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Opening Extract from...

You Think You Know Me

Written by Clare Chase

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You Think You Know Me

Clare Chase

Extract



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Chapter One

It was 8 p.m. when I walked into Sebastian Rice's gallery that Halloween. I'd come late for the event, hoping I could lose myself in the crowd.

Given the option, I would have avoided the private view altogether, but there was no wriggling out of it. The exhibition was opening in just over a week and I needed to get my article written in advance. I was meant to be whetting people's appetites. Radley Summers, Seb's exhibitions manager, had been enthusiastic. 'It'll be a whole different experience to coming along later, with the hordes,' she'd said.

I knew that. It would be a nastier experience, where I would be expected to strut around making intelligent comments about Zachariah Shakespeare's paintings. I'd seen a photograph of one of them beforehand and had been instantly struck dumb.

The work showed a woman and man, standing partly entwined, but where they touched there was decay. He'd painted both whole and rotting flesh perfectly, the peach and cocoa skin tones giving way to sickening blood-red, creeping with the browns and blacks of gangrene. It was horribly graphic. He certainly had talent but, with his taste in subject matter, that wasn't a plus. Still, I would just have to make the best of it.

I was wearing a woollen mini dress – green, to match my eyes – and knee-high boots so I wouldn't feel too much like me. Instead, I hoped the costume would instil confidence. I just had to play a part for the evening and then I could escape again. Unfortunately the boots had to have towering heels, to bring me up to normal adult height, which meant I'd be in agony before home time. It was always the same; my mother used to call me her little fairy child. Having that sort of stature was all well and good when I was eight, but less than ideal now I'd reached maturity.

I waited in the queue for the cloakroom, my coat slung over

one arm. In front of me, a tall woman with spiked blonde hair was rattling on to a tiny woman in leather and four-inch stiletto heels. Watching her mouth open and close at such a speed was mesmeric.

The effect of my own clothes was ebbing away already; the brief feeling of alrightness seeping out of me as though I'd sprung a small but definite leak. The stupid thing was, I didn't really need to talk to anyone if I didn't want to. I could just soak up the atmosphere and then leave again. I had my interview with Shakespeare booked for the following week, so I could probably even avoid him, for now.

But the mad flurry of conversation in the room left me feeling conspicuous: a small isolated pool of silence in amongst the carrying, confident voices that filled the air.

The man after me in the line had just met a friend. They embraced, with lots of kissing on both cheeks: 'Haven't seen you since that awful do of Simeon's', 'God! Don't talk about it. Been looking forward to this for ages though … Did you see Désirée's here? We'll catch up with her in a moment. I did hear she was at that party Shakespeare threw a week ago … you know, the one that made the nationals?'

A woman with a nose ring, black mini dress and fishnets took my coat and gave me a skull and crossbones tag with the number ninety-four on it. There was no more queuing to do, and barring a sneaky spot of loitering in the ladies' loos there was nothing for it but to go and join the melee.

A waiter put a tray of red fizzy drinks under my nose.

I raised an eyebrow and he leant forward. 'It's just Cava with food dye in it. The purple ones have got Pernod in, if you want something stronger.'

'This'll do fine thanks.' All the same, I decided to keep an eye out for the purple ones, just in case.

I paused next to a group by one of the canvases and listened to their talk.

'… epitomises the relationship between love and death,' a man was saying, indicating the painting with an outstretched hand. It was the same one I'd seen in the photograph before I came.

Seb had been right to have the private view on Halloween. Zachariah Shakespeare's paintings fitted the occasion perfectly. Each picture was lit from above by a clear, white light, but around the artworks lamps glowed dark red and orange. Some of the bulbs had been embedded in a false floor and everywhere they cast strange shadows, making the faces of the visitors almost as sinister as the paintings. Wherever I looked shapes distorted, heads seemed to elongate and lights danced. I made my way round the room, taking in canvases with titles such as *Road Kill* and *Autopsy*. Another, *For All Time*, was created entirely in shades of white and grey and stood out all the more because it left the gore behind. It showed a woman encased in ice, her face devoid of expression.

