Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Persuade Me

Written by Juliet Archer

Published by Choc Lit Limited

All text is copyright © of the author

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

Persuade Me

Juliet Archer



Copyright © 2011 Juliet Archer

First published 2011 by Choc Lit Limited
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK
www.choclitpublishing.com

The right of Juliet Archer to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the UK such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1P 9HE

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-906931-21-6

Foreword
by Will Darcy

A magazine headline, circled in black ink: ‘Never forgive, never forget’. You can tell a lot from what’s on a person’s desk …

Some years ago, just before I met Elizabeth, I took my sister Georgie to Australia for a much-needed holiday. She was going through a particularly difficult time; so, when she showed a spark of her previous passion for saving the planet, I encouraged it in every possible way.

During a brief visit to Melbourne I discovered that there was an expert in marine conservation based at one of the local universities, a Dr Rick Wentworth. I sent him an email, using the pretext of possible interest from the Pemberley Foundation in his Save the Sea Dragons campaign – although I usually avoid the ‘grand benefactor’ act at all costs. When I received a terse and somewhat begrudging invitation to meet in his office, I immediately pictured an old, cross, bespectacled nerd.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. He turned out to be young, charming and, judging from Georgie’s sharp intake of breath, very easy on the female eye. And he was English, with a northern accent that had apparently resisted all attempts at Australianisation.

He even apologised for the tone of his invitation. He told us that, with his work attracting more and more media attention, he’d become wary of requests like mine. This led to a brief discussion about the drawbacks of being a modern celebrity, especially a reluctant one.

As we talked, I realised that he was meticulous about his research – and not just on sea dragons. I’d given him no

indication of my sister's troubles and had taken the necessary steps to gag the press, although inevitably some details had leaked out. Yet I sensed he knew – and understood – what she'd been through …

So I watched in genuine admiration as he drew Georgie out of her dark shell into the wider world, if only for an hour. He held us both spellbound with stirring tales of battles against natural elements and man-made disasters, often in the form of short-sighted bureaucracy, and showed us stunning footage of the fragile creatures he was fighting to protect. Of the man himself I learned very little – until we got up to leave.

At this point he scrawled his personal email address on a piece of paper and handed it to a blushing Georgie, urging her to get in touch with any questions. That in itself made me warm to him and decide on a generous donation from the Foundation for his campaign – an unusual instance of my heart ruling my head.

But the piece of paper had been hiding something on his desk, a magazine article with a big bold headline. A headline that obviously had a greater significance because he'd drawn a brutal black ring round it: 'Never forgive, never forget.'

They were words I could relate to completely. Except that I was thinking of the man who'd broken my sister's heart, whereas he – as I discovered much later into our friendship – was thinking of the girl who'd broken his.

Although neither of us knew it then, their paths would cross when he wrote a book and, despite some misgivings, visited England to promote it.

This is their story …

Prologue

Her voice gatecrashed his thoughts. ‘Rick, who’s that woman you’ve been dreaming about?’

He frowned. Typical Shelley, scratching at the scab of their relationship just when he was about to leave for the airport. He picked up the last pair of new shirts, still in their cellophane wrapping, and forced them into the suitcase.

Then he looked across at her and said quietly, ‘What do you mean?’

Her eyes brimmed with accusation and she took a long gulp of air before she spoke again. ‘You’ve been calling out to her in your sleep. I didn’t think that much about it at first, but now it’s been three nights in a row.’

He must have had that dream, the one where …

It hurt to breathe, yet his hands were steady as he closed the suitcase; and he held her gaze as though he had nothing to fear. ‘What did I say?’

‘You said “Annie”, over and over again. And you sounded so different, so gentle, as if – as if –’ She broke off, but the damage was done. His eyes flinched shut. In a heartbeat he was ten years younger, far away, with someone else.

‘Rick, who’s Annie?’

Never forgive, never forget.

His eyes snapped open and he swung the case off the bed on to the floor. ‘I don’t know anyone called Annie,’ he said. And he couldn’t have made his voice less gentle if he’d tried.

Shelley stepped forward and grabbed his arm. ‘Is she in England? Is that why you’re going back there all of a sudden?’

He stared down at her, struggling to conceal his impatience.

‘It’s not sudden, as you very well know. It takes months to organise a book tour on the other side of the world. And Sophie’s been on at me to visit for ages. She and Ed can’t afford any more trips over here.’

