

The English Daughter – Romantic Suspense by Lindsay Townsend

Prologue

She was dreaming a murder and her dream was true.

A park at night. A park in Fenfield, the Pennine town where she lived, or a formal garden in Corfu, close to her old home?

Where am I? Marble staircases, palm and cypress trees, grandiose statues. A massive villa, striving to be heroic but achieving instead a bombastic sadness. The Achillion: that classical folly built on Corfu island a century earlier, a shrine to the mythical hero Achilles.

When am I? Her feet touched sun-scorched grass and she was rushing under the wisteria pergola, the scent of white lilies catching in her throat as she ran past the rose beds and hibiscus, fleeing into the pine forest below the palace grounds. Sprinting for her life, terrified under summer stars.

Who am I? Starting awake, she reached for the bedside light and lay panting in its pencil beam. 'You're Val,' she whispered.

Still the dream persisted, stirring memories which she had tried for so long to suppress. After-images danced in her mind. Blood. Lips. Razors.

She knew too much about this murder, a killing which had disillusioned her father. He should not have lifted and copied the murder file from the police station in Corfu town and she should not have looked at it. Hilary had been an acquaintance and Val had been curious and horrified.

'Stop it,' Val muttered. She hated to dream of Hilary's murder, but she had been free of nightmares only when Nick was with her. Now he, too, was gone and their double bed was bleak, cold at the edges.

Val stared at the night light, aware of some difference in tonight's dream. Was the

difference a warning? Her grandmother would have been in no doubt. 'You dream true.' She had told Val that often enough.

'But not with *this* nightmare,' Val whispered. It was ten years since Hilary's murder and still the dream kept returning. She had dismissed the idea of therapy: the thought of admitting weakness to a stranger made her cringe. She forced her mouth into a mocking smile. 'I make my own way.'

Mouth. *Lips*. She had made the wrong association – the words flooded back. She was gawping at the pathologist's report, reading it over in her mind's eye as she had done at seventeen. A memory, perfectly recalled.

The victim, a young woman in her late teens, was found naked under an olive tree in the grounds of the Achillion. Her body had been posed as if to show the artistry of the murderer. See attached photographs.

Her father had found Hilary's body, Val remembered. Stripping off the bedclothes, she hurried to the bathroom. Hanging over the sink, she sucked water from the cold tap. She had done what she could for Hilary. She hadn't lied to the police, or to her father. Sins of omission are different.

A lack of lacerations to the victim's forearms and of foreign skin or other tissue under the fingernails would suggest that the victim was rendered passive by other means. Those means I shall go into later. Cause of death is a broken neck. There were substantial bruises around both wrists, indicating possible use of handcuffs. A single post-mortem injury to the face, inflicted by a sharp object, possibly a razor blade, is the removal of the woman's lips.

Val had never seen the photographs but the words were enough. She dry-heaved, just

as her daughter's light snapped on and a piping voice called, 'I want to watch cartoons!
Can I get up and go downstairs? Can I watch TV?'

'Go on, love,' said Val from behind the bathroom door, glad that Judith couldn't see her as she cleaned her face with trembling fingers.

One

'Why are people bad?'

Val had been thinking of Nick. A mouthful of coffee went down the wrong way. 'I beg your pardon?' she gasped.

Sitting opposite Val at the kitchen table, Judith speared a chicken nugget and ate it like a toffee apple. 'Helen Flower called me foxy-locks today.'

'And what had you called her first?'

'Rabbit teeth. She has, Mummy!' Judith vigorously nodded her head.

'But no one likes to be picked on, do they? You don't like it when you're called "Carrots". Perhaps that's why Helen taunted you back.'

'Perhaps.' Judith gnawed a chip. 'Can I play with my Thunderbird?'

'Have you finished your tea?'

'Yes, thank you.' Judith's knife and fork clattered on to the plate. A May sun, striking through the sash window, flared on her red curls as she charged into the cramped sitting room, a bundle of auburn energy as Nick had been.

