Evil Intent

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Extract

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Prologue

The priest wasn't wearing a dog collar. He was casually dressed in an open-necked shirt, blending in with the other men in the room.

He had not come there by chance or by accident. It wasn't that sort of place: one had to know it was there. Though located in the heart of Soho, it was accessed through an alleyway and down a flight of stairs. There was no sign advertising its presence, and no loud music blaring forth onto the street to attract a passing fun seeker. It was far more discreet than that, its music provided by a lone pianist in the corner. Men came there for various reasons, most of which they would not necessarily want to become public knowledge.

It had been a steamy day in London, and the dimly lit, windowless room was hot, airless, reeking of cigarette smoke, alcohol, sweat and testosterone. And it was crowded as well, many tables occupied, the clot of people round the bar throwing off even more heat.

The priest's shirt clung stickily to his back, from nervousness as much as heat. As a precaution he chose a table close to the piano, where the tinkling of the keys would mask any conversation; though he didn't expect to be overheard, there were times when it was best to take no chances.

After a moment he was joined at the table by a young man – little more than a boy. They engaged in an earnest discussion. One of them did most of the talking; the other listened carefully, nodding now and then in agreement or at least acknowledgement.

A bulging envelope appeared on the table between them.

'You understand?'

'Yes.'

'Half now, half later.'

'I understand.'

A finger nudged the envelope an inch towards the other side of the table.

'Do you want to count it?'

'I trust you.'

The envelope, folded in half, was slipped into a pocket. The priest left;

the boy left.

The pianist's fingers moved over the keys. He had seen many such transactions in this place. He shrugged and put it out of his mind.

Chapter One

On the afternoon of her first official Sunday as Curate of All Saints, Paddington, murder was the last thing on Callie Anson's mind.

Instead, her head ached with trying to process and remember all of the people she had met: their names, their faces, their attitudes. By and large, she had been given a warm welcome. Those who were opposed to having a woman curate – and she knew that there was a handful in the congregation – had presumably stayed away. And there had been a few barbed comments which could be taken more than one way, along the lines of 'I never thought I'd live to see the day when we had a woman in the Sanctuary'.

But most people had been lovely. Old women had greeted her with tears in their eyes, wishing her all the best. Young men had gripped her hand, declaring that it was about time.

And the Vicar, the Reverend Brian Stanford …

Brian, as he had insisted she must call him, had been kindness itself. 'You must come to supper tonight,' he'd said. 'Relax and take it easy this afternoon, and come to us in the evening. It's time we all got to know each other. Isn't that right, Jane?' At that point he had turned to his wife for confirmation.

She had nodded; she had even smiled, but her eyes had narrowed fractionally. Callie, a woman who noticed things like that, told herself that it was only to be expected. After all, it was generally known that wives did not always appreciate having guests sprung on them at the last minute by well-meaning husbands, and this must be as true of clergy wives as of anyone else.

'If it's not convenient…' Callie had said, addressing Jane Stanford.

But Brian had answered for the both of them. 'Oh, of course it's convenient. After Evensong, just come across to the Vicarage. Jane will rustle something up.'

In the end, of course, Callie had accepted the offer of hospitality. It wasn't as if she had anything better to do, she told herself. No one to cook for. Nothing in the diary. There wasn't even anything particularly appealing on the telly that night.

Though she *should* get on with her unpacking. Callie sat on her sofa and looked at the tea chests which ranged along the wall. She'd had a week to unpack, in between her ordination and her first day on the job. And what had she done? She'd gone to Venice for three days, leaving the tea chests behind in the otherwise empty flat. On her return she'd managed to get the kitchen in order, as well as the bedroom and bathroom, so she could eat, sleep, and keep herself clean. But the book shelves gaped at her emptily in silent reproach at her laziness, and the tea chests reinforced her guilt. She was by nature an orderly person; living in any sort of chaos depressed her. Sighing, Callie roused herself from the sofa and opened the nearest tea chest.

