

## Prologue



The man in the beige trousers checked his watch. It was still a few minutes before three o'clock. A bit early to go in—he didn't want to look too keen. One more turn around the conservatory ought to do it. Constable Lethbridge of the London Metropolitan Police set off for another circuit of the building.

Kew Gardens on a summer's day: just about the perfect place to be in London. The sun's warmth lay across the parkland like a comfort blanket. The trees strained under their foliage. The lawns were lush carpet. There were even butterflies. And was that a wren warbling in the hedge as the constable lumbered past? Or perhaps a nightingale? Lethbridge didn't much care for songbirds—he was a racing-pigeon man. He could

prattle for hours about the standard method of calculating velocities, or the complexities of the ‘slow clock’ rule. A man and his pigeons—was there anything more natural?

Lethbridge struck up a tuneless whistle as he trudged around the large glass building. It was an odd place to meet somebody for the first time. He would have preferred the pub. He’d met the last five women from the matchmaking agency at the Dog and Partridge. They were all very nice. He always made a point of buying the first drink. Then he’d tell a few good racing-pigeon yarns. At that point the women always said they needed the ladies’ room. And that would be the last he’d see of them.

Lethbridge rounded the rear of the conservatory and emitted a satisfied *brumph*. ‘Good,’ he thought. ‘No back door.’

The call from the dating agency had come at the perfect time. Lethbridge had just come off the red-hot end of a roasting from his boss, Inspector Parrott. It had not been a good month—for either of them. The ongoing murder investigation involving the fugitive businessman Sir Mason Green was proving a nightmare. Lethbridge was looking forward to meeting someone who wasn’t going to yell at him—at least not straightaway. Maybe even, dare he hope, she might be that someone special?

He reached the front of the Princess of Wales conservatory. The courtyard was crowded with young families, happy couples and a few pensioners holding hands.

Lethbridge felt a sudden surge of confidence—this one was going to work out. He was sure of it.

And then he saw her.

They'd spoken briefly on the telephone to arrange the meeting. She had an intriguing voice—full-bodied, rounded vowels. She said she would wear a red coat with her hair down, so Lethbridge could recognise her.

'Won't it be hot in a coat?' Lethbridge had asked.

'Being hot doesn't trouble me,' she had said. 'Does it trouble you?'

At that point, Lethbridge dropped the phone.

Even ignoring the coat, Lethbridge knew in an instant that the woman in the conservatory forecourt was the one. She stood out like a beacon.

Tall.

Slender.

Dressed as if she'd just stepped from a Milan catwalk—a long red coat, black boots, chestnut brown hair brushing her shoulders.

Her skin was porcelain.

And perfect.

Lethbridge gulped.

'You must be David!' The woman was standing in front of him, a smile illuminating her face. 'I'm Charlotte. So wonderful to meet you.' She leant on the *wonderful* like she was leaning on a car horn.

Lethbridge's palms broke into a sweat. He stared down at the woman's outstretched hand—manicured

nails, doll-like skin. He didn't dare touch it—it would be like taking a freshly hatched pigeon by the neck.

The woman cocked her head to the side; she had a quizzical look in her eye. Lethbridge swallowed, wiped his palm on the back of his pants and thrust it into the woman's hand.

'My!' she said. 'Aren't you the strong one.'

She retrieved her hand and, with effortless poise, spun Lethbridge around and slid her arm into his.

'Let's go inside,' she said. 'It's nice and warm in there.'

Lethbridge stumbled up the front steps arm-in-arm with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He could sense people watching her—watching *them*. The beautiful maiden with the handsome young policeman. He puffed out his chest. Then with his spare hand he reached around and plucked his underpants from between his bottom cheeks.

'You're a police constable, David?' Charlotte said as they wandered among the garden beds inside. 'How terribly brave you must be.'

Lethbridge's blood pressure shot up ten points. 'Oh, I don't know about that,' he said. 'Just doing my job—working together for a safer London. That type of thing.'

'You're too modest,' the woman teased, squeezing his arm. Lethbridge's face lit up a bright pink. 'Tell me about yourself, David. Tell me something...interesting.'

Lethbridge glanced at the woman by his side. Her

eyes were locked on him, as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist.

‘Funny you should ask,’ he said, ‘because I’m working on something quite interesting at the moment.’

‘Really?’ The woman guided Lethbridge through a set of glass doors as if he was a shopping trolley. ‘Do tell.’

‘Well, I’m putting the finishing touches to an automatic closing gate for my pigeon coop. You see, when the birds come in after a flight—’

‘No!’ Charlotte interrupted. ‘Not about pigeons, David. Tell me about your real work. About stopping the bad people from hurting the innocent people. Like me.’ She stopped walking and gazed at Lethbridge with an intensity that set his heart racing. Her rich hazel eyes opened wide. Lethbridge was mesmerised.

He gulped again.

‘Well, I have been working on the Mason Green case,’ he said. ‘Have you heard of it?’

The woman’s eyes melted. ‘Now that sounds interesting,’ she purred. ‘Tell me *everything*.’ She placed a hand on Lethbridge’s chest and eased him onto a garden bench, then slid down beside him.