The phone rang. Glad of the distraction, Val took the call. 'Val Baker.'

'You got Steve there? Sorry, you can't have – nobody's screaming. Sure you want him with you tomorrow?'

'If it's still okay with you, Penny.' Val was very careful with Nick's ex-wife.

'You know he's only coming for a free ride? A month of sun, sex, raves . . .'

‘We don’t get many raves where we’re staying.’ Clearing away Judy’s plate, Val hunted under the sink for the washing-up liquid. ‘Last time we talked, Steve said he was looking forward to windsurfing.’

‘Oh, he’s full of it. But he’ll have to come back here tonight.’ Penny laughed. ‘I’ve got his passport.’

When the musical doorbell rang moments later, she wondered if she would find Steve on her doorstep. Instead it was another six footer, altogether more disconcerting.

‘Harry.’ Blushing at finding the new bottle of Fairy Liquid still in her hand, she stood back in the hall.

‘How are you?’ he asked quietly. ‘Are you all right?’

She stared up at him without answering, seeing the new harsh lines round his mouth, the new bruise on the side of his neck. She could smell the whisky on him, for her an unseen badge of office for the plainclothes force Nick had been part of, before he had died in his sleep of a heart attack at the impossibly young age of thirty-three.

‘Val?’ Harry ducked under the lintel, a big blond fellow in a trim grey suit, his tie stuffed into a pocket. ‘May I come in?’

Resigned, Val stalked back into the kitchen, letting Judith and Uncle Harry complete their frenzied hellos in the living room. She was uneasy with his calling in tonight. Every year for five years, on the day Nick had died, he visited, offering support. She was wary of breaking down.

Making fresh coffee, Val heard Judith begin another countdown to Thunderbirds. She guessed that Harry had left the sunny sitting room, strewn with books and toys, and would soon be joining her.

A cleared throat indicated he was close behind her. Val twisted round and stepped sideways so that the table was between them.

‘Coffee. Black, three sugars.’ She thrust the blue mug handle-first at him.

He took it. ‘You always remember.’

'Sit down,' Val said. 'Please.' She felt easier when Judith's chair creaked under more weight than it was designed for and the shadow was lifted from her head. Harry was taller and bulkier than Nick had been.

Joining him at the table, she watched as Harry glanced about her home with wary blue eyes. His blond hair was still more gold than grey, but his squarely handsome features had refined with age, while in her memory Nick was always youthful and sharp, younger looking than his years.

'How are you?' They spoke together and both replied, 'Fine.'

'Off to Corfu again tomorrow.' Harry sipped his coffee.

'Yes.' Watching his mouth, Val was reminded of her recurring dream.

'How is the piano restoration business?'

'Fine.'

'Judith tells me she's started French at playschool.'

'Nick would tease me in French . . .' Val thought of Corfu, as blue and bright to her as anywhere in France.

'Val?'

She blinked. 'Sorry, I was miles away.'

Harry flicked her a look from under thick pale lashes, his voice indulgent.

'Anywhere special? You and Nick?' he added softly.

'I don't want to burden—'

Harry reached across and caught her hand in his. 'Never that, Val.'

'You'll have heard it before.' Newly widowed, she had told Harry the whole run of hers and Nick's courtship, a holiday romance that had stuck.

He smiled. 'I like to hear you,' he said.

Faintly embarrassed, Val heard the floating notes of an ice-cream van weaving through the Fenfield streets. The tune, 'Greensleeves', reminded her of the first time Harry had sat with her at this kitchen table, telling her how he had met Gilda. An ice-

cream van had been passing then, playing 'Greensleeves.' He and Gilda had been married for four years. This wasn't bad for a police marriage, especially as Gilda was also on shift-work as a nurse. Their divorce was quick and both had moved on.

Val waited for 'Greensleeves' to fade away, and Harry said, 'The first time you and Nick met.' He brushed her fingers. 'Where was it again, Corfu town?'

