Michael DOBBS

Old Enemies

Who will live, who must die? It's down to Harry Jones.

From the bestselling author of *The Reluctant Hero*

PROLOGUE

Villars sur Ollon, Switzerland

She was a girl with hazel eyes and a face that with every smile reflected her happiness at being part of the world. She wasn't long past her sixteenth birthday; she lacked a cynical side, which was perhaps something of a surprise for a teenager from New York. That's why she trusted the two men sitting in front of her.

Casey didn't know them, but that seemed not to matter. Had her mother known what she was doing she would have shouted at her, and perhaps even her father would have joined in, too, if he'd been around, but she was far from home and at this age and distance the old rules didn't count. So much of what she'd found since she'd arrived at the international college in Villars was carved from a different world and she was determined to embrace every bit of it. Anyway, Switzerland was safe, everybody said so, particularly up here in the mountains, and she'd been here less than three months, barely enough time to get homesick. Soon she would be packing her pink suitcases and returning to Manhattan for the Christmas break, so before her mom took over her life once more and smothered it in single-parent angst she wanted to stretch her wings and seek out a little excitement.

The two men nodded, encouraging, as she buried her nose in the sweet mist that rose from her mug of hot chocolate. A snowflake settled on her eyelashes, another high on her cheek. There had been a heap of snow this past month, so on the coming Friday, the first day of December, she planned to go heli-skiing, unseasonably early, Ruari's treat. After that, she had decided, she would sleep with him. Their first time. For the heli-skiing, too. There was so much that was new to her here and she couldn't resist sharing it, even with these two strangers as they sat on the balcony of the coffee shop, while the snowflakes melted and slid down her face like fading innocence.

The chocolate chilled in the thin air and she finished it quickly, leaving a thin line of froth on her upper lip. She was a little nervous, burbling, hadn't even got close to mentioning what she wanted, and her cheeks rose in a guilty blush.

'Not to worry, we understand,' one of the men said, his English sharpened by an accent she couldn't place, but everyone in this country seemed to have some sort of accent. 'We know what you want.'

He slid a small sachet across the table. He wore a wedding ring, which reassured her. Casey glanced nervously around her, but the three of them were alone on the balcony, looking out over snow-topped roofs that stretched like jigsaw pieces into the valley below. Inside the transparent plastic sleeve were six small tablets. Es. For her and Ruari. Another first.

‘How . . . much?’ she mumbled, staring at them, her habitual smile replaced by a frown.

The man shook his head. ‘We’re not dealers.’

‘Then . . . ?’ She was confused. They were too old to be part of the club circuit.

‘Buy us another coffee. That will be enough.’

Her fingers stretched out for the sachet, covering it with her palm; it felt cold, almost clinical, and she hesitated one last time before tucking it into a pocket of the colourful Russian felt coat her mother had bought her as a going-away present. The man waved at the elderly waitress, and soon fresh drinks were steaming in front of them all. As she sipped more chocolate, freed from her embarrassment, Casey relaxed under their gentle questions before glancing at her watch and gasping in surprise. ‘Wow, this girl’s got to be out of here. I’ll be late for class!’ Suddenly she was on her feet, leaving in a fluster of thanks and apology, her hand still firmly thrust inside her pocket.

As she hurried away, her boots crunching through the crust of fresh snow, the smiles of the two men faded into rock.

‘She didn’t pay for the fucking coffee,’ one said drily.

‘She will,’ the other whispered.

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Casey kept her most intimate possessions tucked inside a small silk purse. It was kingfisher-blue, and beneath its gold clasp she had squirreled away a photograph of her parents when they had still been together, and a more recent one of herself astride Trixie, her horse, along with the ring her grandmother had given her before she’d left for Switzerland. The ring was old-fashioned, too large for any of Casey’s fingers, but her grandmother was one of those special people in her life who understood her better than almost anyone. Those secrets she wasn’t told she still somehow guessed, in return offering Casey a gentle word of encouragement or occasional caution. But she never judged. ‘I was there in the sixties, sweetheart,’ she would say. ‘Sure hope you have as much fun as I did.’ And now the ring was nestling next to the note from Ruari. He was eight months older than Casey, almost seventeen, and when they had first grown close at the start of term he’d given her a piece of paper with her name written on it. He’d proved to be something of an artist, had turned the capital C into a face that bore a remarkable resemblance to Casey, capturing her snub nose and hair swept back behind her head, while the tail of the Y seemed looped in the form of a heart, although when she’d pressed him on that he’d grown embarrassed and pretended it was only her backside. Boys could be such idiots.

