Lovereading.co.uk

Doors Open

Ian Rankin

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The open door was only yards away, and beyond it lay the outside world, eerily unaffected by anything happening inside the abandoned snooker hall. Two thickset men had slumped bloodily to the floor. Four more figures were seated on chairs, hands tied behind them, ankles bound. A fifth was wriggling like a snake towards the doorway, straining with the effort. His girlfriend was yelling encouragement as the man called Hate stepped forward and slammed the door shut on all their hopes and dreams, hauling the chair and its occupant back to the original line.

'I'm going to kill you all,' the man spat, face smeared with his own blood. Mike Mackenzie didn't doubt him for a second. What else was someone called Hate going to do? Mike was staring at the door, reminded that this chain of events had begun – so innocently – with a party and with friends.

And with greed.

And desire.

But above all, with doors opening and closing.

A few weeks earlier

1

Mike saw it happen. There were two doors next to one another. One of them seemed to be permanently ajar by about an inch, except when someone pushed at its neighbour. As each liveried waiter brought trays of canapés into the saleroom, the effect was the same. One door would swing open, and the other would slowly close. It said a lot about the quality of the paintings, Mike thought, that he was paying more attention to a pair of doors. But he knew he was wrong: it was saying nothing about the actual artworks on display, and *everything* about him.

Mike Mackenzie was thirty-seven years old, rich and bored. According to the business pages of various newspapers, he remained a 'self-made software mogul', except that he was no longer a mogul of anything. His company had been sold outright to a venture capital consortium. Rumour had it that he was a burn-out, and maybe he was. He'd started the software business fresh from university with a friend called Gerry Pearson. Gerry had been the real brains of the operation, a genius programmer, but shy with it, so that Mike quickly became the public face of the company. After the sale, they'd split the proceeds fifty-fifty and Gerry then surprised Mike by announcing that he was off to start a new life in Sydney. His emails from Australia extolled the virtues of nightclubs, city life and surfing (and not, for once, the computer kind). He would also send Mike JPEGs and mobile-phone snaps of the ladies he encountered along the way. The quiet, reserved Gerry of old had disappeared, replaced by a rambunctious playboy – which didn't stop Mike from feeling like a bit of a fraud. He knew that without Gerry, he'd have failed to make the grade in his chosen field.

Building the business had been exciting and nerve-racking

– existing on three or four hours' sleep a night, often in hotel rooms far away from home, while Gerry preferred to pore over circuit boards and programming issues back in Edinburgh. Ironing the glitches out of their best-known software application had given both of them a buzz that had lasted for weeks. But as for the money … well, the money had come flooding in, bringing with it lawyers and accountants, advisers and planners, assistants, diary secretaries, media interest, social invites from bankers and portfolio managers … and not much else. Mike had grown tired of supercars (the Lambo had lasted barely a fortnight; the Ferrari not much longer – he drove a second-hand Maserati these days, bought on impulse from the small ads). Tired, too, of jet travel, five-star suites, gadgets and gizmos. His penthouse apartment had featured in a style magazine, much being made of its view – the city skyline, all chimneypots and church spires until you reached the volcanic plug on top of which sat Edinburgh Castle. But occasional visitors could tell that Mike hadn't made much of an effort to adjust his life to fit his new surroundings: the sofa was the same one he'd brought from his previous home; ditto the dining table and chairs. Old magazines and newspapers sat in piles either side of the fireplace, and there was little evidence that the vast flat-screen television with its surround-sound speakers ever got much use. Instead, guests would fix their attention on the paintings.

Art, one of Mike's advisers had advised, was a canny investment. He'd then gone on to suggest the name of a broker who would ensure that Mike bought wisely; 'wisely and well' had been his exact words. But Mike learned that this would mean buying paintings he didn't necessarily like by feted artists whose coffers he didn't really feel like filling. It would also mean being prepared to part with paintings he might admire, solely to comply with the fluctuations of the market. Instead of which, he had gone his own way, attending his first sale and finding a seat right at the front – surprised that a few chairs were still vacant while people seemed content to stand in a crush at the back of the room. Of course, he had soon learned the reason – those at the back had a clear view of all the bidders, and could revise their own bids accordingly. As his friend Allan confided afterwards, Mike had paid about three grand too much for a Bossun still life because a dealer had spotted him as a tyro and had toyed with him, edging the price upwards in the knowledge that the arm at the front of the room would be hoisted again.

'But why the hell would he do that?' Mike had asked, appalled.

'He's probably got a few Bossuns tucked away in storage,' Allan had explained. 'If prices for the artist look like they're on the way up, he'll get more interest when he dusts them off.'

'But if I'd pulled out, he'd've been stuck with the one I bought.'

To which Allan had just shrugged and given a smile.

Allan was somewhere in the saleroom right now, catalogue open as he perused potential purchases. Not that he could afford much – not on a banking salary. But he had a passion for art and a good eye, and would become wistful on the day of the actual auction as he watched paintings he coveted being bought by people he didn't know. Those paintings, he'd told Mike, might disappear from public view for a generation or more.

