.' He drew on his cigar and sent a puff of smoke swirling away above him. I looked around to see if station staff were converging on this human bonfire. 'I was worried most of all about what should happen to my beloved Bristol,' he continued, 'if the railway for it and the line for the great port of Liverpool should meet in one place. I mean, I am all for free trade and the invisible hand of the market, but one should not make it unreasonable easy for an upstart port like Liverpool to flourish at Bristol's expense.'

'A sensible opinion,' his companion added, hooking his thumbs into the pockets of his waistcoat.

'Shrewd is what it was. I may be many things. Engineer, shipbuilder, tunneller, husband and Christian too. But above them all I am the Great Western Railway, and the Great Western Railway is Bristolian!'

He pushed his hat back on his head and disappeared into a triumphant cloud of smoke.

'So you built this Paddington station instead, my friend,' the other said.

'I did, sir. Mine was the *visible* hand.' They both laughed at his small joke. 'I, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, created Paddington station in place of the mean hovels that were here before, to serve all locations west in our fine country. For

the passengers of Bristol, and Cardiff and Oxford and Penzance too.' He looked around at the great structure. Momentarily, his gaze settled in my direction. A smile spread across his face, seemingly in recognition. 'And it is as fine a building for the people of Great Britain and Ireland as the magnificent Crystal Palace itself or the grand Hauptbahnhof that stands in Munich—'

Something hit my shoulder then. Hit it *hard*.

A man in outsized headphones and a black overcoat was walking away from me, with neither apology nor concern for the collision that had just happened. My companion with mutton chops and the stovepipe hat was nowhere to be seen.

I glanced about, looking for him. My eyes passed over the Departures Board as I did. It now said *Boarding* by my train. An announcement came on the tannoy saying that the train was about to leave. The crowd had gone, I realised.

In a blur, I ran to the ticket barrier, fumbling to get my season ticket out and almost dropping it. A whistle blew as I ran along the platform. Unhelpful words were muttered at my back by station staff. I made it to the train as the electronic doors beeped and shut, then the train jolted into motion.



Progress toward Oxford was short-lived. At Royal Oak, the train's wheels began to slow. By Ladbroke Grove, a snail would have outpaced it. Now, barely a mile from Paddington, it stopped entirely.

Somewhere in the carriage, a phone pinged irritably.

Then again.

And a third time for luck.

I tried to lose myself in the spreadsheet that was open on my laptop – the nearly complete DCF for the Stark & Läcker acquisition – but couldn't concentrate. The internet was out of bounds and the train Wi-Fi didn't work anyway. The novel I was reading lay forgotten on my bedside table.

So I stared out the window.

As I gazed at the rusting Victorian ironwork and graffitied 1970s concrete, my mind returned to the curious figure on the station concourse. His peculiar clothes – stovepipe hat, penguin coat and great mutton chop sideburns – and the sounds that accompanied him. Horses whinnying, locomotives venting steam brakes and lewd, ribald exchanges. Not to mention the smell of acrid smoke. Manure. Rough shag cigarettes and pipes.

It didn't, I had to admit, make much sense.

The man I'd seen was the spitting image of the black and white picture of Isambard Kingdom Brunel that featured on the station hoarding when they did building works a few years ago, only he was in colour.

It was enough to make me wonder what was going on with Ailsa Dunning, esq. To the outside world, a 32 year old financial analyst with prospects, two pairs of Manolo Blahnik pumps and one, only slightly soiled, husband. To my many and varied gifts, second sight seemed to have been added.

It was an unsettling revelation for a Monday afternoon.

'This train terminates here,' the PA system in the ceiling boomed, breaking my reverie. 'Please alight for London Paddington—'

'It doesn't terminate here,' a jaunty voice said beside me. 'Those announcements are always wrong.' I turned to find a blonde woman wearing a

GWR badge and a green-grey uniform smiling at me. Her name was Laura, apparently. 'Can I get you anything from the trolley?' she went on brightly.

She indicated the cuboid battering ram on wheels beside her. It was crammed with long-life food shrink-wrapped in plastic.

'No, I'm fine, thanks,' I said.

'Tea, coffee? Cake or crisps?'

'Really, I am just great.'

'I can't tempt you with juice or something stronger?'

She lifted up a screwtop bottle of red wine. I shook my head.

'Listen,' I said. 'Did you see someone smoking on the station concourse just before the train left? I know it was rather crowded.'

'Smoking?' Laura said, eyebrows raised in disbelief. 'That is completely prohibited. The rapid response team would have been on them in an instant.'

'Yes, that's what I thought,' I went on meditatively. 'It's just that I saw someone wearing Victorian clothes – top hat and all – standing there, bold as day, smoking the longest cigar I ever saw in my life.'

'Well, that can't be right. Unless they were shooting a TV programme, but I guess we would know if they were doing that.'

'I guess we would.'

Laura smiled at me warmly.