Their ski instructor, Mattias, picked them up from the school; you got door-to-door service when your parents were laying out more than seventy thousand dollars a year in school fees. Their equipment was piled high in the back – helmets and sticks and the fat skis used on powder – and Mattias had driven them to a football pitch on the outskirts of Villars

that was now covered in a blanket of thick, fresh snow. In the centre of the pitch stood a small canary-yellow helicopter. Their adventure was almost underway. As they clambered from the school van their boots sank in deep; it would be wonderful up on top, so long as the weather held. Casey glanced across the valley towards France, praying that the clouds piling up in the direction of Mont Blanc would steer clear of them, at least for the next few hours. It was glorious on this side, no wind, nothing but sun, a day that would lead to an even more perfect night.

She turned to Ruari, who already cleared six feet, way above her own height, so she had to stand on tiptoe to kiss him. He had an athlete's lean frame, streaks of red bleached into his brown hair by the Alpine sun and a razor nick below his left ear, with a dimple in the centre of a stubborn chin and strong, steady eyes that flooded with humour and seemed to undress her every time they touched her. She grabbed his arm, urging him on. She'd not told him what she was planning for later, when their friends and the teaching staff would be wrapped up in an end-of-term party, but she thought he'd guessed. She couldn't contain her excitement, squeezed his lean frame tighter, then slipped in her heavy boots, falling onto her back on a duvet of pure white, dragging him on top of her. Any excuse. The instructor turned away, smiling to himself, pretending not to see as they scrambled to their feet, laughing.

Mattias greeted the pilot warmly; they were old friends who had made this trip dozens of times, and the pilot began helping stow the skis in a wire basket that ran along one of the skids. Mattias had already spent half an hour briefing his students, and now he instructed them yet again on what to expect, how to behave in the helicopter and on the snow, what to do in the event of an avalanche. One final equipment check to make sure they hadn't mislaid their hand-sized avalanche transceivers or the folded aluminium probes, then all was ready. 'Today is a special day,' he declared, laying his hands on their shoulders. 'I promise you, it will be one of the sweetest adventures of your lives.' Casey giggled; he didn't know, of course.

As Casey climbed into the open-sided cabin, she was too wrapped up in her own world to take any notice of the other passengers already on board, two men, one of whom sat inside the passenger compartment while the other had begged a favour and taken a seat alongside the pilot up front. They were entirely anonymous and unremarkable. Both wore reflective sunglasses with scarves around their chins and sun cream plastered across their noses. Their heads were covered by thick woollen hats so that very little of their faces could be seen, and what was visible was covered in stubble. They offered no sign of acknowledgement. So Casey couldn't be blamed for what was about to happen. She was young, had eyes for Ruari, no one else. There was no way she could recognize these men as the pair she had met at the coffee bar a couple of days before.

And there were other distractions. The turboshaft engine began to whine, the giant rotor blades above their heads turned, Casey's world began to tremble and scream. Even when Ruari shouted into her ear she had trouble making out what he was saying, so she used it as an excuse to lean on his shoulder and look into his laughing eyes, unaware. No, you couldn't blame Casey for that. She was in love and on the verge of one of the sweetest adventures of her life. Or so Mattias had promised.

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Casey sat next to Ruari, facing the rear of the helicopter, with Mattias and the stranger opposite. Their knees almost touched, there was so little room. Outside, through the open door hatch, the scenery grew more rugged and spectacular as they climbed past the treeline and up towards the peaks. She pulled out a camera and began taking photographs, wanting to share the experience with her grandmother. The view of Villars was extraordinary, with wood smoke rising from the chimneys of its huddled chalets, while beyond she could see the valley of the river Rhone as it thrust its way towards Lake Geneva, with its power-station chimney standing tall and steaming. In the great distance were the French Alps, where ribbons of ice crystals were being blown from the mountain tops like the fluttering of Tibetan prayer scarves, while behind her, Casey knew, in the direction they were flying, lay the peaks of Les Diablerets and the town of Gstaad, where her mother had taken her shopping only a few weeks earlier, before the snows came and blocked the pass. It was where she had bought the silk purse. Her fingers searched for it once more, beneath the folds of her ski suit, and she nestled closer to Ruari.