‘But *seven weeks*? You’ve never been away for that long before. And it’s not as if you can study your precious sea dragons over there, is it? Especially in the depths of Somerset or wherever your sister’s bought her crummy little garden centre!’

These were basic observations, and she could have made them at any time in the last few months; but she’d waited until he was ready to walk out of the door. He sighed. She sounded so shrill and resentful, as though she really did care.

He smiled as he framed her face in his hands and tilted it up towards him. ‘I know. So I’ll be coming back. To the sea dragons – to my life in Australia.’

Hardly a profession of love, but it was better than nothing. And maybe, when he did come back, they could make a fresh start. Because, after ten years, it was time to forget the past.

Forgiveness was an entirely different matter.

Chapter One

He made the headlines, naturally.

On Saturday morning, in the neat privacy of her little flat, Anna read them all; from *The Sun*'s 'Sex-in-the-Sea Doc Comes Home' to the more sedate 'Celebrity Scientist on UK Book Tour' in *The Times*.

To her shame, it was the article in *The Sun* that she lingered over. It had the most detail, real or imagined, about Dr Rick Wentworth: a description of his girlfriend, the Australian supermodel Shelley McCourt, in tears as he left for the airport; an interview with a woman on the same flight, featuring some banter about asking him to join the Mile High Club – an invitation he'd apparently refused; his little altercation at Heathrow with a TV reporter who'd had the temerity to question something in his research.

And *The Sun* had the best photo of him – sitting on the deck of a boat, studying some small creature cradled in the palm of his hand, his expression intent yet relaxed, as though he didn't want to be anywhere else in the whole wide world. It was a look she'd known well, once upon a time.

She let out a long breath. If she wanted to, she could meet him again; she had a ticket for his Bath book signing in four weeks' time. She could see herself now: waiting in line, counting the minutes that brought them closer and closer, full of dread yet unable to tear herself away. At last, it would be her turn and she'd stand awkwardly in front of the table as he opened another copy of *Sex in the Sea*. Head down, pen poised, he'd ask 'Name?' and she'd whisper 'Anna Elliot'. Then that sleek blond head would snap up and …

But at this point the picture became blurred. Would he

force a smile and write ‘To Anna from Rick’ as if she were just another of his fans? Or would he jump up, send table and books flying, and carry on where they’d left off all those years ago?

If that happened, it would be an ugly scene. Anger and recriminations on his part, no doubt – tears and resentment on hers; which would probably do his book sales no good at all. And book sales were the main reason he was here; that much was obvious from all the newspapers she’d read this morning. He’d be off to Australia again as soon as the book tour was over and the only people he’d be visiting in England were his sister and her husband. No mention of looking up the girl he’d once begged to sail with him to the other side of the world.

A knock at the door made her start. What if …? She gave a rueful smile. Silly to think, even for a split second, that it could be him; he neither knew nor cared where she was. She got to her feet, scooped up all the newspapers except *The Times* and stuffed them behind the sofa.

It was Jenny, her landlady and work colleague; more than that now – her best friend. She and her husband Tom, wheelchair-bound since a car accident, occupied the ground floor of this large, end-of-terrace house in central Bath, having converted the rest into self-contained flats. That income, together with Jenny’s part-time job, could never compensate for Tom’s previous salary as a sales director, but they managed. And Jenny always claimed that her frequent visits to Anna on the top floor did her far more good, both physically and mentally, than the gym memberships and theatre trips she could no longer afford.

Now, with no indication that she’d just run up several flights of stairs, she breezed past Anna into the living room. ‘Just seeing if you want me to get you anything at the shops. You’re off to Kellynch soon, aren’t you? And I thought we

could eat together when you get back tomorrow night – unless you've got something else planned?'

They both knew she hadn't, but Jenny's voice was still full of hope.

'Yes, I'd love to eat with you,' Anna said, 'and no, I don't need anything from the shops. I've already been out, to get a paper.'

Jenny went over to the table where *The Times* was spread out next to a solitary mug and an empty cereal bowl. 'Isn't that Rick Wentworth? Good job I got our tickets for his book signing as soon as they went on sale – I was in Molland's last night and there were none left. I bet it's mainly women who've bought them – women with absolutely no interest in marine biology, like me!'