Novels. She would put them here in the sitting room, on the built-in book shelves, and the theology books would go into the tiny second bedroom which would serve as her study.

Her new flat was not large, but Callie felt that it would suit her very well, once it was sorted out to her satisfaction. It was, almost literally, living above the shop: the flat was on the first floor, above the church hall. The proportions were pleasing, with high-ceilinged rooms, and the sitting room boasted an original Victorian fireplace flanked with book cases. The kitchen was rather old-fashioned and overdue for a refit, but Callie thought she could live with that.

She emptied three tea chests and arranged the books in alphabetical order. Then, feeling that it was time for a break, she went through to the kitchen and switched the kettle on.

The doorbell buzzed.

Callie wasn't expecting anyone. She went to the door and opened it a crack. Her younger brother stood on the landing outside her door, half obscured behind a large sheaf of flowers.

'Peter!' She opened the door more widely, smiling in delight.

'Aren't you going to invite me in?'

'Come in! I've just put the kettle on.'

'Music to my ears. You must have known that I was coming, then.' He presented the flowers to her with a graceful flourish. 'Here, Sis. For your housewarming.'

'Peter, how sweet.' She hesitated for a moment as she accepted them.

'Let's see if I can remember where I've put the vase.'

He followed her into the flat, neck craning unashamedly in curiosity. 'So this is where they've put you, then. Not bad, is it?'

'Sorry. I'm still not quite unpacked.' Callie indicated the tea chests as they passed through the sitting room towards the kitchen.

Peter Anson laughed. 'I moved three years ago, and I'm *still* not quite unpacked. To say the least.'

'I've noticed.' In Callie's opinion, her brother had made disorganisation into an art form. His packing crates had become part of the décor of his flat, almost replacing the need for furniture.

'The kitchen's a bit small,' Peter observed. 'And surely those units have been there since about 1950?'

Callie opened the cupboard under the sink and found a large vase, which she filled from the tap. 'True. But wait till you see the bathroom. They've left the Victorian claw-foot bath, but they've put in a brand new power shower. Perfect for a curate on the go.'

Peter, who had started rummaging in the nearest cupboard in search of the biscuit tin, turned to stare at her. 'I still can't believe it,' he said. 'My sis – a curate.'

'Well, it's true.'

'What do they call you, then?' he asked. 'They surely don't call you "Father", do they? Or "Mother"?'

Callie laughed as she took a scissors from a drawer and began snipping off the bottoms of the flower stems. 'Good question. To tell you the truth, I don't think they quite know *what* to call me. They've never had a woman curate here before. So I've been telling them just to call me "Callie". Some of them don't seem very comfortable with that. Any bright ideas?'

'I'll give it some thought.'

While Callie arranged the flowers, Peter made himself useful by preparing the tea and carrying the tray through to the sitting room. He placed it on a convenient tea chest; Callie followed him and put the vase of flowers on the hearth in front of the fireplace.

'Thanks so much for the flowers,' she said. 'They really lift the place, don't they?'

Peter surveyed her handiwork and nodded. 'I like the fireplace. Does it work?'

Callie shrugged. 'I think so. I haven't had a chance to try it yet.'

'That will be nice and cosy come winter. Given the right person to curl up next to —'

She cut him off, aware that her voice was sharper than she'd intended. 'Peter, don't.'

'Sorry, Sis.' He looked repentant. 'I thought maybe what's-his-name had come to his senses by now.'

'You know perfectly well that his name is Adam. And no, he hasn't changed his mind. I haven't seen him since … well, since the ordination.' Her tone, controlled and chilly, warned him to drop the subject.

'Sorry,' Peter repeated, and took the hint as she sat down on the sofa and began to pour the tea. He reached over and accepted his cup, reaching for a biscuit with his other hand. 'Have you seen Mum?'