Not all of the guests were repelled. One man was so enthusiastic his companion seemed almost flattened by the force of what he had to say. I grinned in her direction but she didn't notice.

Then, looking just over her shoulder, I realised someone else was watching the scene too: a dark-haired man, tall and broad, lounging against a pillar. After a moment he raised his eyes, caught mine and cocked an eyebrow. He held my gaze for a moment before moving off to another part of the room.

A waiter darted past with a plate of crudités. He looked edgy. At least I was having a better time than he was. It would be tense downstairs in the kitchens where Alicia was no doubt in full flow, spitting out orders. My cousin was scary enough at the best of times, and if I ever found myself quailing at the prospect of my own work, I could console myself that it couldn't be as bad as working for her. Lodging with her was enough of a challenge to the nerves.

The gallery was stifling. The windows had been covered with reflective film – almost entirely opaque – which increased the claustrophobic atmosphere. Over at one end of the room I could see a way out. Time to investigate.

The swing doors closed quietly behind me, though they didn't do much to keep out the din beyond. The bliss of finding myself on a landing was almost overwhelming, and would have been complete if I hadn't known I'd have to go back in again.

My green dress contrasted my auburn hair nicely, but it was way too hot. I could feel myself becoming auburn in the face as well.

I glanced over my shoulder to check for onlookers and then rubbed at the wool where it was irritating my neck. The gentle scratching gave some relief, so I scrabbled away some more, aware I was probably leaving a mark. Never mind. I would let it fade before I faced anyone again.

I leant against the landing windowsill, bending my head forwards until it touched the cool glass. The smell of gloss paint filled my nostrils; Seb had spent a fortune recently, doing the place up. Or at least a fortune to anyone else. Small change to him.

Outside, a patch of the Thames glittered in the lights that ran along a jetty. Nearer, in the square just below, some party-goers straggled by, leaning in against each other and stumbling sideways. One was wearing some kind of monster mask. From a distance, the face looked like molten wax, reminding me of the people I'd just left in the exhibition hall, with their freakishly up-lit cheekbones.

'Had enough?'

The voice made me jump so badly I knocked my head against the glass. Turning, I saw the man who'd caught my eye earlier. The light of the landing revealed a five o'clock shadow. His ruffled hair contrasted with his suit, but fitted with the sleep-

deprived look. Still, there was a twinkle in his blue eyes.

I suddenly realised I'd been sizing him up so thoroughly I'd forgotten to speak. My embarrassment must have shown, but luckily he misread it.

'You look guilty,' he said. 'Are you meant to be in there for work?'

I nodded. 'I'm interviewing the artist in a couple of days.'

'And you don't fancy chatting to someone you suspect might be a latent serial killer? Don't worry. His publicist will have the answers you need. Contact with Shakespeare should be minimal.'

I noticed he had a small scar just by his left eye, but pulled my attention back to the matter in hand. 'You've met him?'

'Lawrence has, my brother. He's an art dealer, but he had to be with a client tonight so I'm here in his place. What will you write about the paintings, do you think?'

I shook my head. 'God knows. They're brilliantly done of course, but I can't wait to get away from them.'

'Sounds like a fair comment. Shakespeare will probably love it. I get the impression he enjoys repulsing people.'

He moved closer to me.

I was very conscious of his nearness and it took me a moment to think of something to say. 'I still haven't met him. I assumed he'd be in evidence.'

'Word is he decked a man outside a restaurant at lunchtime and is helping the police with their enquiries.'

'Blimey. And you still reckon it's usually minimal contact as far as he's concerned? One punch and he's off?'

He laughed. 'It's probably just a publicity stunt. It all boosts the hype and avoids the risk of him turning up and demystifying himself. Do you always write about art?'

