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The Darkest Hour

Written by Barbara Erskine

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Barbara Erskine

The Darkest Hour



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Prologue

March

Glancing into the driving mirror Laurence Standish frowned uneasily as he swung the old Citroën estate off the main road and headed into a side turning which wound down steeply through coppiced woods towards the valley bottom. The sleek black Ford which had been sitting on his tail for the last twenty miles or so had followed him and was drawing closer.

He had first noticed the car coming out of Chichester. It was close behind him. Too close, and he was growing increasingly irritated. Perhaps he shouldn't have turned off the main road. He was lost now, well off the beaten track, threading his way up and down winding lanes, ever mindful of the car still there in his rear view mirror.

He was approaching a crossroads now. On impulse he spun the Citroën's steering wheel to the left at the last moment without signalling, feeling the suspension sway and adjust as the road climbed steeply again, becoming narrower and more potholed as it crested the rise and plunged once more into the woods.

The black car followed him. If anything it had closed the gap between them slightly.

He didn't recognise the car and he couldn't make out the face of the driver but there was no doubt at all that he was being harassed in an increasingly dangerous fashion. He had no idea why. Was it road rage? Had he offended him by pulling out in front of him or something? He wasn't aware of doing anything which anyone could take offence at. Did the guy want to rob him? Did he want his car? He doubted it! He fumbled in his pocket for his mobile with the vague idea of calling the police and cursed, remembering that he had thrown it into the battered old briefcase which at this moment lay on the back seat with the surprise birthday present he had picked up for Lucy. A signpost flashed past. He couldn't see how far it was to the next village, but once there he resolved to pull up outside the first shop he reached and go inside.

The car was even closer now and it was flashing its lights.

Supposing there was something wrong. For a moment he hesitated, taking his foot off the accelerator and as though sensing his hesitation the driver behind him pulled out to try and overtake. Still flashing its lights the nose of the Ford drew level. The road was narrow and winding and there was a sharp left hand bend ahead.

'Oh shit!' Laurence stamped on his brake. The car behind him was trying to force its way past. It swerved towards him and there was a scrape of metal, followed by a louder grinding noise as the wheels of the two vehicles locked. Instinctively Laurence pulled his car towards the left, praying there was room for him to manoeuvre. His Citroën's wheels spun on the muddy verge, then gripped and flung the car into the dense hazel brake. Laurence was aware for a fraction of a second of the tangle of splintering branches thrashing against the windscreen, then beyond, a strip of woodland sloping steeply down towards a stream at the bottom of an area of rolling hillside.

The Citroën banked sharply, racing faster down the hill.

Laurence was stabbing frantically for the brake. Shocked and disorientated, he fought to hold the steering wheel. The last thing he saw was the huge oak tree heading straight for him.

The car reared up momentarily as it struck the oak, then it slid sideways in a cascade of shredded bark and started to roll. At the foot of the slope it hit another tree crushing the bonnet like a concertina as it came at last to a stop. There were several moments of silence as the ruptured fuel lines spilled their contents onto the hot exhaust, then with a roar the car burst into flames.

The driver of the Ford had pulled up at the roadside ten yards ahead. He climbed out and ran back, standing by the torn and broken trees, looking down at the burning wreck. That was not supposed to happen.

'Shit!'

Unknowingly repeating Laurence's last word he watched in horror as the car exploded, sending a ball of flame and smoke up into the windless air.

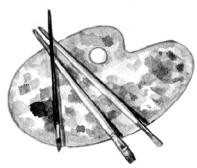
For a moment he stood completely still, then swiftly he turned away and ran back to the Ford. It was scraped and dented but still drivable. He climbed in. As he drove away from the scene he pulled the black balaclava off over his head and tucked it into the door pocket.

Nothing in the car would be recoverable.

But no one was going to survive that inferno.

Shit.

1



Three months later

Lucy Standish was in the kitchen of the small flat above the art gallery in Westgate, Chichester, an open letter in her hand. She had read it twice already, trying in her own mind to make sense of the contents.

> Re: Your application for a grant to research the life of war artist and portraitist Evelyn Lucas, with a view to producing a biography and definitive history of her career:
>
> I am pleased to inform you that your application for a grant from the Women's Art Fund has been accepted . . .

