

## CHAPTER 2

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### INSPECTOR BLAND

For the next few days Julia could not stop thinking about Heriot Row. She had lived in Heriot Row for five unhappy years, leaving just after her divorce. Actually, most of her Heriot Row memories were happy ones – Maisie and Philip starting and finishing primary school, her friendship with Ruthie and Rupert, she eccentric and yet practical, he reserved and a dreamer. These were happy memories because they did not include any recollection of her ex, a sorry specimen of a bully, now a totally faded nightmare. Every time she drove past that beautiful row of grey stone houses she remembered the hope and trepidation that had filled her when she moved into the magnificent three-storey apartment all those years ago. Her marriage was already a shipwreck looking for a big rock to crash into, but she had stubbornly refused to admit it.

“The Enlightenment in stones”, that is how Edinburgh’s New Town is described in tourist guides. Well, she thought that the airy high ceilings, the beautifully proportioned windows, the sense of rational distributions of lines and volumes, could somehow restore a semblance of normality to her life, stop it from sliding into the quick sands of accepted unhappiness. She had been an idiot – she knew it now.

What had been her temporary salvation or, more accurately, her means of postponing the inevitable, was the strange inverted gated community of Heriot Row residents. What tourist guides do not mention is that, facing the neat row of Enlightenment stone houses, there are some magnificent gardens, fenced in black steel balustrades, gated, and locked – each Heriot Row resident the proud owner of a garden key.

When the weight of disappointment was unbearable, Julia would simply cross the road, unlock a gate, open it slowly and even more slowly lock it behind her and then be welcomed by the splendid reproduction of an

impossibly idyllic Scottish countryside – century-old oak trees, undulating lawns, little spinneys dotted around, discreet benches beckoning her to sit down and rest. She felt secure, protected, safe.

For years, after the divorce, she had missed that sense of private space that the Heriot Row gardens had given her. Only now that she had moved to the East Neuk had she regained that very sense of inviolable personal domain, not thanks to a garden, but through leisurely walks along the Coastal Path, the reassuring sight of the Isle of May an unmoveable beacon confirming her location more accurately than any GPS device.

55 Heriot Row would be described in London as a basement flat, whereas in Edinburgh it was unmistakably a ground-floor apartment, the few steps down at the front entrance an irrelevance compared to the back aspect of the house leading to a small but totally enchanting garden.

She was familiar with the two-lock door – A-grade listing ensures that all Heriot Row doors look remarkably similar. She enjoyed as much as ever the solid sound of a long since locked door yielding to her steady turning of the Chubb key. Automatically she reached for the light switch and was startled when the lights obligingly lit up. Sue of Reid & McHalm had warned her that the property had been vacant for over a year and therefore may be dark and cold. It was certainly cold, even in the unseasonably warm weather of early April, but it was full of light, the vestibule resplendent in the 12-light chandelier hanging from the high ceiling, the living room bathed in sunshine coming through the two full-length windows.

As soon as she stepped into the living room, she felt very uneasy – something was wrong, very wrong, but she could not say what it was. She approached swiftly the large vitrine housing the best pieces of the late Dr Gordon's collection and, just as she was about to open it, she realized why she felt so weary, as if someone was watching her. The room, indeed, as she discovered later, the entire apartment, was exactly as she had seen it over ten years ago. She was certain that, from the large Chesterfield sofa down to smallest snuff box, every single piece in the house had not been moved. It was like walking by mistake on to a movie set, left untouched from the last shoot, the cameramen and sound recordists glaring at her for disturbing the carefully arranged set.

Julia tried to shrug her uneasiness off by starting her valuation in earnest. She had decided to leave the piece de resistance, the pair of Doucai bowls, till last, – a reward for her hard work in the freezing apartment. She methodically checked every piece against the inventory in her old valuation. She loved comparing the current value of the better pieces against her ten-year old estimates, Japanese porcelain drastically under-priced today, any Chinese piece of good quality soaring in value. She proceeded much faster than she had expected mainly because she could follow her old inventory step by step, as nothing had been moved, as if it had been super-glued for posterity.

Finally, the time had arrived for her reward. As expected, the two Doucai bowls had a tiny vitrine all to themselves. She opened the glass door carefully and lifted one of the bowls slowly, turning it upside down to see again that very elusive Yongzheng mark. As she did so she nearly dropped it, as she was startled by the sound of the doorbell echoing through the empty house.

She was used to working in vacant properties and sometimes a neighbour or a delivery man would interrupt her solitary annotations of items and values, but today she was definitely unsettled by the unexpected visit. Before opening the door Julia looked through the spy-hole and was mightily relieved to see at the other end the unremarkable features of Inspector Bland.