Casey had lost herself in the beauty, the noise, her rising sense of expectation, when she felt Ruari stiffen. His body tensed. He reached for her hand and squeezed it, too hard, so that she almost yelped in discomfort. It was only when she followed the direction of his gaze that she saw why. The faceless stranger who sat opposite him had turned in his seat. He had taken off his glove and in his bare hand he was now holding a pistol. It was aimed at Mattias's chest, barely two feet away. Casey didn't understand; there had been no argument, no raised voices. Even Mattias was looking on with an expression that suggested more confusion than concern.

'Stand up,' the stranger mouthed at Mattias. The words were flung away in the downdraught yet their meaning was unmistakable.

The guide shrugged his shoulders, indicated his seat harness, still assuming this was some sort of pathetic joke. Then he saw the finger tighten on the trigger, only fractionally, but it was enough to persuade him that it would be unwise to test the stranger's sense of humour too far. Cautiously, not taking his eyes from the snub nose of the gun, he unclipped his safety belt and edged along the bench, trying to put a few more inches between him and danger.

The helicopter flew on, ever higher.

The gunman jerked the barrel, once, twice; with desperate slowness Mattias rose to his feet. His head was bowed, he couldn't stand full height in the cramped cabin. His eyes turned towards the pilot's compartment, hoping his friend had witnessed everything and would intervene. What he saw there made him suddenly sick. That's when he knew he was a dead man.

He was beginning to rage inside with the injustice of it all when, even above the racket of the engine and rushing air, he heard Casey scream. At the same moment he felt a horse kick him in the chest, smashing through his sternum. His breastbone was no match for a 9mm slug fired from a semi-automatic. It didn't hurt, there was no pain, only numbness, which was flushing all the way down through his bowels. His knees were buckling. That made him angry; he was a mountain man, his legs were his life. He was still filling up with anger when, at more than six thousand feet, his knees gave way and he tumbled backwards into oblivion.

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The pilot hadn't been in any position to help his friend Mattias. He was already dead. He'd been flying on a path that had his craft rising straight and steady through the mountain air when the passenger in the left-hand seat reached over and twisted the lever that engaged the auto-pilot controls. The pilot had barely enough time to blurt out a protest before he died. Two bullets. No one in the rear passenger compartment heard the sharp retorts, no one saw what was happening on the other side of the bulkhead until Mattias stood up and noticed the pilot slumped over his controls, but by then it was already too late. Afterwards there was nothing more than a slight kick of the aircraft, like hitting a small air pocket, to betray the fact that the autopilot had been disengaged. The passenger up front now had control.

In the compartment behind him, the three remaining passengers were lost in their own individual worlds. Casey was old enough for love but far too young for death, even to comprehend its meaning, yet suddenly her world was overflowing with it. She couldn't stop screaming. The helicopter had become a coffin.

Beside her, Ruari was bent forward, straining against his harness, his senses focused on the gunman so close at hand. They both knew that if Ruari found the chance he would hurl himself at the attacker, even though the man was fifty pounds heavier and nearly half a foot taller, but Ruari wouldn't get that chance, not stuck in his harness. The attacker stared from behind his sunglasses, his face a mask drained of emotion.

All the while the noise from the engine and the rotors were beating down upon Casey, numbing her mind, -driving her fear still deeper inside her until it caught her senses and sent them tumbling. One instinct consumed her; she had to survive, to get away from this danger. She fumbled with the lock of her safety belt, releasing the catch, sinking to her knees as she

struggled to breathe. Suddenly Ruari reached for her, trying to help, to hold her, but it was too late, she was slumped on the floor, crawling away, her ski boots slipping as she struggled.

But there was nowhere to go. She sprawled nearer the access hatch but didn't dare move any closer. She whimpered, raised her head, looked at the gunman.

'Please,' she whispered.

He made no move. The gun remained pointed at Ruari. It seemed as if Casey was of no importance to him.

Beyond the hatch she could see the mountaintops that had so excited her and the vast blue void that filled the spaces between. The helicopter twitched, she sank still lower to the floor, reached out to grab one of the metal supports beneath the seats, clinging to it in fear, afraid to move in any direction.

'Please!' she begged once more. She began to scream, piercing cries that not even the pounding of the rotors could suppress. Ruari's hand stretched out once more, shaking as he strained for her, but still he couldn't reach. The pitiful screaming continued. She was a young girl, in terror, pleading for her innocent life.