I shook my head. 'I'm a generalist. I'm cashing in on the fact that I know Sebastian Rice. Shakespeare's his discovery. Unfortunately, I can't seem to work up the required

enthusiasm.'

'Hang on a moment.' He disappeared through the swing doors into the gallery and returned with a couple of the purple drinks. 'Here.' He handed one to me, his fingers touching mine for a second. 'I met someone earlier who told me that after four of these, the paintings seem quite appealing.'

'Sure they didn't say appalling?'

He laughed again and raised his glass to me. 'I'm Max by the way, Max Conran.'

'Anna Morris.'

'So, have you known Sebastian long?'

'Since university. Do you know him?'

'Hardly at all. What's he like?'

'A charmer …' God, after all these years that was still the first thing to come to mind. 'Intelligent … single-minded. I guess you can just about imagine. It's harder to catch up with him now he's such a hotshot, but we were quite close once. I mostly deal with his publicity people these days.'

He had drained his glass and so had I, despite the knowledge of the Pernod. I had a feeling he'd be able to cope with a lot more purple drinks than I would.

Now he moved next to me, his elbow on the windowsill.

I felt light-headed and a familiar warm and unreliable sensation lit up somewhere inside me. I couldn't put it all down to the cocktails.

His blue eyes were the sort you found yourself staring into; lulling you into a false sense of security. He smiled and I realised I'd been looking into them for slightly too long.

'I'm glad I came now,' he said and I turned to look outside again, my cheeks feeling hot.

As he shifted position his shoulder brushed against mine. It had a disturbing effect, as though the patch was newly sensitised. What on earth was happening to me?

He pointed down to the square below. 'There's a bar just off

Tanner's Yard. Let me buy you a drink?'

'Anna Morris?'

I jumped almost as much as I had the first time. The doors from the gallery were far too quiet on their hinges. When I turned my head, a woman I didn't recognise was looking at me, her eyebrows raised. Her smile revealed very white, but uneven, teeth. She had slanting cheekbones, a wide mouth and long eyelashes.

'Yes?'

'Radley Summers, Sebastian's exhibitions manager. We've been speaking on the phone.' She held out a hand and I shook it, noticing the silver ring she wore on her thumb and her neat, unvarnished nails. 'Good to meet you,' she went on. 'Seb pointed you out to me earlier. Look, I'm sorry to butt in, but could I have a quick word? I've got a bit more background for you.'

She turned to Max and he looked over towards me. 'Come and find me when you're ready,' he said and disappeared, back into the orange glow of the gallery.

I spoke into the silence he'd left: 'It's good to meet you face to face. So, you had more information for me?'

'Sorry,' said Radley, 'but that was just an excuse. I thought you might need rescuing.'

'Rescuing?'

'I don't want to freak you out, but Seb has several of us watching the CCTV cameras, looking out for social wheels that need oiling, that kind of thing. It helps this sort of event go off smoothly.'

'And you were watching me and Max Conran?' I suddenly wondered about the scratching earlier. Radley was just the kind of woman I particularly wouldn't like to scratch in front of.

She nodded. 'Seb pointed you out to me quite early on. I wasn't keeping an eye on you specifically of course, but I noticed when you nipped out here for a break. I switched

screens and I could see you were just cooling off. All fine. But I'd already seen that man watching you when you were inside the exhibition.'

'Watching me?'

'It made me uneasy. I mean, it wasn't as though he was just eyeing you up. It was as if … well, as if he was taking notice of what you did. Do you see what I mean?'

I thought it was a pretty fine distinction. Perhaps she just found it unbelievable that someone like Max would be interested in me.

'And then I saw him follow you out here. He stood behind you for ages before he said anything.' She paused. 'I even wondered if he was going to try to steal your bag.'

I must have looked incredulous.

'I know,' she said, 'it's pretty weird. Well, the next bit's even weirder. At that point he took out his phone. And I'd swear he took your photograph.'