'Worst case, they're bought as investments and placed in a vault for safe keeping – no more meaning to their buyer than compound interest.'

'You're saying I shouldn't buy anything?'

'Not as an investment – you should buy whatever *pleases* you …'

As a result of which, the walls of Mike's apartment were replete with art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – most of it Scottish. He had eclectic tastes, so that cubism sat alongside pastoral, portraiture beside collage. For the most part, Allan approved. The two had first met a year ago at a party at the bank's investment arm HQ on George Street. The First Caledonian Bank – 'First Caly' as it was more usually called – owned an impressive corporate art collection. Large Fairbairn abstracts flanked the entrance lobby, with a Coulton triptych behind the reception desk. First Caly employed its own curator, whose job it was to discover new talent – often from degree shows – then sell when the price was right and replenish the collection. Mike had mistaken Allan for the curator, and they'd struck up a conversation.

'Allan Cruikshank,' Allan had said, shaking Mike's hand. 'And of course I already know who *you* are.'

'Sorry about the mix-up,' Mike had apologised with an embarrassed grin. 'It's just that we seem to be the only people interested in what's on the walls …'

Allan Cruikshank was in his late forties and, as he put it, 'expensively divorced', with two teenage sons and a daughter in her twenties. He dealt with HNWs – High Net Worth individuals – but had assured Mike that he wasn't angling for business. Instead, in the absence of the curator, he'd shown Mike as much of the collection as was open for general viewing.

'MD's office will be locked. He's got a Wilkie and a couple of Raeburns …'

In the weeks after the party, they'd exchanged emails, gone out for drinks a few times, and become friends. Mike had come to the viewing this evening only because Allan had persuaded him that it might be fun. But so far he had seen nothing to whet his jaded appetite, other than a charcoal study by one of the major Scottish Colourists – and he already had three at home much the same, probably torn from the self-same sketchbook.

'You look bored,' Allan said with a smile. He held his dog-eared catalogue in one hand, and a drained champagne flute in the other. Tiny flakes of pastry on his striped tie showed that he had sampled the canapés.

'I *am* bored.'

'No gold-digging blondes sidling up to you with offers you'd be hard pressed to refuse?'

'Not so far.'

'Well, this *is* Edinburgh after all; more chance of being asked to make up a four for bridge …' Allan looked around him. 'Busy old night, all the same. Usual mix of freeloaders, dealers and the privileged.'

'And which are we?'

'We're art lovers, Michael – pure and simple.'

'So is there anything you'll be bidding on come auction day?'

'Probably not.' Allan gave a sigh, staring into the depths of his parched glass. 'The next lot of school fees are still on my desk, awaiting chequebook. And I know what you're going to say: plenty of good schools in the city without needing to pay for one. You yourself attended a rough-hewn comprehensive and it didn't do you any harm, but this is *tradition* we're talking about. Three generations, all schooled at the same fusty establishment. My father would curdle in his grave if I put the boys elsewhere.'

'I'm sure Margot would have something to say about it, too.'

At mention of his ex-wife, Allan gave an exaggerated shudder. Mike smiled, playing his part. He knew better than to offer financial assistance – he'd made that mistake once before. A banker, a man whose daily dealings involved some of the wealthiest individuals in Scotland, couldn't be seen to accept handouts.

'You should get Margot to pay her share,' Mike teased. 'You're always saying she earns as much as you do.'

'And used that purchasing power to good effect when she chose her lawyers.' Another tray of undercooked pastry was coming past.

Mike shook his head while Allan asked if the fizz could be pointed in their direction. 'Not that it's worth the effort,' he muttered to Mike. 'Ersatz, if you ask me. That's why they've wrapped those white cotton napkins around the bottles. Means we can't read the label.' He took another look around the chatter-filled room. 'Have you pressed the flesh with Laura yet?'

'A glance and a smile,' Mike replied. 'She seems popular tonight.'

'The winter auction was the first one she'd fronted,' Allan reminded him, 'and it didn't exactly catch fire. She needs to woo potential buyers.'

'And we don't fit the bill?'

'With due respect, Mike, you're fairly transparent – you lack what gamblers would call the "poker face". That little glance you say you exchanged probably told her all she needed to know. When you see a painting you like, you stand in front of it for minutes on end, and then you go up on your tiptoes when you've made up your mind to buy it.' Allan attempted the movement, rocking on his heels and his toes, while holding out his glass towards the arriving champagne.

'You're good at reading people, aren't you?' Mike said with a laugh.

'Comes with the job. A lot of HNWs want you to know what they're thinking without them having to spell it out.'

'So what am I thinking now?' Mike held a hand over his own glass and the waiter gave a little bow before moving on.

Allan made a show of screwing shut his eyes in thought. 'You're thinking you can do without my smart-arsed remarks,' he said, opening his eyes again. 'You're wishing you could stand in front of our charming hostess for minutes on end – tiptoes or no tiptoes.' He paused. 'And you're just about to suggest a bar where we can get ourselves a *real* drink.'

'That's uncanny,' Mike pretended to admit.