She had been accepted. She had been given the grant. Lucy put down the letter and walked across to the window. The gallery was part of a terrace of narrow period houses, each one different, some two storey, some three. Hers was three, with a small attic floor under a roof of ancient tiles. From the kitchen, on the first floor, she could look down at the pocket handkerchief back garden she and Laurence had created together from the builders' rubble which

had filled the small yard when they first took over the gallery four years before. The short paved path was lined with flowers now, the small lilac tree they had planted had blossomed. There were butterflies everywhere; she could see them hanging from her pots of lavender and from the clinging roses on the fence.

It was months since she had applied for the grant. She and Laurence had discussed the project endlessly, wondering how she could take time out from the gallery to research a book. It was their part-time assistant, Robin, who had suggested applying for some sort of bursary; Robin who had turned up the obscure organisation which had now come up trumps. Robin who had made it all seem possible. Then, before Larry died.

Now it was too late.

She glanced round. On one side of the first-floor kitchen was their living room, and on the far side behind a closed door was the studio where Laurence had worked. It was somewhere she could hardly bear to go, even now. It was in there they had discussed Evelyn Lucas with so much excitement when they had realised that for all her fame there were no books about her, very little research, hardly any information at all; it was there they stood together in front of Evelyn's self-portrait and it was there, in front of the painting, that Laurence had bent to take Lucy in his arms and kiss her hard on the mouth before running down the stairs and going out to the car.

It was the last time she had seen him. Taking a deep breath she walked across to the studio door and opened it. The portrait of Evelyn still stood on the easel where it had been on the day Laurence died. He had been about to start restoring it when he had had the notion, he hadn't told her why, that he would like a second opinion on its authenticity. He had contacted Professor David Solomon at the Royal Academy and arranged to take the picture up to London on that fateful day at the end of March. Two hours before he was due to leave the professor's secretary had phoned to say David Solomon had flu and they had postponed the meeting.

So why had he gone out anyway? She remembered his smile, his mysterious wink as he tapped his nose, his last words 'I won't be long'. He hadn't taken the painting with him after all, and obviously he wasn't going to meet David Solomon, so where was he going? The question had circled endlessly round in her head. For a while she had wondered if he had gone to buy her birthday present. That might have explained the wink. But that would have meant he had died on a trip to do something for her and she couldn't live with that thought. Her birthday had come and gone only days after the crash and she had tried to put the idea out of her head. She would never know now.

The professor had written to her several weeks later with his condolences and had suggested that one day, when she was ready, perhaps he could come down and view the portrait here at the gallery. She had not replied, though she suspected Robin had.

Dear Robin. She must start taking control of her life again. It had to go on. And she had to face the fact that almost certainly she could no longer afford him; probably no longer afford to go on running the gallery even with the bursary to back up her income. Glancing into the mirror on the wall by the door she sighed. She had lost a lot of weight over the last three months. Her face, always thin with high angular cheekbones, was positively haggard, her dark eyes enormous in contrast to her pale skin. She had raked her long straight dark brown hair back into an unflattering ponytail which Larry would have hated.

The studio was in darkness, the blinds pulled down over the north-facing skylight windows. The room ran the full depth of the house front to back and the front windows looked out over the street below. She pulled the blinds up allowing the clear north light to flood in at the back, and resolutely she faced the easel. Evelyn Lucas, if it was indeed her, had painted herself sitting perched on a farm gate. She was young, perhaps in her early twenties, and dressed in fawn jodhpurs with a blue sweater knotted round her shoulders over a blue and white gingham shirt, her honey-blond hair loose and wild in the wind. She had

dark blue eyes which looked straight out of the portrait, eyes which were engaging, challenging even, daring the viewer to do, what?

At the corner of the painting, a patch of sky with torn grey clouds and fragments of blue behind her shoulder, there was a clean area where Laurence had started to remove some of the grime which covered the surface. Lucy moved closer and stared at the corner. There had to be something there he had spotted which had caught his attention and made him doubt the picture's provenance. But what?

'You OK?' Robin's voice behind her made her jump. He was standing in the doorway. She hadn't heard him let himself into the gallery below.

She nodded. 'Do you know what it was Larry saw here which made him think it wasn't an Evelyn Lucas after all?'

Robin came to stand beside her. 'No idea.'