'Yes, it was,' she admitted slowly. 'I was tending my mother's grave in the British cemetery. Nick came up and asked me something in Greek and when I answered in English I think he was so grateful for someone to talk to that he invited me for tea at the Liston. We were married next spring.' Val blushed again. Harry knew this: he had been their best man.

'There was some opposition to your marriage: Nick told me at the time. Your Greek relatives liked him, but not as a future son-in-law.' Harry smiled, unrepentant. 'Later, you told me more about them.'

'Yes,' Val said faintly, remembering.

'You and Nick looked right, as a couple,' Harry said. 'Gilda and I never managed that. I look at Judy and see Nick in her—'

'No.' Listening for Judith's patter heading their way, Val cut across him. 'Don't worry about Judy or me. We're going to Corfu.'

The square planes of Harry's face changed subtly to a look Val knew well: cop curiosity. 'You're going earlier this summer. Why is that?'

Val gently disengaged her fingers, wrapping both hands round her cup. 'I'm going to work. A restoration job for an old friend. A girlfriend,' she added, wondering why she felt it necessary to justify herself.

Harry grunted and relaxed, draining his drink and glancing round the small, spare kitchen, so different from the cheerful clutter of her music workshop in Corfu. 'Want me to cruise past here, now and then?'

'If it's no trouble.'

‘None whatsoever. What kind of job will you be going to?’

Val’s dark-blue eyes twinkled. ‘Repairing a giraffe piano.’

‘A what?’ Harry was laughing too.

‘A giraffe piano. Looks like a cross between a piano and a harp. Alexia – the school friend I always stay with when I go back to Corfu – she wants me to restore one that’s been in her family for years. We’re hoping it’ll get Chloe interested in playing her modern piano again.’

‘Chloe. Your god-daughter.’

Val nodded, mentally cursing Harry’s prodigious memory for names and relationships. He was recalling more, snippets of conversation.

‘Tipped for a big career in music, wasn’t she? When you came back from Corfu last summer, brown as a tea bag, I remember you said she played like an angel.’ Harry frowned, embarrassed by his tea bag simile.

Val found it endearing. ‘Yes, she did,’ she agreed quickly, to cover his embarrassment. ‘She was wonderful.’ Her smile faded. ‘But this year it’s all stopped. Chloe won’t play a note.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ll find out when I get there.’

On his way home, Harry stopped the car on a grass verge in sight of the spire of Fenfield Church, where his best friend was buried close to the ancient yew. Nick had loved that tree, Val said.

He couldn’t blame Val if she was a bit spiky with him. With her he became a fourteen-year-old trapped in a thirty-seven-year-old’s body. After the night Nick died, he rarely touched whisky – except when he called on her, a touch of grisly Dutch courage.

Harry thought of tiny prickly Val, with her short black hair, aquiline nose, dark-blue eyes and coral-red, expressive mouth, a Celtic style of beauty that would not be so

out of place in Corfu. When she spoke of the first time she had met Nick, Harry had shamelessly put himself in the dead man's place. Leaning back on the head-rest, he imagined strolling through that hot foreign cemetery, imagined walking up to Val, speaking to her.

He remembered how he had once trapped his hand in a door. She had bathed and bound his wounds, her touch comforting and sure. She had not spoken much, except to ask if the bandage was too tight.

'It's perfect,' Harry had said and she'd blushed, the colour of paprika.

In her workshop, engrossed, Val showed another side: deft and endlessly patient, the corners of her mouth turned slightly upwards as she laboured at the thing she loved.

Harry wanted to buy jewels for her ears and chocolate for her mouth. He wanted to take her to concerts on his arm, have her with him every day, have her in his bed at night. But how could he make a play for the love of his best mate, a young woman made a widow when she was seven months pregnant? To Val he might always be nothing more than a friend.

Opening the car window, Harry studied the churchyard where Nick was buried. 'Christ, I'm tired.' He hadn't had a proper holiday away in fifteen years.

But he was between cases now. A day or so would see him caught up on paperwork and he'd some leave due. He loved ancient ruins, culture, art.

Corfu would be perfect.

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