Callie grimaced. 'Yes, I dropped by a couple of days ago. To give her something I bought for her in Venice.'

'Let me guess. She didn't like it.'

Her laugh was rueful. 'Well, I should have known. I got a little cat for her collection – a glass one, from Murano. And she said that I ought to have remembered that she collects *china* cats, not *glass* ones.'

'Well, that's Mum for you.' Peter lifted his eyebrows and sighed.

Callie felt a tightness across her shoulders. She consciously relaxed, laughing again. She shouldn't let her mother get to her; she knew that. And at least Peter understood – the one person in the world who did.

'You had a good time in Venice, then?' Peter asked. They'd talked on the phone, briefly, since her return, but they were both in a hurry on that occasion and this was the first opportunity she'd had to tell him about her trip.

When it came down to it, though, she found it impossible to put her experiences into words. 'It was…wonderful,' she said. 'Having a good time doesn't begin to describe it. I've never seen anything as beautiful in my life as that city.'

'Did you take lots of photos?'

Callie shook her head. 'No. That wouldn't have done it justice. Venice

is so much more than the sum of its parts. I just…well, I just absorbed it. I walked for hours and hours, and just soaked it in.' She sipped her tea absently, remembering. She recalled the play of light on the stone of San Marco, the way the gold mosaics of its domes lit up the interior like millions of tiny lamps …

Peter put his cup down with a clatter, cutting into her thoughts. 'What did you bring me?' he demanded, reverting to the little boy he'd been years ago. 'You said you'd brought me something.'

His eagerness made her smile. 'Just a minute. Let me finish my tea.'

He helped himself to another biscuit. 'I hope it's not a glass cat. Or a china one either, for that matter.'

'I'll have to find it. I think I've put it in the bedroom. I wasn't expecting you today, after all.'

It was impossible to be cross with Peter, she thought as she searched for where she'd put his gift.

Peter had made himself comfortable in her absence; he was sitting crosswise on the chair, his head tucked into the angle of the wing and his long legs dangling over the arm. Callie's heart lifted, as it always did at the sight of him: he was so graceful, so elegant, grown up yet boyish still.

'Here,' she said. 'A gondolier's hat.' Callie proffered it – a straw boater, festooned with dangling ribbons.

Peter took the hat, settling it at a rakish angle on his head.

'Thanks, Sis.' He grinned mischievously. 'At the risk of sounding like Mum, I would have rather had the gondolier.'

Callie chose to misunderstand him. 'I don't think Mum would have fancied the gondolier.'

'Very funny.'

'Anyway,' she went on in the same bantering tone, 'what would Jason have said about that?'

The grin faded from his face, and suddenly he seemed very young indeed, far younger than his twenty-six years. 'Actually,' Peter said, gulping, 'Jason's left me. Last week. Went off with a nineteen-year-old chorus boy.'

Callie's heart welled with sympathy. 'Oh, Peter. I'm so sorry.' And she was: Peter seemed to go through boyfriends the way most people went

through paper tissues, but Jason had been around for several months, and the two of them had appeared almost settled together. Peter had confided to her that he had hopes for a long-term relationship with Jason; evidently Jason had not shared those hopes.

He made an effort to smile, but he looked like nothing so much as a miserable schoolboy whose pocket money had been stolen, and his voice quavered. 'So you see, Sis, it looks as if the two of us are in the same boat, doesn't it? We've both been ditched.'

Callie went to him, her arms outstretched.

In a way, Callie wished that she didn't have to go to Evensong. She and Peter had hugged, had shared their misery and even shed a few tears together. It was therapeutic for both of them; she hated to have to cut it short. But on the other hand, as she was going to the Stanfords' for supper, it was useful to have Evensong in between to collect herself and regain her equilibrium. Peter had dredged up emotions in her which she had kidded herself had been dealt with and banished. Now she admitted to herself that it was far from the case.