'That doesn't make any sense.' I tried to keep the hostility out of my tone.

'I know. I think it's as odd as you do. And in many ways I'd rather not have had to tell you. But given that your safety might be in question, I hope you can see I had no choice.'

I sighed. 'Then what happened?'

'You moved your head and I think he thought you'd seen him. It was only then that he spoke to you.'

'You can't hear what everyone's saying from your control room as well, can you?' I said.

Radley shook her head. 'But what I saw was enough to make Seb think I ought to intervene.'

'I was actually having quite a nice time.' I was finding it hard to match Radley's version of Max Conran with the one I thought I'd experienced. I looked over her shoulder, wondering if he might come back onto the landing if I didn't appear.

'I sent one of the marketing guys off to talk to him,' she said,

spotting the direction of my gaze. 'You don't need to worry. He won't bother you again.' She looked at me, her expression intense. 'He's after something, Anna. I don't know what but, well, there's a bit more to it than I've told you.'

'Go on,' I said.

'When I saw him acting oddly I was particularly disturbed because of who he is. Or rather, who he isn't.'

She wasn't making any sense. 'I know who he is,' I said. 'He introduced himself. He's Max Conran; he said he came in place of his brother.'

'Lawrence Conran, the art dealer?'

I nodded.

She looked back at me, her gaze steady. 'Yes, that's the information he gave when he arrived too. We have cameras recording everyone coming through the doors.'

'You *are* well organised,' I said. It was slightly hard to take.

'We have to be tight on security.' She sighed and then went on: 'And it's handy for Jane too. She's a consultant, working on sales and marketing for us at the moment. She was watching as people came in, so she could see who to target.'

She glanced at me for a second and I'm sure she guessed I disapproved. I found it hard to stop my mouth from taking on a thin, lemon-sucking appearance.

Radley paused for a moment before she said: 'When Jane saw Max Conran's name come up against that guy you were just talking to, she knew at once we'd got an imposter.'

'I'm sorry?'

'He's not Max Conran, Anna. Jane dated Max at the tail end of last year and she was quite positive about it. Whoever he is, he's lied to us. And to you.'

'But you let him stay,' I said eventually.

She nodded. 'There was some question over whether Lawrence Conran was in on the deception. He's very valuable to the gallery; he spends a lot of money with us. You can imagine

Seb didn't want to create a scene unnecessarily. But at the same time, you'll understand why I was monitoring the situation.'

The silence seemed to expand between us. At that point I suppose I ought to have been unnerved, but in fact I mainly felt humiliated. She must have seen how I was behaving around Max, taking his approach at face value.

'I don't know what his game is,' Radley said at last, 'but I'd be inclined to take a cab home tonight, rather than the tube.'

Chapter Two

Ten pounds poorer, I slammed the taxi door shut after me and let myself into Alicia's place. It was one of a row of large town houses in a wide, leafy road. Goodness knows what it would be worth if she ever decided to sell it. It was much too big for her alone, but it had belonged to her parents and I suppose it must have felt too familiar for her to want to leave it. Instead she installed a series of lodgers, or paying guests as she called us, to help fill it up. My quarters were up in the attic and a girl called Sally was occupying the basement.

I paused momentarily to switch on the upstairs landing light and unzip my boots, which were killing me, as anticipated.

'It's not James bloody Bond,' I said aloud, still thinking of the man who wasn't Max and the photograph.

I don't normally talk out loud to myself in public, but I was confident I was alone. Alicia wouldn't be done with the gallery catering for hours, I knew. And as for Sally, well, I'd hardly seen her since I'd moved in, but she definitely didn't seem the sort to be in on a Friday night, least of all on Halloween.

Consequently, I jumped out of my skin when a voice said: 'What's not James Bond?'

I turned to see a glamorous witch with slightly damp hair at the top of the basement stairs. She held a towel in one hand and was wearing the traditional black dress, together with fishnets and purple nail varnish. Sally.