Anna managed a laugh. 'Yes, his marketing's spot on, isn't it? Good-looking bloke writes a book called *Sex in the Sea* and appears half-naked on the cover – I'm sure quite a few people will be disappointed to find they've bought a detailed study on the mating habits of sea slugs and the like.'

'Nice cover photo, though.' Jenny picked up the paper. 'What my Aunt Jane would call a fine specimen of manhood. D'you think he'll sign our books dressed like that? We can but dream.'

Anna glanced at the photo. Jenny would see a man sitting on a beach, in swimming trunks and a baseball cap, his back to the camera, long legs outstretched towards the sea, those tanned, broad, muscular shoulders proclaiming him as a fit outdoor type.

Whereas she … she saw the restlessness that she'd found so attractive in him; head turned to the side, his attention caught by the slightest of movements; arms and legs tensed, ready to launch him up off the sand; back – ah, his back … how many times had she traced those muscles, with her fingers, with her

lips? Too many times, yet never enough …

Yes, this photo could easily have been her favourite, but it didn't show his face. How she'd loved watching him at work, waiting for his expression to change: one moment, still with concentration; the next – as she made some provocative remark – alive with laughter and, although she hadn't realised it at first, desire.

That's why she preferred the photo in *The Sun*. You could see his face, and imagine …

'This is the man,' Jenny was saying, 'who almost made me get satellite TV, remember? That was the only way to see his documentary series, but you talked me out of it. Very sensible too, we need to economise and Tom watches enough TV as it is. Just as well he has his voluntary work at Open Door, since no one wants to employ him.' She gave a little sigh, her eyes still fixed on the newspaper. 'I'm sure they'll bring out a DVD soon, in the meantime the book will do nicely.' Then she chuckled. 'It says here that he's a world expert on sea dragons. Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? They must be huge, although at least they can't breathe fire if they're under water!'

'They're tiny actually, I read somewhere that they're related to the sea horse.' To Anna's relief she sounded more brisk and business-like than she felt. 'Look, I've finished with the paper for now – why don't you take it? Tell Tom I expect him to get all the Sudoku done, even the Killer, before I see him tomorrow.' She checked her watch. 'I'd better get going, or I'll be late for our special family meeting and Walter will say all the important stuff while I'm not there.'

Jenny pulled a face as she folded up the newspaper. 'I'll never understand why your father insists on you girls calling him by his Christian name, it's not natural.'

'But then,' Anna said, with a little shrug, '*nothing* about

my father is natural.'

'Except his preference for your obnoxious older sister. She's a chip off the old block, if ever there was one.' Newspaper in hand, Jenny turned towards the door and stopped short. 'Ah, there's the other thing I came for.'

Anna followed her gaze to the DVD case lying on top of the TV. '*Anna Karenina*?'

'Yes, the very thought of Sean Bean as Vronsky … Tom likes watching him in *Sharpe*, as you know, but I want something more romantic.' Jenny picked up the DVD and hesitated. 'Are you in the middle of watching it?'

'No, take it. I'll just need it back a week on Monday, when term starts.'

Jenny grinned. 'For your opening lecture to the first years? They're always full of it when they come into my office afterwards – you're so good at getting them to relate to nineteenth-century Russian literature. How does it go again? "Would you give up everything for your lover …"'

'"Would you give up everything in your life – family, friends, your place at this university – for your lover?"' Anna said softly. '"Anna Karenina did. She ignored the advice of those closest to her and left everything she had – husband, child and social position – for Vronsky. When it all went wrong, she threw herself under a train."' A pause. '"Tragic heroine – or selfish fool?"'

'Brilliant opening to a brilliant lecture!' A wry chuckle. 'Of course, the students who *have* given up their place at Bath & Western University for their lover aren't there to hear it, but you certainly make an impression on the students who are. I've always meant to ask you – which one do *you* think Anna Karenina was?'

'A selfish fool.' The response was automatic, a consequence of subtle indoctrination since childhood.

Besides, if Jenny knew what had happened all those years ago, she'd realise it was the obvious response from a woman like Anna Elliot.

A woman who'd followed the advice of those closest to her: to keep her family, friends and place at university – and give up her lover instead.

Chapter Two

Sir Walter Elliot ran an elegantly manicured fingertip over the faded gold lettering on the cover of his most treasured possession: *Burke's Peerage & Baronetage*, 106th edition, Volume One. Published shortly after his wife's death, it had become a trusty anchor in the storm-tossed sea of his life, a symbol of hope in a darkening world; a world where, increasingly, people worshipped the false god of celebrity in preference to the true and solid worth of an hereditary title.