As she knelt for the prayers, Callie took deep breaths. She had to get on with her life. She had a new job, a new flat, and the prospect of many new relationships as she got to know the people in the parish. She should be thankful that it was so, thankful that her life was full of promise and possibility. But she couldn't stop thinking that somewhere less than a mile away Adam was probably also at Evensong. And someone else might be at his side.

Jane Stanford hadn't gone to Evensong. No, she'd been left behind to prepare supper. Offering hospitality was one of the accepted duties of a vicar's wife, and she had never resented that. Throughout Brian's ministry Jane had always been conscious of her privileged position at his side, embracing the obligations that position brought with it: she had, in her day, taught Sunday School, run the Mothers' Union, headed up the flower rota, made countless cups of tea and produced endless traybakes and scones. She had edited the parish magazine, typed it herself and duplicated it on an old hand-cranked Gestetner machine in the days before high-speed photocopiers. She had typed Brian's sermons, often improving them subtly, hop-

ing that he wouldn't notice. Many times through the years she had even been a surrogate vicar, listening to the whispered confessions and guilty tears of people who were too afraid or in awe of the vicar to speak to him; everyone knew that something told to the vicar's wife would reach his ears, and no one else's.

It was a high calling, that of a vicar's wife. There were moments, of course, of being fed up with it all, of wishing that one's home were one's own and not an extension of the parish hall. There were times when the burden of making the meagre vicar's stipend stretch to the end of the month, to put food on the table for her family every night and still eke out enough money for everything else, seemed impossible – for unlike many clergy wives, it was a point of honour with Jane that she had never worked outside the home. But when Jane had met Brian all those years ago, when he was an ordinand and she embarked on secretarial training, she had determined from the start that it was what she wanted: to be married to Brian, and to have all that came with being the wife of a clergyman in the Church of England. She had never, for more than a passing moment, regretted that choice.

Tonight, though, Jane was feeling a bit low. She told herself that it wasn't really surprising. She had worked flat out over the past few weeks as the boys prepared to go off to university, making sure that they had everything they would need to take with them and that it was all packed properly and in a fit state. Buying all those last-minute things for them had stretched the budget, as well. It had always been one of the difficulties of having twins, she recognised: the demands on the budget had inevitably come in twos. When Charlie needed new trainers, Simon always needed them as well, and the same was true now of tuition fees and books. For the first time in her married life, Jane had thought seriously about getting a job to fund the expensive proposition of having two boys going up to Oxford.

But when she'd broached the subject to Brian, he'd been horrified. 'You can't do that *now*,' he'd said. 'Not after all these years. I mean, who would look after *me*?' Then he'd given her a hug. 'We'll manage somehow, Janey. *You'll* manage. You always do.'

So that had been that. And she *had* managed.

Jane had always prided herself on being able to produce a reasonable

meal for visitors at short notice; it was something she was called upon to do with some regularity. Usually this wasn't a problem, with judicious use of things from the freezer and a stock of tins in the larder. At the moment, though, the larder and the freezer were both a bit depleted. It wasn't very sensitive of Brian to have invited the new curate to supper tonight, of all nights. She couldn't very well give the woman beans on toast.

There was a packet of spaghetti in the larder. But what to put on it? Jane got down on her knees and pulled things out of the freezer. At the back she made a serendipitous discovery: a container labelled 'Bolognese sauce'. It was a legacy from a parish supper, some months ago now, when they had ambitiously over-catered; the left-overs had been prodigious in quantity. 'You take it, Jane,' the other women on the catering team had urged. 'You have those boys to feed, and Father Brian.' So Jane had filled a shelf of the freezer with little containers, and they'd eaten Bolognese until the boys were sick of it. This one little remnant of that bounty had escaped undetected, and now was welcomed by Jane as a positive Godsend. Never mind that it might not be at its best. There was a nub of cheese in the fridge, and if she grated that over the top perhaps it wouldn't be noticed.

'Do you fancy a pint, mate?' Neville Stewart paused by the desk of his colleague Mark Lombardi.