It now occurred to me that it was too early for her to have left to start her evening. Mine had been such a washout that I'd made it home before ten.

I wished I'd kept quiet and got safely back to my room.

'D'you fancy a drink?' she said, with a smile that suddenly made her seem very young and not at all witch-like. 'I'm having one – just to get into the party spirit. It's always a bit freaky

going into a room full of monsters and ghosts without a drink inside you.'

I paused for just a second.

'I've got gin,' she added, as though I might make up my mind according to the quality of refreshments on offer.

'Thanks,' I said, putting my boots back on again and feeling all grown-up and un-Halloweeny.

It was the first time I'd been into her room. In terms of mess, it was spectacular. I pushed two or three pairs of tights, a pair of knickers, a paperback and a packet of cotton wool to one side so I could perch on her sofa. It was only when I took the drink she held out that I realised I'd sat on an open tube of foundation.

'Oh God,' I said, leaping up again. My green dress was safe, but the make-up was oozing out onto a red cotton cushion.

'Oh don't worry about that!' Sally said, rubbing at it with a tissue, making the smear thinner, but more widely spread. 'I get that stuff half-price anyway.'

'Really?'

She nodded. 'I work at Farquharson's. I'm a pedicurist.'

That explained it. Farquharson's: the most exclusive health and beauty spa in London. It was the kind of place where you could spend three hundred pounds to have someone place pebbles down your spine for an afternoon whilst you lay on a couch. Each to their own.

I hoped the cushion belonged to Sally and not Alicia. I reckoned my cousin couldn't have been down to Sally's room, at least, not when I'd been in the house. I'd have definitely heard the screech if she had.

Sally looked at me for a moment, her head on one side. 'I've got a colleague who could sort you out with some great make-up,' she said. 'I love your colouring; auburn hair and honey-coloured freckles are to die for at the moment.'

I was pleased that she thought this, as someone in the know,

although, from what she said, they were only enjoying temporary popularity, which meant I couldn't relax.

'How do you find it, living here?' I asked.

She grinned. 'I thought you might be after the low-down, given that you've only just moved in. Well, I've been here for six months. My uncle knows Alicia and he got it all arranged for me.' She reached for some blusher and started applying it, facing the mirror as she spoke. 'I mean it's a great house, isn't it? All those antiques! And I've never seen so many books … but I guess Alicia and me, we don't quite see eye to eye.'

I was willing to bet that was an understatement.

'She does like everything to be just so, doesn't she?' Sally said.

I nodded. 'At least I was forewarned about that though. She's my cousin, so I've known her since I was tiny. I can remember her coming upstairs to tidy my bedroom with me when I was about six. She must have been around sixteen. She was completely obsessive about order even then.'

'Pretty weird,' said Sally. She had reached the eyeshadow and mascara stage now. 'Sorry – no offence – she is your cousin after all. So where were you living before?'

'With a friend just outside London,' I said. 'But I really needed to move down here for my work.'

And that was how we got on to my so-called career, as well as my evening at the gallery. It was only after the second gin and tonic that she persuaded me to explain the James Bond comment. Once I had, she was delighted; I suppose to an onlooker it was like something out of a soap opera.

'He took your photo?' she said. 'Wow!'

'That's what this woman, Radley Summers, reckons. I can't help feeling she's mistaken though. I mean, why would he?'

'Freaky!' said Sally, as though it was the highlight of her week. 'And, I mean, who is this guy? Why would he be lying to everyone? It's like something out of film or something.'

'First really sexy bloke I've met in ages, and it looks as

though he's a stalker with criminal intent.'

'You haven't got a boyfriend then?' said Sally, turning to the mirror to apply some scarlet lipstick. 'It must be hard getting to meet many people when you're older.'