A fine sweat broke out across Lethbridge’s brow.

‘I simply adore the atmosphere in here,’ Charlotte said, her eyes never leaving his. ‘The cactus garden is very special to me.’

Lethbridge looked around. They were sitting by a

rocky garden bed that contained an array of spine-covered cacti thriving in the desert-like conditions of the hot house.

‘Tell me, David,’ the woman said in a dangerous whisper. ‘Tell me about Sir Mason Green.’

Lethbridge swabbed a handkerchief across his face. ‘Well, we’ve been looking for him for a while now. Wanted for murder on two continents, he is. He killed a man in India and he ordered the death of an old lady here in London. You know the one—Geraldine Archer.’

Charlotte could not have been paying closer attention.

‘The billionaire? The one who left all her money to her great nephew? Now, what was his name...’

‘Gerald Wilkins,’ Lethbridge said. ‘We’re, uh, quite good friends, actually.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Oh yes. We went on holiday together. To India. I’m spending a lot of time at his house in Chelsea at the moment.’

‘As a guest?’

‘Um, not exactly,’ Lethbridge mumbled. ‘On guard duty. He’s under twenty-four-hour protection until Sir Mason Green is arrested.’

There was a glint in the woman’s eyes. ‘You see a lot of this Gerald, do you?’ She opened her handbag and pulled out a delicate lace handkerchief. ‘It is quite warm

in here, isn't it, David.' She dabbed the lace across her perfectly dry top lip. Then let it fall to the ground.

'Oh dear. Clumsy me,' she said. 'Would you be so kind?'

Lethbridge wriggled upright and levered himself off the bench. 'Allow me.'

He stooped down and plucked the handkerchief from the floor. And the woman rammed a syringe deep into his right buttock.

The constable's lips clamped shut and a muffled yelp seemed to escape through his ears. He remained bent over, snap frozen in place, his face blooming as purple as the cactus flowers behind him.

The woman yanked the needle out and reached down to take her handkerchief from Lethbridge's fingers. She wrapped the syringe in lace and dropped it into her handbag.

'Let's sit you down again, shall we?' Charlotte said. She took Lethbridge by the elbow and heaved him back onto the garden bench. He flopped into place like a sack of potatoes. A look of dazed stupor was plastered across his face.

'Comfy are we?' the woman asked.

'No,' Lethbridge said, his voice a dreamy wave. 'My bum hurts.'

The woman suppressed a grimace. 'David, I have just injected you with a powerful serum. It's derived from the poison in the cactus right behind you. It has the

intriguing effect of making anyone under its influence tell the truth.’

Lethbridge blinked. He cast his eyes about as if he’d just landed from another planet.

‘So you’re not from the matchmaking service?’ he slurred.

The woman managed a slight grin. ‘No, David. Sorry to disappoint you.’

Lethbridge jerked his head to the front and blinked again. ‘I’m not going to get a kiss at the end of this?’

‘David, I need you to concentrate,’ the woman said. ‘Tell me about your friend. About Gerald Wilkins. Does he ever leave the house?’

Lethbridge lolled his head around to face the woman.

‘Nope,’ he said. ‘Can’t go out. Not allowed to.’

‘Is he planning any trips away? Abroad perhaps?’

Lethbridge’s head started a slow descent towards his navel. His chin banged onto his chest and he jolted upright. ‘France!’ he bellowed, as if spotting land from the crow’s nest of a pirate ship.

A few heads turned their way. The woman shushed Lethbridge, and placed a calming hand on his arm. ‘Where David? Where in France?’

Lethbridge looked at her with uncertainty, as if he was undergoing some great internal struggle. ‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘I’m sure you must have overheard something.’ The woman considered him carefully. ‘There might be





a kiss in it for you.'

Lethbridge's purple hue deepened two shades.

When his answer came it was greeted with a smile of glacial warmth.

'You've been very helpful, David,' the woman said. 'One last thing. Did Gerald bring something back with him from his holiday in India? A little souvenir he keeps hidden away?'

Lethbridge's head bobbed like a drunken sock puppet. His lips quivered open, and his reply set the woman's eyes afire.

Charlotte gathered her things and stood up from the bench. 'Goodbye, David,' she said.


She turned to leave but a grunt of protest stopped her departure. Lethbridge stared up at her.

'K-kiss?'

The woman looked at him and sighed. She straightened her coat, grabbed Lethbridge by the lapels and hauled him to his feet. Then, as if planting a seed in a pot, she pressed her lips to his cheek, leaving behind a smear of crimson lipstick. Lethbridge's eyes beamed out like headlights.

Charlotte then shoved his chest, sending the constable backside-first deep into the nest of cactus plants.





When Lethbridge woke, he was facedown on a hospital gurney. A nurse armed with a set of pliers was plucking cactus spines from his buttocks. The constable turned his head and gazed up through groggy eyes to find Inspector Parrott frowning back at him.

Lethbridge took in a deep breath, smiled up at his superior officer and gave him a shaky thumbs-up.

‘K-kiss!’ he said.