'Great, Nev.' Mark looked up at him, distracted from his paperwork for just an instant. 'I've nearly finished.'

They were among a dwindling number of policemen left at the station, early on Sunday evening. Neither of them was scheduled to be there, but both had come in for their own reasons, and now it seemed the right time for them to call a halt to their activities and leave together for some liquid refreshment.

Neville Stewart was an Irishman by birth. His name, with its roots so strongly on the eastern rather than the western side of the Irish Sea, was a source of mild amusement, sometimes hilarity, amongst the English. But in Dublin, where he'd grown up, it was little short of an incitement to riot. 'I can't tell you how many times I've had the crap beat out of me because of my name,' he'd once told Mark. 'Very early on, I knew there were only two

things I could do about it: change my name, or leave Ireland.' London had proved a safe haven for him, and in spite of the soft Irish lilt in his voice which he'd retained, and his predeliction for drinking Guinness, he had assimilated very well. Now in his late thirties, he had risen through the ranks of the CID to become a Detective Inspector, and a very good one, with responsibility for major crimes.

Mark Lombardi was a few years younger – just over thirty – and a Detective Sergeant whose speciality in the CID was as a Family Liaison Officer. He was London born and bred, though both of his parents had come from Italy, and he was proud of his Italian roots.

There was a natural affinity between the two, not least because of their non-English backgrounds, and they often had a drink together when their schedules permitted it. These drinking sessions sometimes went on for rather longer than intended but, unlike most of their colleagues, neither of them had anyone at home waiting for them – no wife, no girlfriend – so it didn't matter, as long as they were in fit condition for their next stint of duty.

The pub to which they regularly repaired was an anonymous sort of place without a great deal of character, but it possessed the virtue of being close to the station, and the beer was a few pence cheaper than in the more upmarket pubs. Besides, they offered Guinness on draught.

'My turn to buy, I think,' Neville announced. Mark found a table, and Neville joined him a few minutes later, balancing a pint of Guinness in one hand and a Peroni in the other, trying hard not to lose a precious drop of either.

'So,' said Neville, after they'd quaffed the first few refreshing mouthfuls, 'I haven't seen you since you got back from Italy. Had a good time, did you?'

'Fine. I always enjoy Venice.'

'And your granny was in good health?'

'Remarkable,' said Mark. 'She's in her eighties, but she's very fit. She still does her own shopping every day.'

'She's still on at you to find yourself a wife?'

Mark shrugged and nodded. 'She won't give up until I do. And of course she keeps trying to help me out – every time I'm there, she dredges

up some young women and makes sure I meet them. It's my duty, she says. My duty to *la famiglia*.'

'Sounds just like my granny,' Neville commiserated. 'Though in Ireland no one expects a bloke to get married before he's forty. It's well known that the sap doesn't start to rise till then.'

Mark, in the process of sipping his beer, sputtered and choked. When he'd recovered, he pointed out to his friend, 'You don't have much time left, then. You'll be forty in a couple of years. Then no more excuses.'

'Don't remind me,' Neville groaned.

Neville wasn't averse to women: far from it. On the contrary, he was well known amongst his colleagues for his success with the ladies. Blessed with more than his fair share of charm, and above average looks to boot, he could have had his pick of any number of women. But he preferred to sample their goods – freely offered – rather than buy into anything permanent. 'I'm just not ready to settle down,' was his mantra. So far he'd managed to get away with it.

'Let's change the subject,' said Neville, knocking back half his glass in one swallow. 'What were you doing at your desk this afternoon? I thought you were off until tomorrow.'

'As a matter of fact, it had something to do with my trip to Italy.' Mark followed suit and took a long drink, aware that the next round was his and that Neville would soon be ready for a second Guinness. 'Tying up some paperwork. Turns out there was some bloke on the plane who had bumped off his wife in Venice, and thought he'd get away with it.'