At that moment there was the sound of a text coming in. Sally lifted up layers of black skirt, rummaging amongst lace and velvet. 'I had to sew in a pocket for my phone and cash. I mean, whoever heard of a witch carrying a handbag?' She found the phone at last and checked the message. 'Greg! He's outside. I'd better shoot.' She grabbed a set of keys and tucked them into the hidden pouch.

As we walked up the stairs to the entrance hall she carried on chatting. 'I can't believe you were actually at Zachariah Shakespeare's do!'

'You know about him then?'

'God! Who doesn't? He's as popular as a rock star. Everyone at Farquharson's is talking about him.'

So Seb had done his job well, I thought. Zachariah Shakespeare was hot property. And the people at Farquharson's had lots of money.

Before she let herself out, Sally glanced round at me. 'You will tell me what happens next, won't you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'With the mystery man from the gallery!'

'Oh!' I paused for a second. 'Yes.'

But nothing would happen, I was quite sure of that. Either 'Max' had made a mistake about who I was, or Radley had got it wrong about the photo, or, or … well, something. Weird things didn't happen to me.

I watched as Sally closed the front door behind her and then pulled off my boots again, ready to climb the stairs.

It was the smell of baking pastry that woke me on the morning of my interview with Zachariah Shakespeare. It had woven its

way up two flights of stairs and was playing with my senses, so that hunger was my first conscious thought. This made a change from coming to with vague images in my head of the man who wasn't Max.

I'd successfully avoided Alicia all weekend. She'd headed off to give herself a break after the gallery do, but I could smell that she was back in work mode now.

As I showered in the attic bathroom I thought there was a good chance I could give her the slip again if she was busy cooking. She had a separate kitchen on the ground floor where she prepared for her catering jobs: all gleaming hobs and granite. I'd only seen it once; it was definitely her own private domain, to be left well alone. Sally and I had the use of a smaller, communal kitchen instead, which was a very different affair.

It turned out I was to be disappointed. The moment I'd opened the fridge to get the butter, Alicia's cropped head poked round the kitchen door.

'Oh, it's you,' she said. 'I thought it be might Sally. I wanted a word.'

Seeing the look in her sharp grey eyes I was immediately glad I wasn't the one in the dog house. 'Good weekend?'

She put her head on one side. 'So, so. I went to Bridget's, you know? She took me to an awful restaurant on Saturday night. Horrible food, dirty cutlery and the waitress had a cold.'

It must be such fun having Alicia to stay. Bridget would probably need a week in bed to get over it.

She moved to leave the room, but then suddenly dashed my hopes by changing her mind and reaching for the kettle instead. 'I'll pause for a break.'

She stood there, tapping her fingers on the work surface as she waited for the kettle to boil. She was wearing a black ribbed polo neck sweater and chocolate coloured trousers. If I'd been cooking in an outfit like that it would have been flecked with

flour by now, but – Alicia being Alicia – there wasn't a mark on it.

'Smells as though you've been hard at work.'

She nodded. 'Food for a do at Number Eleven.'

She meant number eleven Downing Street, I knew. It sounded intimidating to me but, of course, Alicia had had years of experience and, in any case, it wasn't in her nature to get intimidated.

She brought the cafetière and a couple of cups over and came to join me at the table where I'd settled myself down with a brown roll stuffed with thick-cut marmalade.

'Don't you ever eat properly?' she said, peering at my breakfast and shuddering slightly.

'There's nothing more proper than marmalade.'

'It's what you do with it that worries me,' she said. 'I don't know why you can't have it on toast like anybody else.'

She poured me a coffee and pushed it across the scrubbed oak. 'You don't look very together for someone who's meant to be interviewing the biggest rising star in the art world this afternoon.'

I instantly stopped feeling hungry.

'You do have to make the effort you know,' she went on.

I tried to open my eyes wider so that I would look more alert and she would leave me alone. It wasn't working.

She leant towards me. 'So, what was Shakespeare like when you met him on Friday?'