He turned to the page where the red satin bookmark had taken up permanent residence and read the words he knew by heart: 'SIR WALTER WILLIAM ELLIOT, 8TH BT, of Kellynch, Somerset; *b* 5th April 1953 … *m* 1975 Princess Irina Grigoryevna Petrova (*d* 1998), dau of Prince Grigori Ivanovich Petrov, of Paris, and has: Elisabeth Irina, *b* 1978; Anna Elena, *b* 1982; Mona Katerina, *b* 1984 …'

He let out a little sigh. The absence of a son to inherit his title had always been a severe blow, but at least he could be proud of two of his daughters: Lisa, made in his own image, tall, golden-haired and utterly beautiful, the only one who understood him; and Mona, incomprehensibly freckled, something of a disappointment until she made a respectable marriage to Charles Musgrove and produced two fine boys. The Musgrove family might not possess a title, but they had a nine-hundred-acre farm, a decent-sized manor house and generally clear complexions.

Which left Anna: small and dark and studious like her mother; but, unlike her mother, unable – or unwilling – to find a suitable man. And, since she'd started living with that Smith woman and her layabout of a husband, showing a rebellious

streak that would no doubt manifest itself at the meeting today. He shook his head sadly. It had all started so well! The degree at Oxford and trips to Russia that he'd magnanimously funded – out of the trust fund that Irina had purposely set up, but even so … (He'd never understood why Irina sold the Petrov diamonds and invested the proceeds for the girls' education – unless it was to favour Anna, who was always going to need more than her fair share.) The PhD that he'd tolerated, so long as Anna earned enough to support herself … But then, instead of doing something useful with her life and finding a desirable husband, as Irina had, she'd become a lecturer at the Bath & Western University! Oxford itself would have been preferable, and further away … 'My middle daughter's an Oxford professor, you know. Always was a bit eccentric.' Thank God Irina couldn't see her favourite daughter now, mixing with the working class and – on the rare occasions that she visited Kellynch – dressing as scruffily as one of her students …

A car sweeping past the library window roused him from his reverie. His nearest neighbour Minty – or Lady Russell, to use her formal name – in her vintage Rolls; like him, she was a stickler for appearances. In fact, they had so much in common that he found himself wondering why they'd never married. He could see several advantages in such an alliance. As the widow of a mere knight, she'd always been more than willing to look up to a baronet; she dressed with a certain style and, as she often reminded him, on a much smaller budget than Lisa; and, from the far side of a dimly lit room, she could easily pass for forty-five.

Then he remembered the downside. As his wife's closest friend and confidante, she had an unfortunate habit of imagining what 'dear Irina' would have thought about everything; her hair was as grey as dust and she refused to

contemplate any sort of flattering rinse; what he called the necessities of life, she termed pure extravagance; and, last but by no means least, she was too old to bear him a son, a scenario that had suddenly become a distinct possibility, thanks to–

'Walter, *darling*!'

Minty, somewhere behind him. He hadn't heard her come in, but he could smell her perfume – Je Reviens, or 'I'll be back'. Wasn't that a famous line from a film? He could vaguely recall the actor, a splendid figure of a man with an unfortunate guttural accent … Yes, he reflected, dear Minty had been as good as her word, or rather her perfume's word; over the years she'd been back time and again to Kellynch, worldly wisdom and well-meant advice always at the ready.

He placed *Burke's* carefully on a nearby secretaire, got languidly to his feet and proffered a silk-smooth cheek for her kiss. 'Still wearing that old Jaeger jacket, Minty? It looks almost as good as new, you must tell me how you do it. I'm afraid I feel rather wretched this morning, my masseuse phoned to say–'

'Masseuse?' Minty's eyes widened in horror, then narrowed; she had a deplorable lack of concern for crow's feet. 'Walter, we discussed this last time I was here and I'm sure you said you'd dispense with her services *immediately*. Imagine what dear Irina–'

He interrupted her with a sharp, 'She wouldn't have minded in the least.' Sometimes, just sometimes, Minty overstepped the mark and assumed that the widow of old Sir Reginald 'Rusty' Russell knew better than the 8th Baronet of Kellynch. He went on, 'As I was saying, my masseuse phoned to say she's delayed, so I'm not at my best. Which is a great pity, in view of the stressful nature of this meeting–' He broke off. 'That reminds me, Mona's not coming. The usual.'