Then the helicopter banked sharply, like a fairground ride, until it was almost on its side. For a moment the screaming stopped as Casey needed all her strength to cling to the seat support, fighting the gravity that wanted to break her grasp and rip her free. She was losing the struggle. She slipped, a few inches, then a little more. Her boots were no longer scrabbling on the floor, they were dangling over the edge of the compartment, outside, in the void. No matter how Ruari strained, time and again, he couldn't get to her, couldn't touch her, couldn't save her. Her lips twisted into shapes they were never meant to make, while her hazel eyes drowned in terror.

And at last, although it was only seconds, her fingers gave way. There was nothing to hold her any longer. She was tossed from the helicopter like a sweet wrapper in the wind. That was when she started screaming again, more pitifully than ever, but this time there was no one to hear.

CHAPTER ONE

The Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe

The events that led up to what took place in the Swiss mountains began in another time zone and on a different continent less than five weeks earlier. The chronology would eventually turn out to be important. The matters that were put in motion typically required months to

plan, but time was to prove a particularly inflexible factor. Corners were bound to be cut, knuckles scraped.

Moses Willard Chombo stood at the window of his retreat perched in the hills of his country's Eastern Highlands and snorted in frustration. It was eighty degrees, the humidity that was so unexpected in these elevated parts made him short of breath and the rain that had been threatening all morning was now tearing itself from the sky and trying to batter its way through the roof. He couldn't even see as far as the military gatehouse at the entrance to his compound; the only immediate sign of life was a column of ants clinging to the outside of the window frame. Even the weather made him feel impotent.

Chombo was a significant man but he was one who, in his own mind, was not yet significant enough. He was the Mr Meanwhile, His Acting Excellency, the President *pro tem* of his battered country, and the temporary nature of his title made him feel about as uncomfortable as a second-hand shoe. He had been one of Robert Mugabe's deputies and had emerged from the dung heap left behind by that profoundly psychotic despot to squeeze into the dead man's chair, but only until elections in three months' time could confirm a proper and fully empowered successor. Chombo hoped very much that proper and fully empowered successor would be him. He needed only to win an election and was in an excellent position to do so, but Zimbabwe was still a deeply troubled country, exhausted by the years of Mugabe's madness, and the acting President's mood was as overcast as the skies. He was watching a waterspout erupt from the gutter and cascade onto the lawn, where it was tearing at the roots of a hibiscus bush, when he heard a door open behind him. The wooden frame was swollen and warped, the hinges complained, like everything in this country, and through it came Takere, the head of the President's personal guard. Behind him were two white men, in their late thirties, neatly dressed and well-muscled.

'You are late,' Chombo remarked in Shona, the language he shared with Takere. It was more observation than rebuke. The President was a big man with an ox's chest who didn't rush to judgement, the sort of man who preferred to seek salvation and revenge in his own time. It was a caution that had held him back all these years while others had rushed into the hands of the death squads.

'My apologies. There are more potholes than tarmac on the roads out of Harare,' Takere responded, cautious, with a tightness in his lips that made him lisp. He was nervous, sweating, despite the fan that churned the air above his head. 'Mr President, this is—'

But a wave of Chombo's hand cut short Takere's introductions. 'We need no names, not for a meeting that has never happened. Have you searched them?'

'Of course.'

'Search them again.'

'But—'

Yet even as Takere made his protest, the shorter of the two men had raised his hands to the back of his head and patiently spread his feet. His face bore the marks of exposure to the African sun, his ears looked chewed and hugged his skull, making it appear streamlined, an impression enhanced by his close-cropped hair that was thinning, and fading red. The eyes were of the palest grey, like openings in a frozen lake, and gave no warmth. His willingness in submitting to the fresh search showed that he understood Chombo's language and felt no need to keep the fact secret. Takere patted him down, then turned to the other man, who was broader in both shoulder and belly and whose sleek, greying hair and expensive shoes suggested a softer and more blunted lifestyle. Again Takere found nothing.

'You will understand the need for caution,' Chombo said, this time in English.

'That's why I fly El Al,' the red-haired man said. 'It never gets blown out of the sky. And why? Because it gives a damn, like you.' His accent was clipped, rolling from the tip of his tongue, South African.

'You address him as Your Excellency or Mr President,' Takere said sharply, taking exception to the man's relaxed tone. 'You show him respect.'

The ice eyes stared at Chombo, examining the black leader's face, whose every feature – lips, nostrils, cheeks, eyes – seemed too large for comfort. The prominent brow gave Chombo the appearance of having a permanent scowl.