They gazed at the painting in silence for several seconds. That it was of Evelyn had been almost beyond doubt. There were photos of her on the record and she certainly looked extraordinarily like them. Lawrence had picked up the painting at an auction only a few weeks before his death. It had been catalogued as 'Portrait of Unknown Woman', but when he brought it home in triumph he told Lucy that he suspected that it might be a missing Lucas from the early 1940s. It was being sold by the executors of an old lady who had died without close heirs and its past was, as far as he knew, a mystery. In Larry speak, he took a punt and bought it for a song.

Robin folded his arms and squinted at it. 'Whoever painted it, I think it's lovely.'

She smiled. 'So do I.'

Robin glanced at her. 'Sure you're OK?'

'Why go out if the professor has cancelled?' she had begged. She hated it when he went away on his own. But he had insisted he had to go out. And he had refused to let her go with him.

When the police knocked on the door a few hours after he had left

she didn't believe them. What was he doing on a remote lane on the way to Petersfield? Why had he turned off the main road? Where had he been going?

They never found out exactly what had happened. He had skidded, that much was clear from the tyre tracks, and there was evidence that another car had been in collision with his, but the fire damage had been too great to discover much more. He had probably been killed by the impact with the first tree. No other vehicle had shown up on the database with damage which would correlate to the paint marks which had survived. It was black, and probably a Ford. How many black Fords were there in the south of England? Lucy did not care. No amount of forensic evidence would bring Larry back, her perfect, adored, talented husband.

She turned away from the painting and looked at Robin. Short, plump, slightly balding and with the biggest and best smile of anyone she had ever known, Robin Cassell had been her mainstay and her rock for the last three months. When Larry was alive he had come in to run the gallery two or three mornings a week to allow them some time in the studio and the freedom to go to auctions and on buying trips around the country. When the gallery reopened three weeks after Larry's funeral it had been at Robin's suggestion, and he had started coming in every day. 'Just until you are back on your feet,' he had said, giving her a hug.

Guessing at her cash flow problem – neither her parents, nor Larry's were in a position to help her financially – and knowing Larry had made no will, he had refused to let her pay him. But that situation could not go on. However much he wanted to help her she could not let him continue to work for nothing. He didn't need the money; he was, as he mockingly put it, a trust fund kid, which meant he had inherited a large house from his parents which had been sold for development. Besides that, he worked on and off with his life partner, Phil, who ran a bookshop in the centre of town, but even so, her conscience had been beginning to worry her. Until now.

'I've got the grant, Robin,' she said quietly. She turned

back to the picture. 'I had the letter this morning. What am I going to do?'

'You are going to write the book, ducky.' Robin smiled. 'You owe that to Lol. And to our Evelyn here.'

'I don't know that I can. Not without him.' She blinked back the sudden tears so close all the time, so near the surface.

'You can. And you will. And it will be up to you to prove if this is a painting of her, by her, or not.'

'Professor Solomon would tell us that.'

'Maybe.' Robin stood back, still staring at the picture. 'Maybe not.'

'Did you tell him not to come, Robin?'

'I said we would be in touch when we were ready.'

'Thank you.'

'So, it's up to you, Luce. Take the money and start researching. Leave the gallery to me, at least for a while. You know I love looking after it.' Robin turned away and walked back into the kitchen. 'Did you have any breakfast this morning?' he called over his shoulder.

She followed him through and closed the door on the studio. 'I wasn't hungry.'

'Well I am, so I am going to make us some toast with lashings of marmalade and some coffee and then you are going to start planning how you are going to approach your research. OK?'

She gave a wan smile. 'Maybe,' she echoed.

'No maybe about it. You've got to start living again and this will gently lead you out into the world. You know Uncle Robin is right.'

She walked over and picked the letter up from the worktop where she had dropped it earlier. She read it through again and then she looked up at him. 'I'll think about it, OK?'

The evenings were the worst. When the sign on the gallery door had been turned over to read 'Closed' and Robin had gone home

to Phil, and she was alone in the flat. At first there had been people around. Her family, friends, Larry's family, they had all been there for her, but slowly their visits had become fewer and further between. Neither she nor Larry had brothers or sisters; her parents and Larry's lived miles away and in some ways she had been glad of that. She needed time to be alone, to think and to grieve.

Tonight was different. She waved Robin out of the door and locked up behind him then she climbed the stairs back to the flat and went straight into the studio.