Minty gave a little snort of derision. ‘That girl needs a decent doctor or a firm husband, and she doesn’t seem to have either. Heaven knows I’ve tried to tell her often enough, but I’ve lost all patience with her since she told me to keep my opinions to myself.’ She went over to the window and peered out. ‘Any sign of Anna?’

‘No. She’d better not be late.’ He glanced across at Minty defiantly. ‘I’ll be going for my massage as soon as Cleopatra arrives.’

‘Cleopatra?’ She made a little moue of distaste. ‘Oh, the masseuse.’

‘A real find,’ he said, flexing his wrists. ‘I feel ten years younger already. Lisa’s started having her too, I’m sure you’ll see a difference.’

As if on cue, the library door swung open and a slim, bronzed goddess in black leggings and a long cream cashmere sweater made her entrance. Lisa, his loveliest and most loving daughter. He gazed at her fondly as she glided over to Minty, kissed her lightly on the cheek and came to stand next to him.

‘Coffee’s on its way,’ she said in a high, breathless, Marilyn Monroe voice that had shattered countless male hearts, ‘and I’ve had a text from Cleo. She’ll be here by half-past, thank God.’

‘Excellent, darling, let’s make a start.’

Minty frowned. ‘But it’s only ten to, and Anna’s not–’

‘You can tell her what she’s missed,’ he said coolly.

Then, like a pair of synchronised swimmers, he and Lisa crossed to the sofa facing the window and sank gracefully into it, while Minty perched on a high-backed chair opposite.

Walter adopted a slightly troubled look and began, ‘As you both know–’

Immediately, there was a half-hearted tap at the door and the latest in a long line of unsatisfactory housekeepers tottered

into the library with the coffee tray. He'd stopped trying to remember their names; Minty handled the whole boring business for him, recruiting them from the surrounding villages, recording their hours, dispensing their wages and dealing with the ghastly tax people. They always started off suitably grateful to work at Kellynch – then, after a month or two, the rot would set in. The excuses ranged from advanced decrepitude – dodgy hips and dicky hearts were the favourites – to family revolt – 'my son says I'm working for a pittance and he'll report you to the national minimum wage helpline' – or transport problems, with heavy-handed hints that Walter should meet the cost of a taxi. It was a sign of the times; people judged the privilege of serving a baronet and a job at the local Tesco by the same lamentable criteria.

When the creature had slopped coffee into the cups, handed round a plate of limp-looking ginger snaps and sloped off again, Walter resumed his troubled look. 'As you both know, I take my responsibilities very seriously, very seriously indeed. *Noblesse oblige* is my way of life. And so, in the midst of another recession, with the estate farm yields well down on last year, I feel I must set an example and be even more of a shining light in these dark times. I've accepted–'

He broke off in irritation as the door opened again and his middle daughter came into the room – looking so like Irina that it hurt, ever so briefly.

And that husky voice, so like Irina's. 'Am I late? I thought–'

'You're not late, Anna dear, Walter started early.' Minty patted the chair next to hers.

His other daughters would have come straight over and kissed him, but not Anna. He watched her sit down beside Minty and rub her temples, as if the very sight of him produced a headache.

He cleared his throat. ‘As I was saying, I’ve accepted an offer that will bring in a substantial amount of income over the next year and allow me to finance the necessities of life.’ He paused long enough to hear Minty’s sharp intake of breath, then continued in a louder tone, as if to quell any thoughts of insubordination, ‘I’ve been approached by the couple who’ve bought Graham Farley’s garden centre. To make a proper go of it, they need to rent more greenhouse space and they’d also prefer to live off the premises, but not too far away. I’m sure you’ll agree that Kellynch meets their requirements admirably.’

Lisa’s hand flew to her mouth. ‘You’re not suggesting they live *here*, with us?’

He smiled his reassurance. ‘Of course not, darling, I’m thinking of The Lodge.’

‘The Lodge?’ Minty’s jaw dropped, rather unattractively. ‘But Walter, it needs a lot of work, and you may not recover the cost of that in the rental, especially if the business fails and they only stay a few months. Who are these people anyway? What if they bring …’ her eyebrows straggled upwards, ‘an undesirable element to Kellynch?’