“How can I help you?” asked Julia, not wishing to reveal that she had done some background checks on the visitor.

“Detective Chief Inspector Bland, of Police Scotland,” replied Eric Bland showing his badge and his desire to gain access to the apartment as quickly as possible. Once he was inside, DCI Bland pre-empted Julia’s next question: “I had asked Reid & McHalm to let me know immediately the new valuation was carried out. I meant to arrive here before you, but, you know, Edinburgh traffic.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr Bland. Julia Flowers, of Hillman Roberts, the auctioneers. Forgive me if my question is out of order, but I am not sure why the police should be at all interested in my valuation.”

Eric Bland could not possibly answer with the real reason. Leaving the Gordon murder unsolved was a big stumbling block to his promotion to Superintendent and, conversely, bringing a conviction home would guarantee it. He had exhausted all lines of enquiry and was clutching at straws. And if straws came in the rather lovely shape of Julia Flowers, so much the better. He reckoned she would be 50 tops, well educated, probably separated or divorced, and he found her instantly alluring.

“We checked the contents of the house against your valuation and found that nothing was missing hence the line of enquiry ‘Botched Burglary’ but, if I can be frank with you, it has led nowhere.”

Julia relaxed and broke into one of her broad smiles, genuine, sincere, utterly charming. “Well, not quite,” she said, pausing for effect.

“What do you mean ‘not quite’? I double-checked myself and not a single pin was missing. I am certain.” Eric Bland was thorough and he knew it.

“How much do you know about Chinese Imperial bowls, Mr Bland?” Julia surprised herself with the directness of her own question.

“I know that Dr Gordon had a pair of them of very good quality – the best pieces in his collection – and I also know that they were in their own cabinet when we released the apartment into the care of Reid & McHalm.” DCI Bland did not really mean the nasty implication of his last statement, but now it was too late. He saw Julia Flowers’s face tense up and her beautiful smile disappear.

“Follow me, Mr Bland,” Julia walked to the vitrine housing the Doucai bowls, opened it, took the two bowls out and then asked: “You mean these?”

“Precisely.” DCI Bland unaccountably and suddenly felt less secure of his case.

“To the untrained eye or even to a trained eye they *look like* the Doucai bowls, but I can assure that they are not. I can explain, if you like.” Julia felt in charge and it was a warm feeling. She took Bland’s silence as an invitation to carry on.

“The Yongzheng period lasted for only 22 years (1723-1735) but produced arguably the most exquisite Chinese porcelain ever. As always with Chinese pieces, the best quality bears the Imperial mark,” at this point

Julia turned one of the bowls upside down to reveal some hieroglyphics, “in this case a six-character Yongzheng mark.”

“I do not mean to be rude, Mrs Flowers, but if you could concentrate on essentials,” interrupted Bland.

“The mark is the ‘essentials’, Mr Bland,” continued Julia unperturbed, “probably only two or three Imperial calligraphers were entrusted with marking pieces made for the Emperor. A genuine mark is distinctive for the neatness of the strokes, and other features that I will not bore you with, Mr Bland. But I can assure you that these are *not* the Doucai Lingzhi bowls I valued ten years ago.”

“I do not understand. Where are the originals? Why replace them with fakes?” DCI Bland was thinking aloud.

“I can tell you that someone went to a great deal of trouble to make these copies. These are not fakes; most probably they are 19<sup>th</sup> century replicas, with the signature added on some time later.”

Now DCI Bland was angry with himself. He should have had the contents of the apartment assessed by an expert at the time. He could see it now. Too fucking late. But then what? Surely the burglars would not replace the originals with two pretty good copies that they happened to have in their swag bag and then proceed to smash Anthony Gordon’s skull and leave the scene unseen. The whole business made even less sense now.

“Thank you, Mrs Flowers. I am sorry if I was a bit blunt before, but this case has been bothering me from day one. And the missing bowls make this job even harder now,” DCI Bland thought best to mend bridges with Julia Flowers. As he was at it, he may as well go the whole hog and ask her for help. “Have you found anything else that may help us with our enquiries, Mrs Flowers?”

Julia realised that Bland was trying to make amends and she was happy to return to a less tense conversation: “Well, Mr Bland, I am not sure whether it may be of any help to you, but there are a couple of things ...”

“Please, Mrs Flowers. Anything. Anything at all.” She had not corrected his use of Mrs, he noted. Shame.

“Well, I find strange that the whole arrangement of the house has not been changed at all after ten odd years,” said Julia.

“Why is it strange?”

“It is as if nobody touched anything. Ever. Every single item is *exactly* on the very same spot it was ten years ago.”

Bland did not quite know what to do with this piece of information.

“And then there is the cheap Chinese puzzle box,” continued Julia.