

Chapter one To the accompaniment of screeching violins – a cacophony that should have had the ghost of Bernard Herrmann speed dialling his LA attorney and screaming Plagiarism! – the film’s credits rolled relentlessly on. Embarrassed, red plush curtains swished to a close as though to hastily cover a crime, in this case a cinematic one, allowing pale Odeonesque light to saturate the cinema and dissolve the tawdry atmosphere created by the economical film production. As she stepped out into late afternoon light of the warm Somerset evening, Hazel Whitby was still chuckling aloud. She slipped her arm through that of her young male companion and gave another loud guffaw. “The silly bitch must have had a hardware shop hidden somewhere on that ladder. Every time she turned around she had something different in her hand. A torch. An iron poker. A screwdriver. And finally a bloody great carving knife.” She punched the man on her arm on his. “Really, Tim. Didn’t you have a continuity girl, or whatever you call them?” Tim Hindley, a good looking, well-developed thirty-five year old scratched his blonde head and replied mock defensively: “Well, I told you it was a low budget picture.” “Low Budget? No budget, more like.” Hazel sniggered as they turned towards Lansdown Road and fought their way through a group of bilious looking tourists fresh from partaking the slightly disgusting waters in the Bath Pump Room adjoining the Roman Baths. Hazel had met the young film editor during a recent visit to London and as he had a few spare days before starting work on a new film he’d gladly accepted her invitation to stay with her in her flat in Bath. Being Australian he had not visited the West Country before and Hazel was more than happy to show him the local sights, which included quite a detailed study of the landscape within her bedroom. If people looked askance at the younger man on the older woman’s arm, Hazel, at least, gave no validation to their criticism. What she did with her life was her affair, and she’d had quite a few of those she thought smugly. Not bad for a fifty ... er ... forty year old divorcee whose husband, after thirty years of marriage, had made off with the common or garden blonde bimbo. It had taken quite a sizeable financial settlement to assuage Hazel’s hurt, but the pain had been alleviated by investing the money in her antique shops and by investing her well preserved charms in a string of strictly non-antique gentlemen friends. She had kept her figure and appearance more by good luck than by design, although cosmetics and designer clothes had certainly played their part. This summer her hair was red. What colour it was to be in the autumn was yet to be decided – and not by nature. “And this is the fourth film you’ve made with this Australian director? What’s his name?” said Hazel as she turned the key in the door of her flat. “The one he’s shooting here next month will be the fourth,” said Tim, stepping into the Lansdown Crescent apartment. “His name’s Giovanni Pergolesi. Gio to his mates. The Slug to those whose life he has ruined.” “Charming. But if he’s so horrible why do you keep working with him?” “Gio’s the sort of director who shoots the arse out of every scene and lets the editor put it together. He doesn’t understand editing and leaves me pretty much alone, which means that I can get on with the job without him breathing down my neck all the time. Plus, he pays well.” “Pergolesi doesn’t sound very Australian,” said Hazel while she collected her mail from the mailbox. “But it seems vaguely familiar.” “Same name as an eighteenth century Italian composer,” said Tim, as he stood at the window and looked at the beautiful Georgian city spread out before him. “Gio’s family is Italian. Arrived in Australia after the war. Had a small vineyard just outside of Melbourne. Gio was born there and eventually worked at a local television station as a floor manager until he scraped together enough to make his first film. Largely autobiographical about a migrant Italian family starting a new life in Australia.” He turned and walked back to join Hazel giving her a kiss on the back of her neck. Hazel glowed. “Until then he was always called plain John Bertoli, but when he started getting publicity he thought Giovanni had more class. He added Pergolesi after he saw the name on a record cover and thought it sounded more creative, you know, like Antonioni or Zeffirelli. Not that it did him any good. He still turned out rubbish.” “Are all his films as bad as the one we’ve just seen?” said Hazel, wrinkling her nose as though to confirm a bad smell.

“Some. He made a name for himself with a few early films that were quite good but then started to believe his own publicity.” “How?” Hazel began to pour two gin and tonics. “He thought he was better than he was. And he was seduced by offers from Los Angeles, but they were all pretty much standard Hollywood crap. Lately his career’s hit rock bottom and with four wives and countless kids to support he desperately needs a hit.” “Oh, so he’s a ladies’ man?” “In his opinion.” Hazel handed him his drink and took a heavy duty swig of her own. “Which means you don’t think he is?” She reached for the telephone. It was her turn to cook dinner so she was about to ring and make a reservation at a favourite restaurant, which was her equivalent of tying on an apron and turning on the oven. “As I said, he believes his own publicity.” Hazel chortled and rang the restaurant. The reservation being made she sank onto the sofa and flicked idly through the day’s mail. “So tell me about his love life.” “Unofficially anything that moves and what doesn’t he kicks until it does. The official list is his first wife, a young girl he knew from school days. The Italian girl next door, that sort of thing. Probably set up by the family. Divorced once his so called career began to take off. She and the babies were considered an embarrassment to his image. “Then came a young model who was as power hungry as himself. That lasted until she found someone with a bigger income. In Hollywood it was the mandatory star who turned out to be a transsexual.” “That must have been a surprise to him.” “To them both, I suspect. The fourth and last was an heiress from Italy but her family had it annulled.” “He’s been a busy little bugger, hasn’t he?” Hazel smiled. A post card from Melbourne showing an omnipresent cuddly Koala fell onto her lap. “Expect me on Friday morning,” she read aloud, before flicking the card across the room. “Expect ... ?” said Tim, stretching his legs and arms wide giving Hazel the luxury of feasting her eyes on his young energetic body. “Belinda. My business partner.” She was constantly amazed how easily the sight of the male form – even clothed. – unhinged her attention. “She’s a compatriot of yours”. “Australian?” “Raised there. Naturalised but has lived here near Bath for the past few years. She inherited a cottage from an old aunt.” “Lucky girl.” “Luckier than you think.” Hazel rose and began to pour a fresh gin. “It turns out that a couple of hundred years ago a very famous landscape gardener designed the garden on the property. One of the few small gardens he designed, apparently. Belinda had it restored and now makes quite a nice living permitting horticultural freaks from around the world to pay for the privilege of traipsing through the muck and mud.” “You sound as though you have no interest in gardening?” Hazel turned up her nose. “So how come she’s your business partner?” “Her old house is open to the public as well as the garden, and I’ve furnished it with some of my antique bits and bobs to promote my shops. Furniture, bric a brac, that sort of thing. Dressing the place up to look like it would have in the past. Set dressing I suppose you’d call it in your business. She also helps me with the shop here in Bath and the one in Wells.” She glanced at her watch. “We’d better head off to the restaurant. I’ve booked my favourite table.” Tim stretched out on the sofa and unbuttoned his shirt. “Pity. I really fancy eating in tonight.” “But I’m a lousy cook, you know that,” said Hazel with some conviction. Tim gave a carnal smirk. “I wasn’t thinking of cooking anything.” Suddenly Hazel felt she’d lost her appetite – at least for food. The First Class cabin was in darkness when Belinda Lawrence awoke. As she removed