Walter spread his hands in an eloquent gesture of despair. ‘I’ve thought long and hard about this, Minty, and talked it over with my professional advisors.’ He put a tiny but audible emphasis on the word ‘professional’. ‘Shepherd feels that we can get away with the minimum of refurbishment and still charge the maximum rent. And the couple themselves, Sophie and Edward Croft, come with very solid references.’

Minty pursed her lips. ‘Croft … Croft … I wonder if they’re related to the Ashford Crofts?’

‘I’ll look it up in *Burke’s*.’ He reached towards the secretaire.

‘They can’t be,’ she said hurriedly. ‘I’d have heard about it

from Tuppy if any of them were planning to run a garden centre.' She gave a little shudder.

Walter reluctantly withdrew his hand. 'I've made my own enquiries, of course,' he went on. 'In Uppercross, where they're renting one of those poky cottages on the main street. Roger Musgrove thinks they're rather dull, but very pleasant and hard-working. And, as he's Mona's father-in-law, I'm perfectly happy to take his opinions into account – in spite of the fact that he never trims that revolting beard of his. Anyway, he says things should liven up soon, Sophie's expecting her brother from Australia. Somebody quite famous apparently, a scientist who writes books, which sounds respectable enough. Except he's called Woolworth … Woolworth … Wasn't that the name of that young upstart we had to sort out in France, Minty?'

'Wentworth,' came a low voice.

Walter looked across at his middle daughter. 'What?'

'Rick Wentworth.'

He had to strain to catch her words. 'Speak up, anyone would think you couldn't bear to say his name.'

'That's hardly surprising, Walter, when you remember the circumstances,' Minty said crisply.

Walter allowed his lip to curl. He remembered the circumstances extremely well: the collar of his favourite Eton shirt twisted completely out of shape as the young upstart hissed some very unsavoury words in his ear. 'Well, if it's the same man, which I doubt, we'll have to hope he's mended his arrogant ways. But in any case I'm not renting anything to *him*, just his sister. Everything's signed and the builders are starting work on The Lodge next week, which is why I wanted you all to know.'

He gave Anna an accusing look. 'Are you sure it wasn't Woolworth?'

Anna made no answer; it was taking all her self-control not to run out of the room. She stared down at her lap, outwardly composed but secretly chasing wild thoughts around in her head.

A famous scientist who wrote books … from Australia … a sister called Sophie. It must be him. He'd talked about Sophie, all those years ago … To think that his sister would be living in The Lodge and running the garden centre on the main road between here and Uppercross … She decided she would make an effort to meet her. It would be – interesting. And it might help her to prepare for meeting *him*.

Her father was saying, 'At Cleopatra's recommendation, of course. An excellent place for the more advanced treatments, a sort of revival of its former glory days as a spa town. And I won't be too far away if there's anything to sort out at Kellynch, which there usually is.' He paused and gave a little sigh.

Anna closed her eyes; she knew perfectly well what was coming next.

'*Noblesse oblige*,' he murmured, savouring the words like nectar. '*Noblesse oblige*.'

Then Minty said, 'At least you'll see a lot more of Anna.'

Anna looked up, blinking in confusion. Was her father moving to Bath? She could feel the blood draining from her face.

Minty went on, warming to her task, 'You could even see if the flat below hers is still vacant. Bennett Street's so handy for everything and Jenny Smith charges a very reasonable rent.'

Anna's confusion turned to undisguised horror; but, as usual, Walter didn't appear to notice. He glanced impatiently at his watch, stood up and crossed the room to the large ormolu mirror over the fireplace. 'Definitely …' he paused to

study his reflection from several angles, while Anna held her breath for his next words, 'not. We have our standards and I guarantee that they're a far cry from anything that Smith woman might aspire to.' He turned to Lisa with a brilliant smile. 'Don't worry, darling, I've booked us into The Royal Crescent Hotel.'

'I should bloody well hope so,' Lisa muttered. 'If we have to go to Bath and not London, then I'm certainly not slumming it.'

Anna went over in her mind what she'd just heard – blocking out the unkind reference to Jenny, knowing from experience that retaliation was pointless. The Royal Crescent was only a short walk from Bennett Street, but her work would take her several miles in the opposite direction, and her social life even further away, metaphorically speaking … She felt her shoulders relax; in reality there'd be little chance of their paths crossing and, with any luck, Walter and Lisa would be too busy enjoying their five-star surroundings to parade themselves around Bath like C-list celebrities.