'What's more,' Allan added, raising his glass in a toast, 'one of your wishes is about to be granted …'

Yes, because Mike had seen her, too: Laura Stanton, squeezing her way through the throng, heading straight towards them. Almost six feet tall in her heels, auburn hair pulled back into a simple ponytail. She wore a sleeveless knee-length black dress, cut low to show the opal pendant hanging at her throat.

'Laura,' Allan drawled, pecking her on both cheeks. 'Congratulations, you've put together quite a sale.'

'Better tell your employers at First Caly – I've got at least two brokers in the room scouting on behalf of rival banks. Everyone seems to want something for the boardroom.' She had already turned her attention towards Mike. 'Hello, you,' she said, leaning forward for another exchange of kisses. 'I get the feeling nothing's quite caught your fancy tonight.'

'Not strictly true,' Mike corrected her, causing her cheeks to redden.

'Where did you find the Matthewson?' Allan was asking. 'We've one from the same series outside the lifts on the fourth floor.'

'It's from an estate in Perthshire. Owner wants to buy some adjacent land so developers can't spoil the view.' She turned towards him. 'Would First Caly be interested …?'

Allan offered little more than a shrug and the puffing out of his cheeks.

'Which is the Matthewson?' Mike asked.

'The snowy landscape,' Laura explained, pointing towards the far wall. 'Ornate gilt frame … not really your thing, Mike.'

'Nor mine,' Allan felt compelled to add. 'Highland cattle and sheep huddled together for warmth beneath trees with no leaves.'

'Funny thing about Matthewson,' Laura added for Mike's benefit, 'is that they fetch more if you can see the faces of the animals.' It was the sort of titbit she knew would interest him, and he nodded his appreciation.

'Any sniffs from overseas?' Allan was asking.

Laura gave a thoughtful pout, measuring her response. 'Russian market is strong … same goes for China and India. I reckon we'll have plenty of telephone bidders come sale day.'

'But no pre-emptives?'

Laura pretended to swipe at Allan with her catalogue. 'Now you're just fishing,' she chided him.

'Incidentally,' Mike began, 'I've hung the Monboddo.'

'Where?' she asked.

'Just inside the front door.' The Albert Monboddo still life had been his only purchase at the winter auction. 'You said you'd come see it,' he reminded her.

'I'll email you.' Her eyes narrowed a little. 'But meantime, feel free to quash a rumour I've been hearing.'

'Uh-oh,' Allan said, snorting into his glass.

'What rumour?'

'That you've been cosying up to the city's other, less likeable auction houses.'

'Where did you hear that?' Mike asked her.

'Small world,' she replied. 'And gossipy with it.'

'I've not bought anything,' Mike said defensively.

'Poor swine's actually blushing,' Allan added.

'You don't want me visiting the Monboddo,' Laura went on, 'and have to turn on my heel because there's half of Christie's and Sotheby's hanging next to it. Well, do you?'

But before Mike could answer, a meaty hand landed on his shoulder. He turned his head and was staring into the dark, piercing eyes of Robert Gissing. The older man's huge dome of a head gleamed with sweat. His tweed tie was askew, his blue linen jacket creased and stretched beyond saving. All the same, he carried real presence, and his booming voice took no prisoners.

'I see the playboys have arrived, just in time to save me from this awful hooch!' He wafted his empty champagne flute like a conductor's baton. His eyes fixed on Laura. 'I don't blame you, my dear, it is your job after all …'

'Actually, it's Hugh who orders in the catering.'

Gissing shook his head theatrically. 'I'm talking about the paintings, child! Don't know why I come to these tragic affairs.'

'The free booze?' Allan pretended to guess, but Gissing ignored him.

'Dozens and dozens of works, representing the best each artist could muster … a story behind each brush stroke, each carefully considered placement of object or subject …' Gissing had pinched his thumb and forefinger together, as though holding a tiny brush. 'They belong to us all, part of our collective consciousness, our nation's narrative … our history.' He was in his element now. Mike caught Laura's eye and offered a wink: they'd both heard the speech – or variations on its central theme – plenty of times in the past. 'They don't belong in boardrooms,' Gissing went on, 'where only a security pass will get you into the building. Nor do they belong in some insurance company's vault or a captain of industry's hunting lodge …'

'Or a self-made millionaire's apartment,' Allan teased, but Gissing wagged a finger as fat as a sausage at him.

'You lot at First Caly are the worst offenders – overpaying for undeveloped young talent that then gets too big for its boots!' He paused for breath, and slapped a hand down on Mike's shoulder again. 'But I won't hear a word said against young Michael here.' Mike flinched as Gissing's grip tightened. 'Especially as he's just about to buy me a pint-pot of whisky.'

'I'll leave you boys to it,' Laura said, fanning out the fingers of her free hand as she waved goodbye. 'Sale's a week today … make sure it's in your diaries.' There was, it seemed to Mike, a final smile just for him as she moved away.

'The Shining Star?' Gissing was offering. It took Mike a moment to realise he was talking about the wine bar along the street.