'Oh, I heard something about that.' Neville assumed a look of professional interest.

'The usual story, it seems. Clearing the way for another woman. His Italian girlfriend came back with him on his wife's passport.'

'Doesn't sound like Immigration were doing their job,' grumbled Neville.

'I'm sure they'll catch hell for it, if that's any consolation.'

'So how did he get caught? If they made it through Immigration?'

Mark drained his glass. 'That's a long story, best left for the next pint. I'll get you one, shall I?'

Evensong was over; in the vestry, vicar and curate took off their surplices and cassocks. 'Shall I go home and change?' Callie asked.

'Mufti? Oh, no need for that,' Brian Stanford assured her. 'Just come along with me. Jane will be waiting.'

It was only a short distance, but the wind was blowing cold, and Callie didn't have the benefit of a clerical cloak like the one Brian wore; she was glad to reach the vicarage, with its promise of warmth.

The warmth, though, was merely relative, as the heating had only just come on. Brian apologised, adding, 'If it were up to Jane, we wouldn't put the heating on at all until the end of October, no matter what the weather. She tells me that I have no idea how expensive heating oil is.' He shook his head. 'And I'm afraid she's right – I don't worry about things like that. I leave it all to her.'

Jane appeared at that moment, proffering a small bowl of crisps. 'Would you like a drink, Miss Anson?' she asked. 'Wine? Sherry? Fruit juice?'

Brian intervened before Callie could reply. 'I'll open a bottle of wine, shall I?'

'Yes, all right.' Jane sat on the sofa, and indicated that Callie should take one of the arm chairs.

'It's so kind of you to have me,' Callie said impulsively. 'I do hope it hasn't caused you any trouble.'

'It's our pleasure, Miss Anson,' said Jane, without warmth.

'Oh, please – do call me Callie. Everyone does.'

Jane seemed to be inspecting her. 'An unusual name.'

She was used to explaining it. 'My given name is Caroline,' she said. 'But when we were small my younger brother couldn't say his "r"s. So I've been called Callie ever since.'

Brian came through from the kitchen with a bottle of red wine and three glasses. 'Here we are,' he announced, beaming jovially. 'This will warm us up.'

'Miss Anson – Callie – was just telling me about the origins of her interesting name,' Jane addressed him, then turned back to Callie. 'So do you have other family? Other brothers and sisters?'

'No, just the one brother. There are four years between us, but we've

always been quite close. He lives just across the river, in Southwark.'

'And your parents?'

Callie felt as if she were being given the third degree. 'My father died a few years ago. He was a Civil Servant, in Whitehall. My mother still lives in London.' She made an effort to deflect further questions. 'I understand that you have two sons.'

Jane softened visibly. 'Yes. Twins. Very clever boys, both of them. They've just gone up to Oxford for their first term. Charlie is reading Theology at Oriel, and Simon is reading Law at Christ Church.'

'You must be very proud,' said Callie. That, at least, was a safe thing to say.

'Oh, yes,' Brian agreed, handing Callie a glass and sitting down beside his wife on the sofa. 'Cheers, Callie.' He raised his glass. 'Here's to a successful partnership at All Saints.'

'Cheers.'

Jane didn't look overjoyed at the toast; she raised her eyebrows at Brian and took a sip of the wine. 'I've always looked on our marriage as a partnership,' she said to Callie, almost belligerently.

'And so it is,' Brian assured her, draping an arm across her shoulders and giving her a casual squeeze. 'You know I couldn't possibly manage without you, my dear.'

Callie observed them, middle-aged and content with each other: Brian, with his sandy, receding hair and prominent nose, and Jane, the almost quintessential vicar's wife, chunky in her ancient Laura Ashley skirt, round-faced, bespectacled and with her dark hair skinned back from her face into a lank pony tail. A team, dependent on each other. What sort of partnership would she and Adam have had in another fifteen or twenty years? She didn't want to think about that …

But Jane was on to the next question. 'What did you do before you were ordained? Brian went to Theological College straight from university, of course – everyone did in those days. But I believe that nowadays they like their ordinands to have another career first.'