Minty leaned forward and glared at Walter. 'The rent from The Lodge and a few greenhouses won't go very far at The Royal Crescent. Quite frankly, I'm astonished that you're even considering living in Bath when you'll still be paying for the upkeep of this enormous house.'

Walter ignored her and fixed his cold blue eyes on Anna. 'We will, of course, expect to see you occasionally. Although I find it incomprehensible that a daughter of mine wishes to waste her life being a university lecturer, I'm not above offering her a helping hand with her career. I imagine the head of your department will be honoured to receive an invitation to dinner from Sir Walter Elliot, 8th Baronet.'

Anna smiled sweetly at him. 'As she's a committed socialist, I imagine she'll be anything but.' She had no

intention of letting her father disrupt the measured pace of her life in Bath. It had been years since she'd let his bullying – there was no other word for it – affect her. Still, might as well show some interest; and, after all, forewarned was forearmed. She said, 'When do you–'

Lisa cut in with, 'Here's Cleo now, coming up the drive. She'll have to do me first, I've an appointment with my stylist at one. Party at Pen's tonight, and my hair's a complete and utter mess.' She gave her perfectly groomed mane a petulant flick; then added, in Anna's direction, 'They won't mind if you tag along. You can do the driving, I'll be having a few drinks.'

Just as Anna opened her mouth to object, Walter intervened. 'I'm afraid she's wanted at Uppercross, darling. Mona's not well and it's Harvest Festival tomorrow morning at St Stephen's, someone has to take the boys and Charles is off fishing as usual.' He half-turned to Anna. 'And you really need to go there this afternoon and make their harvest baskets. The boys want a dinosaur theme, nothing too taxing.'

Anna weighed up her options. Stay at Kellynch and have Lisa throw a tantrum if she refused to act as her chauffeur, or go to Uppercross and witness Mona's wall-to-wall misery? But Mona had two redeeming features: her children – Oliver, seven, and Harry, almost three. And there'd be no chance of Rick Wentworth visiting his sister; according to his website, he was starting his book tour in London and had two solid days of signings arranged.

She looked straight at her father. 'I'll go where I'm wanted, then. And I might as well go now.'

No one voiced the slightest objection, so she got abruptly to her feet and left the room. On her way to the front door, she paused to stare mutinously at the two full-length portraits that dominated the hall: her parents, in the second year of their

marriage. On the left, Walter preened in front of a banner carrying the Elliot coat of arms, one hand resting reverently on *Burke's Peerage*; the 106th edition, of course – an anachronism added many years later. On the right stood Irina, stunning in a coral-pink evening dress, a diamond tiara in her dark hair and more diamonds at her throat. The expression in those grey eyes was enigmatic; Anna suspected a mixture of disenchantment with Walter and relief at being apart, if only in an oil painting.

'I'll never – *ever* – understand why you ended up with him. Except – well, sometimes I wonder if you were an even bigger snob than he is.'

She must have said the words out loud, because here was Minty beside her, resting a heavy hand on her shoulder and saying quietly, 'As I told you after she died, your mother made a mistake that she regretted all her days. She was very young when she met Walter, and she couldn't wait to marry him and settle down at Kellynch.' A heartfelt sigh. 'She wouldn't contemplate divorce, so she lived for her children – especially you. But that youthful haste cost her dear. That's why–' She stopped.

Anna stiffened. 'That's why you talked me out of …' it had been a taboo subject for so long that she stumbled over the words, 'out of going to Australia, with Rick Wentworth.'

Minty pursed her lips. 'Your mother wouldn't have wanted you to make the same mistake and put your life, your many talents, on hold for a man who didn't deserve you.'

'Were you and Walter the best people to judge?'

The bitterness in Anna's voice suggested this was a purely rhetorical question, but Minty chose to answer it.

'Absolutely. You were completely under his spell, remember? And your cousin Natasha backed us up–'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

‘But Anna, if he’s back in England he may come looking for you!’

‘Fat chance, when there’s been no communication between us for ten years.’

A slight pause; then Minty said, ‘Exactly. If you’d really been the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, wouldn’t he have been in touch?’

Anna stifled a small stirring of sadness. ‘Yes. Yes, he would.’