'And they wouldn't pick a day when all the trains were up the spout to come and film. Though it would be just my luck for them to make a TV show and no-one tell me,' she said. Her face clouded, as if a profound thought had struck. 'I would love to be on TV,' she continued, hand on her chest. 'I suppose we all would really, wouldn't we? But here I am, working on the trains.' A peal of laughter followed and her smile returned. 'Now, are you sure you wouldn't like a Coke, or fruitcake, or some dry roasted peanuts?'

A sanity check would have been useful, I thought. But that would probably be asking too much.

'Quite sure,' I said. 'Thanks again.'

Laura pushed her trolley further along the train's central gangway, in search of other customers, and disappeared from sight. I turned back to the window and lost myself in the flurry of red, yellow and green spray-paint with which one of the nation's up-and-coming artists had decorated a patch of west London

concrete.

Without doubt, I reflected, my day was becoming curious.

Curious, and even curioser.

The moment played over in my head again. I was in St Paul's Cathedral, in the Whispering Gallery. I stood up, took a step left, then forward. A flash of light on the floor, something moved at the edge of my vision and suddenly I went flying. Next thing James was fussing over me, panic etched on his face, not sure if he should help me or phone an ambulance or whether someone would shout at him for using a phone inside the cathedral. As he floundered, I got back to my feet. The world felt very peculiar all of a sudden. I looked at him, wondering what I ever saw there aside from a ripped torso and an alarming amount of stamina. Then I remembered when I'd seen that torso before, up close and personal. A six pack for the ages.

'You've had quite the day,' Peter said, interrupting my thoughts. 'Banging your head and all. I bought you flowers.'

I was back in reality.

At home in Oxford.

Peter indicated the wrapped bouquet of tulips from Tesco nestling in an overly small vase on the windowsill. Beside it was a toy monkey wearing a Coldplay T-shirt.

'I saw. Thanks.'

'It was the least I could do. Are you sure tea is strong enough?'

We were sat in our kitchen, at my mother's old oak table. It was the emotional heart of the house, a sort of mission control for our lives. Peter was wearing the blue cardigan that could do with a wash and which had a hole in the elbow that needed darning. Darning he would never do, and I certainly wasn't going to skivvy for him. Between his woodcutter beard, receding hairline, expanding waist and dishevelled cardigan, he was already becoming the cliché of a careworn teacher.

'Tea is fine,' I said, curling my fingers around the warm cup. 'Perfect, in fact.'

'Sure. I guess with concussion you shouldn't drink alcohol anyway. If it is concussion?'

'I'm not sure what it is. They just told me what symptoms to look out for. I

imagine Dr Holbroke will give me a fuller picture when I see him tomorrow.'

'Okay. What are the symptoms?'

'Headaches, double vision ... you know, the usual.'

'Sure.'

'Those, and strange optical effects.'

A swirl of cigar smoke fleeted through my mind.

'Optical effects?' Peter asked.

'I don't know what they were. My vision went a little strange at Paddington station. It's probably nothing.'

'Just the bang knocking you out of your normal rhythm, I suspect. You'll be right again tomorrow.'

He put his hand reassuringly on mine. A twinge of guilt or something like it shot through me.

'You know Boudicca was rather sweet this afternoon,' I said. '*After* I banged my head.'

'Sweet? You mean she apologised when she stabbed you in the front?'

'I mean nice. Actually nice. Considerate. She even offered to take me to A&E herself.'

'Wonders never cease. To be fair, I was quite taken aback when she phoned me at school to say what had happened. Are you sure she wasn't the one who banged her head?'

'Positive. I have proof on that score here with me.'

I touched the tender lump on the back of my head. Intense, nauseating pain spread around my skull.

'Perhaps she's about to make you all redundant,' Peter said.

He turned that thought over in his mind, then decided not to pursue it.

As he spoke, I was suddenly back in the cathedral.

James' laughter reverberated along the polished stone of the cathedral wall again. There was a frisson in the air, the possibility of something wonderful and exciting about to happen.

My cheeks coloured.

'Anyway, why were you in St Paul's Cathedral?' Peter was saying. 'When you fell over?'

'Oh, you know. I fancied a change, a breath of fresh air at lunchtime.'

'Not so much fresh air inside the cathedral,' Peter said, chuckling.

'No, I guess not. I just wanted to be out of the office with everyone going crazy over this acquisition we're working on. Look, are you cooking dinner tonight?'

'Yes, I will be. I hadn't had time to think about it. What with you hurting yourself ... and Stoneman making such a dog's dinner of the exam timetable at school ... and then that bomb being discovered in the centre of town. They've closed half of Oxford down. It was a nightmare getting home—'

'It's just that I can feel this headache coming on,' I interrupted. 'I'd really like to eat a little food. Then get to bed. Get some rest. You understand.'

I smiled weakly, then put my hand on top of his.

'Sure, absolutely,' he said, standing up. 'I'll go and start now.'

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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