Callie gratefully turned her thoughts from Adam. 'To tell you the truth, when I was at university, ordination was something that never crossed my mind. I wasn't much of a church-goer, in fact. I wasn't even very much

aware of the battles over the ordination of women.'

Brian seemed interested. 'What happened?'

'Well, I followed my father into the Civil Service. It was a good career. I enjoyed it. Then…well, then my father got sick. Cancer.' Now she was back on painful ground; she told the rest as quickly and non-emotively as she could: how during his illness she had come to know and respect the hospital chaplain, Frances Cherry; how the respect had grown into a deep friendship; how, after her father's death, Frances had helped her to discover her vocation to the priesthood and put her on the path leading to ordination.

'So that's it,' she said. 'Before I met Frances, I didn't even know that women could be priests. Afterwards, I knew that I had to be one.'

And then, with the second glass of wine, came the question that she should have been expecting, but wasn't.

'Have you set a date yet?' asked Jane.

'A date?' Callie echoed, not yet comprehending.

'Your wedding. Brian told me that you're engaged to a fellow ordinand. He's the new curate at Christ Church, I believe?'

The question struck Callie like a physical blow, and for a moment she was breathless with the pain of it. Of course Jane would have known about Adam, she realised. She'd told Brian all about him at their initial interview, had explained that it was one reason why she was so interested in serving her curacy at All Saints, in the adjoining parish to Adam's. In a year or so, she'd told him, when they were both settled into their parishes, they would get married.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, her head hammered. If only…If only Adam hadn't gone on that particular parish placement …

The silence stretched out painfully, as Callie searched both for her voice and for something to say. The voice, when she spoke, was less wobbly than she'd feared it might be. 'I'm afraid that's not going to happen,' she said. 'It's been called off. We…changed our minds.'

'Oh,' said Jane, narrowing her eyes. 'Oh, I'm sorry.'

Somehow Callie got through the evening. She was going to rub along just fine with Brian, she decided – he was quite sweet, if a bit wet. And Jane?

Fortunately, she thought, she wasn't going to have to work with Jane, at least not directly. Jane had been perfectly civil to her, but there was something there that she just couldn't quite put her finger on …

Letting herself back into her flat, Callie was unexpectedly assailed by a feeling of desolation at its emptiness. It was silly – she had lived alone before, and that had never bothered her. Now, though, she longed for some living creature – a dog, or even a bird or a goldfish – to welcome her back. Fighting back a lump in her throat, she went to her phone and checked for messages. There were three, according to her call minder.

Not Adam, she told herself, while hoping against hope that one of them might be. Even if he weren't ringing to say he'd changed his mind and seen the error of his ways, even if he just wanted to say hello and see how she was doing …

The first message was from Frances Cherry. 'I just wanted to know how your first Sunday went,' her friend said. 'And I need to have a word with you about the Deanery Chapter meeting. Give me a ring in the morning, if you have a chance. I'll be at home until late morning.'

The second was from Peter. 'Good to see you this afternoon, Sis,' he said. Odd, thought Callie – not for the first time – that the person who had been responsible for her nickname never called her anything but Sis. 'Hope I wasn't too much of a wet blanket. Give me a ring whenever. And by the way, you're better off without what's-his-name, in my humble opinion. I never did think he was good enough for you.'

Callie supposed that was meant to make her feel better. Holding her breath, she pressed the button to listen to the final message. She exhaled slowly as she realised that the male voice wasn't Adam's. 'This is Mark,' it said, then paused. 'You know – Mark, Marco, from the Venice flight. You gave me the tip about Mr Hawkins and his wife, and I thought you'd like to know what's been happening. Here's my number.'

Callie wrote it down, with an unexpected flutter in her chest.