'Respect?' the white man said slowly – he always talked slowly, as though he was never in a rush. 'That is a rare commodity in this part of the world. But I assure you, my respect for the President is every bit as great as any he has for me.'

Takere twitched in agitation but Chombo burst out laughing. Flies would seek a second opinion before settling on this man, the President decided. His mind ran back to Micklethwaite, the visiting British Minister, a man of phenomenally damp palms and absolutely no trace of respect.

'Yes, the West will give you aid, enough of it to transform your blighted country,' Micklethwaite had explained over tea in the ostentatious glass-fronted embassy that looked out along Harare's Norfolk Road. 'Zimbabwe can become the flower of Africa once more.'

'Then we shall be grateful.'

'There are conditions.'

'Of course.' There were always conditions.

'These upcoming elections of yours, they must be fair and free, and seen to be so. You understand that. Not like in Mugabe's time. None of us wants to go back to the old days.'

'Mr Micklethwaite, you sanctimonious and limp-wristed white bastard,' Chombo had thought, but did not say. Instead he had offered a generous smile. 'Mr Micklethwaite, I can lay my hand on my heart' – he had done so with an exaggerated gesture – 'and assure you that there is nothing I want more than for my country to make a fresh start with you and our

other Western friends. But . . .' There were always buts, too. 'I must ask for a little patience. We have our customs.'

'You know our position on corruption,' the Minister had insisted casually, reaching for a biscuit.

'Ah, yes, you mean the corruption that permits rich businessmen to buy votes in the British Parliament and in every corner of the US Congress?' Chombo had replied softly. For a big man he could speak very softly, which somehow made the words shout all the more loudly.

'I'm not interested in an empty debate, Mr Chombo. You know what I mean. Your country has a dark past in such matters.' Then the Englishman had hesitated. Even Micklethwaite had to admit it was a clumsy turn of phrase. Biscuit crumbs fell carelessly down his shirtfront.

'And a dark future, I assure you,' Chombo had replied, smiling yet again, deflecting the tension as he rubbed the skin on the back of his hand. 'But you must understand the way we do things in this country. Zimbabwe is desperately poor. Many live on the edge of starvation. Sometimes the only thing of value they possess is their vote. And if they give it, they expect something in return.'

'And we expect something in return, too,' Micklethwaite had replied.

The white man hadn't changed, still played the imperialist, using what he called humanitarian aid as a hammer to beat former colonies into submission all over again. Mugabe had been right about that, at least, even if he had made a total fuck-up of the potholes.

Since that conversation Micklethwaite had been sacked and replaced by yet another damp palm, but it would make no difference, the British still danced to the tune of the American organ-grinder, who knew nothing of Africa. And yet Americans believed in self-help, so what better way of confronting his current problem, Chombo thought, than to use other white men. Like these two standing on the rush mat in front of him. Security consultants. The expensive name for mercenaries.

The ceiling fan turned idly above their heads, and from nearby a pair of hornbills, spooked by a guard, screeched in alarm. The two consultants stood patiently. Chombo didn't offer them refreshment or invite them to sit.

'You have discussed matters with Takere?' he asked.

'Yes. And what has been suggested is pointless,' the shorter man replied.

Takere's eyes, tired and bloodshot, flared in agitation, but he said nothing. He sensed he was out of his depth, that it might be wise to tread water for a while.

'Look, you want to . . . *change the mind* of an important newspaper owner in London, and in something of a hurry,' the mercenary continued. 'Well, there's no point in offering him money, he has plenty. If his office burns down, it will still make no difference, he will

move into a new one. And if, as Mr Takere has suggested, he were to meet with a tragic accident . . .' The mercenary spread his hands wide and shrugged. 'He would simply be replaced by others. You do not change a man's mind by smashing in his skull.'

Chombo considered the point, breathing deeply to massage his thoughts. 'Then what is it that you suggest?'

'We *distract* him. Give him something else to think about. It's difficult for a man to know where his mind is when you are *ripping* out his heart.' The man had a way of emphasizing the letter 'r', rolling it around his tongue in a manner that gave his words added menace.

Takere began cracking his knuckles in confusion, but Chombo thought he was keeping pace. 'His wife, you mean?'

The mercenary shook his head. 'No, not that. They live in London, it's sewn up as tight as an antelope's arse with all their anti-terrorist precautions. And if he has any sense he'll have a security company taking care of his home, fitted it with panic alarms, CCTV, that sort of thing. There could be regular patrols, maybe bodyguards. They might even have constructed a secure room inside. No, to break an operation like that would be very difficult, take time. And time, so your Mr Takere tells me, is one thing you don't have.'