I shook my head, swallowing my mouthful of coffee. 'I didn't get to meet him.' I could see she was about to boil over with indignation, so I added quickly, 'I couldn't. He wasn't there. Something about having beaten someone up earlier in the day. He was meant to be in a police cell or something.' I could hear myself sounding incoherent. She always had this effect on me.

'Or something? Really, Anna, you could at least have ascertained the precise facts. And anyway,' she said, swigging

more coffee, 'I don't believe a word of it. Clearly a publicity stunt. You really should use your connections. If Sebastian won't let you see Shakespeare then who will? You should make it clear from the outset what you expect of him. After all, you'll be providing the gallery with excellent publicity.'

'Yes, Alicia,' I said, sighing and leaning back in my chair in an attempt to distance myself, 'and that's all been arranged by Seb himself. He's got a friend on The Enquirer, and that's why they're taking my article in the first place. It's a great break for me. I'm not in a position to go haranguing Seb and having tantrums about the place.'

'Tantrums!' Alicia snorted.

'Doesn't any of your food need checking on, next door?'

'No it doesn't! I'm not suggesting you have a tantrum. You just need to be a bit more professional and assertive. Until it's you that's calling the shots you can't steer where you're going.'

Like I didn't know that. In a minute she would start on the well-worn tale of her humble beginnings in business.

'It was the same for me you know, when I started out.' Here it came. 'And there have been obstacles along the way too. You may remember that Sebastian was very much against me taking on the gallery contract at first, for instance.'

Yes, I remembered. It was very easy to recall things when someone kept repeating them every few days. And in any case, I had been involved. 'I seem to remember I put that business your way, Alicia,' I said.

'You did. You used your contacts to help me and I'm grateful, but all the same, Sebastian didn't want me to do the work. I had to take control of the situation. I went to Mel, because she was in charge of operations, and I got her along to one of my soirées. It was my plan to get her hooked and I did.' She looked at me and went on, 'Because I was professional, and because I didn't take no for an answer.' She tapped the table each time she said "because" for emphasis.

'It's lucky that he kept you on, even when he and Mel split up,' I said.

She sat back in her chair at last, her hands wrapped round her coffee mug. 'By that time he'd realised what an asset I was.'

'Why didn't Seb want you, anyway?' I had the ungenerous urge to focus attention on her shortcomings. The opportunity rejuvenated me, and I got to work on the marmalade roll. I was sure I could feel its bittersweet flavour giving me a new strength of purpose.

Alicia sighed. 'Oh some stupid sentimental nonsense from what Mel said. I only remember because I thought it was so ridiculous. It was something to do with associations. Because I was your cousin he associated me, indirectly, with his university days and he couldn't bear to be reminded. I mean, honestly, did you ever hear anything like it?' She got up and took her coffee cup to the dishwasher. 'It's a wonder he's made such a success of himself if that's the kind of thing he gets bogged down with.'

'He did have an awful time,' I said, getting up to make myself a second roll.

She looked at me over her shoulder as she took a cloth and wiped invisible marks off the working surface. 'We've all had awful times, Anna. Both my parents were killed in a car crash the night before I did my first catering job at Lord Buckeridge's place. That contract's earned me tens of thousands of pounds since. Where would I be if I hadn't kept my head together?'

'More of a human being?' I muttered under my breath.

'What?' But she didn't wait for an answer. 'What about Sebastian on Friday anyway? How was he?'

I told her I hadn't seen him either, but I didn't say anything about the other goings-on that evening. I was in no mood to extend the conversation.

As she left the room, Alicia said: 'It seems to me that Sebastian's avoiding you. And there have been a number of times, over the years, when he could have been more helpful

than he has.'

'It's the old associations at work again,' I said. 'He's been keeping his distance.'

She fixed me with a look. 'What he went through happened a long while ago now, Anna.'

But she didn't know the half of it.

To be continued…