She stood for a long time staring at the picture, taking in the detail of the composition, the position of the young woman, just a girl, really, in the landscape, the detail of the countryside around her, then of Evelyn herself, if it was Evelyn, her clothes, her eyes and hair, her expression. It was strange. The more one looked at it, the more hostile that expression seemed to become. She was good-looking – beautiful even, but there was a rawness about her, a violence in the brushstrokes which was unsettling. Robin was right. The painting contained a mystery of some sort. And surely it was a mystery Larry would want her to solve. She shivered. Were it not for the fact that the professor in London had cancelled the meeting the painting would have been in the car with Larry. It would have been destroyed. Perhaps providence had saved it for a reason.

She moved over to the table and switched on the lamp. No doubt Larry had thousands of digital photos of the painting on line, but he had also made several prints, much enlarged, pinned to a board on the wall. She stared at the close-ups of the paint textures, then she turned back to the painting. Scrabbling round in the tray on the table beside the easel she picked up Larry's magnifying glass. Ignoring the sudden pain which swept over her as she took it in her hand and realised that he had been the last person to touch it, she held it up to the area of the picture which he had started to clean and scrutinised the paint. She could see nothing special. Just sky and clouds. Shaking her head she put down the magnifying glass and surveyed the

selection of bottles of liquids and gels on his tray. Conservation liquids, solvents, acetone, turps, they were all there. Hesitantly she picked up one of the bottles of cleaning emulsion. Pulling up the high stool on which Larry perched when he was working at the easel, and reaching for a cotton bud, she dipped it into the fluid and gently stroked the edge of the clean patch where Larry had made his first tentative efforts. The cotton came away covered in dirt. And paint. She frowned. Paint? She felt a moment of panic. If this was an Evelyn Lucas it was potentially very valuable. Perhaps valuable enough to solve her money problems forever should she ever sell it. She must not damage it. She looked at the picture again and then she saw it, so obvious when you looked closely. A section of the sky had been over-painted. It had been done skilfully, but obviously at some point after the original paint had dried. She moved closer and worked on another small section, her tongue protruding slightly between her teeth, removing the newer paint, acutely aware that Larry would be furious with her; that working on the painting was something for a trained expert like him, not for a rank amateur, but she couldn't stop. The over-painting was resinous and smooth. It was coming off relatively easily leaving the texture beneath it untouched.

Suddenly she caught her breath in excitement. Something was emerging from the clouds. Behind Evelyn, if it was Evelyn, on the far side of the gate on which she was perched, there was another figure, a figure which had been completely obliterated, a figure in the uniform of the Royal Air Force, a young man with fair hair and bright blue eyes.

Lucy let out a whistle. 'So, Evelyn. You had an admirer.' She put down her swabs and the bottle and sat back, staring at the canvas. 'And you didn't want anyone to know about him.'

She had been sitting there working for two hours and she was stiff when at last she screwed the lids back on the bottles on the work table and stood up, pushing back the stool. The silence

of the room had become oppressive and for the first time that evening she became aware once more of how empty the place was. The daylight had faded and beyond the circle of the spotlights the room was growing shadowy. Somewhere outside she heard a small aircraft flying low over the rooftops. The deep throb of its engine grew louder. She glanced towards the window, then back at the easel.

In the painting the figure of the young airman was clear now, standing behind Evelyn, his hand on her shoulder, his eyes gazing past her out of the picture. Who were they looking at? Not someone they welcomed, surely. Both looked angry and defensive. Only the touch of his fingers on her sweater was gentle. Lucy could sense the reassurance there. And the love.

By next morning her excitement had returned and she showed the painting to Robin.

'That is extraordinary,' he said. 'We had no idea he was there. Do you think Lol had spotted him? Do you know if he had the painting X-rayed?'

Lucy shook her head. 'I think that must be what he was going to discuss with Professor Solomon. He took lots of photos, some in close-up. He must have sensed something because there was no sign of it. None at all. I looked with the magnifying glass. It was only when I began to clean it that I spotted something underneath.' She turned to face him and for the first time in ages he saw the spark of excitement in her eyes.

'I've made my mind up, Robin. I'm going to try and find out more. I owe it to Larry, you're right, and I owe it to Evelyn as well. I want to know who this young man was and why he was painted out.'