Chombo didn't bother to dispute the point.

'Anyhow,' the white man continued, 'he may not even like his wife.'

A smile spread slowly across the President's face. It took considerably longer to reach his eyes, which remained fixed on the other man, who wasn't like the last pair of 'consultants' Takere had brought him – Englishmen, who'd been halfway up his backside trying to establish parking rights before the draught from the door had time to settle, which was why they had been thrown out just as quickly. But Chombo's instincts told him that the one with frozen eyes was different. Very practical.

'Yes, as you say, there are many problems, so many problems,' the President said. 'But I have a suspicion that you have brought with you a solution. An expensive one.'

'It will be double the fee that was originally indicated. Half up front, the remainder as soon as the operation is underway, and an additional ten per cent for operating costs every month it continues. No payment, or late payment, or part payment – and we walk.'

Suddenly Takere came back to life, beginning to understand that these two men had played him like a fish. 'We said only a third up front, with the final instalment only afterwards, when the job is completed.'

'We are all of us in this for high stakes, putting our necks on the line. "Afterwards"? What is "afterwards"? I may not be around to collect, while you, Mr Takere, might not be around to pay.'

Takere looked in uncertainty towards his President, waiting for his cue to throw these cheating bastards out into the mud.

'So how is it that you propose to distract him?' Chombo asked.

‘Not through his wife.’

‘Then . . . ?’

‘His child. At school in Switzerland.’

‘Ah! The snow. It hides many things,’ Chombo replied softly.

‘There’s a lot of it in Switzerland.’

‘We should have more snow in Africa.’

And so it was that Casey’s fate had been sealed. She wasn’t the child of the newspaper owner Chombo was so desperate to get at – that was a kid named Ruari. It was simply Casey’s misfortune to be his friend, and to be in the way.

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It had been an easy affair to fall into. He was the busy entrepreneur, rich in ideas and public principles but -deficient in funds, and very much up for the statutory midlife meander, while she was the money woman, self-sufficient, predatory, with exceptional legs that most men imagined in any number of contortions yet which had the capacity to escape from a situation more rapidly than even the most carefully crafted excuse. City Woman. And the two lovers had superb cover. He was the proprietor of *Newsday*, a newspaper in the middle rank of the British market, while she was a vice-president of the paper’s main bank and creditor. Being seen together was as inevitable as the process of attraction was predictable, leading from extravagant lunches to more understated dinners, then on to her house on Blackheath Common – ‘an excellent investment,’ he had mused, following her that first time up the staircase to the bedroom.

Nothing too heavy, except the sex, which was brilliant. No emotional baggage, no demands for exclusivity, no deep entanglement, just a gentle distraction in a life that for him was throwing up more questions than he could cover with answers. Sometimes a man in his overweight forties needed to know he could still do it.

Like most of these very private entertainments, the matter fell into a pattern, one that she was mostly responsible for providing. Candles, atmosphere, crystal glasses to catch the soft light, things that could be thrown together in the time it took him to retrieve something cold and indulgent from her fridge. But this evening there had been no adornments, just sex, and in a manner suggesting her mind was elsewhere. It didn’t bother him overly, not until he was finished and left wondering whether she had even started.

‘Penny for them?’ he asked, reaching for his glass.

‘A penny?’ She turned to stare at him, pillowing her head on her hands.

‘OK,’ he smiled, his eyes sliding slowly over her body and widening with appreciation, ‘name your price.’

The smile wasn’t returned. ‘There isn’t one.’

‘Meaning?’

‘You’ll get a letter tomorrow declining your request to extend your credit facilities.’

‘What?’ The sudden tremor in his body caused a trickle of wine to spill over his chest, but he didn’t seem to notice.

‘The bank won’t do it any more.’

‘But you can’t . . .’ It would be like dropping him on the surface of the moon without oxygen. ‘That would destroy me. You know that.’

‘The bank has decided that the newspaper sector isn’t one we want to play in any more.’

‘But you *are* the bank!’

‘Not really. You know how these things work.’

He tried to turn to face her but his feet were tangled in the duvet. As he tried to wriggle himself free, he noticed there were goose bumps on her skin and her nipples had become rock hard. This is what she got off on. He’d always known, it was her reputation, and yet . . .

‘So this – tonight. One final fling. Just business?’ he gasped.

She looked at him curiously, as though for the first time. ‘Hasn’t it always been?’