

Tandem
By Alex Morgan

Hookline Books

“Sometimes terrible things happen. Lives hit unexpected reefs, break up and sink; they can never be put back, but with love and effort (and the assistance of a penguin-loving hermaphrodite if you are lucky) life can be salvaged from the wreck. *Tandem* is a wonderful ‘salvage’ novel – funny, edgy, acute and tender. I am not surprised it has been picked out by real readers – they deserve *Tandem* and it deserves them.”

Sara Maitland

“Quirky, honest and original,”

Cynthia Rogerson

“A novel about perception and the changing nature of relationships, both with oneself and with others. It reminds us that – like penguins – not everything is as black and white as it first seems.”

Clio Gray

For Trevor

On the road

Paula took off her trainers and rested her feet on the dashboard. She was tired and warm. Closing her eyes, she imagined leaping out into the darkness and running along the hard shoulder, picking up speed until she was travelling faster than all the traffic. She felt the coolness of the road spray on her calves, tasted the bitter, fume-filled rain on her tongue. Outpacing cars, lorries and coaches with long, easy strides, she left every single one of them behind, until she had the motorway to herself. Until there was nothing but the sound of her own feet. Until she was free.

She wrenched her eyes open. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Stretching down for her bag, she rummaged for the lighter and packet of Benson & Hedges she had bought that afternoon. She couldn't be sure if the nicotine would make her feel better or just string her out even more, but she reckoned it was worth a go. She peeled off the cellophane, dropped it into her bag and prepared to light up.

"I'd rather you didn't," Andy said without taking his eyes off the road.

"But I thought..." She pointed into the footwell at the scrunched up Embassy packet and fragments of ash she had brushed off the seat when she climbed in.

"Ah, no. I gave up a while ago. I just don't clean the van very often. There's not much point when it's usually only me."

"In that case, maybe I'll give up too, if you can call it that when you haven't even started." She returned the cigarette to the packet, lowered the window, and launched the box out into the night.

He gave her a reproving glance. "That wasn't very environmentally friendly."

"It's better than smoking them, and the rain'll dissolve the evidence pretty quickly."

"There's certainly enough acid in it. Let's stop for a coffee to celebrate you giving up."

"Or not starting."

"Whichever. I could do with a break. The wipers are hypnotising me."

Andy pulled off the motorway and into the car park of a service station. He checked his watch. "Meet you back here in forty-five minutes."

Paula pushed her feet into her trainers, relieved he didn't expect them to spend the time together in polite conversation.

There was a queue in the coffee shop. As she waited, she wondered why everyone else was travelling in the small hours. A young man with a drowsy toddler in his arms was placing an order at the counter. His partner sat bleary-eyed at a nearby table, the toddler's baby brother or sister snuffling gently as it slept in a car seat at her feet. An elderly couple were having a disagreement about whether sharing an apricot Danish would be too serious a breach of their diet, and a pair of vast rugby fans in matching kilts and Scotland jerseys were debating whether to have carrot cake or a fruit slice.

Paula knew that, if the last hundred and eighty miles were anything to go by, Andy didn't particularly want to spend the journey chatting either, but it would be rude to doze off, so she ordered a grande Americano with an extra shot and a double chocolate muffin. Their combined caffeine content should do the trick.

She sat down at an empty table and watched Andy help himself to the last sandwich from the cold cabinet. He ordered his coffee to go. She couldn't place his accent but it was definitely British. There was something almost Mediterranean about his looks though: the aquiline nose, chocolate eyes and slightly swarthy skin. His jeans were old and faded, just like the checked shirt he wore with the sleeves

rolled up above his biceps. His face was young – relaxed, unlined – and she would have put him at no more than thirty if it wasn't for his hair. The thick black waves he had pulled back in an elastic band were streaked with grey. She had a powerful urge to go over and free them, wrap her arms around his back, bury her face in their softness and cling on for dear life.

She shook her head and took a sip of coffee. He was just a guy who drove a van for hire; she didn't know anything about him. The old Paula would never have acted so irrationally, but things were different now and she no longer knew how she was going to behave. The old Paula had felt safe and secure. She was sensible and predictable. She didn't smoke. The new Paula was taking things an hour at a time.

She tried to make her coffee and muffin last, but when she looked at her watch it was only two thirty-five, less than fifteen minutes since they had stopped, and she still had half an hour to kill.

The women's toilets were empty. Paula dumped her bag on the long vanity unit, and felt around until she found nail scissors buried among some tissues at the bottom. She regarded herself squarely in the mirror. Fifteen centimetres should be about right. She took hold of a handful of hair and sawed into it just below her right ear, watching as the brown strands fluttered onto the mottled grey and pink melamine.

"Jesus Christ, that girl's giving herself a haircut," squealed a woman in a spangly turquoise cowboy hat, who tumbled through the swing doors with a gaggle of companions. Three of them wore sagging fuchsia boob tubes printed with the slogan *Brenda's hens*. The fourth's said simply *Brenda*. They clutched each other for support as they attempted to process the sight of Paula in mid-snip.

Brenda was the first to collect herself. Swaying on her stilettos like a tree that might fall at any moment, she made a gun out of the thumb and first two fingers of her right hand and pointed it at Paula.

In what she seemed to think was an American accent, she said, "Put those scissors down, lady, and step away from the mirror before someone gets hurt."

Her friends snorted and hiccupped at her wit.

Paula took hold of another handful of hair. "Thanks for your concern," she said grimly, "but I know what I'm doing."

Brenda staggered over and caught her scissor hand by the wrist. "I beg to differ."

Paula tried to pull free. "What do you think you're playing at?"

Brenda eased the scissors from Paula's fingers. "Those things are potentially deadly in the hands of an amateur."

"You tell her, Brenda," encouraged one of the hens.

"Just think yourself lucky the cavalry arrived in time to avert a disaster," another said.

Paula had never been stripped of her nail scissors in a service station toilet by a quartet of sozzled women before. The old Paula would probably have grabbed them back, gathered up her things and made for the door, but the new version was curious to see what would happen next.

"Look what I've found," announced the third hen as she emerged unsteadily from the cleaner's cubicle carrying a wooden stool with a ripped red plastic seat.

"Thank you, Jasmine. If you could just put it there..." Brenda pointed to a spot at the mirror directly in front of a strip light. "That will be perfect for madam."

Jasmine breathed on the seat and gave it a polish with a fake-tanned forearm. "Please, sit yourself down," she said.

Paula hesitated. "Are you actually hairdressers or are you just having a laugh?"

"I'll have you know I got to the third round of South Yorks Young Hairdresser of the Year in 1998," Brenda said huffily. "Now hurry up and park yourself – the rest of the girls are waiting in the minibus."

"I've got someone waiting too," Paula said.

"A bloke?" Brenda asked.

Paula nodded.

“And you don’t think I’ll get this lot cut quicker than you will? Besides, there’s no harm making him wait. You’ve got to treat ’em mean to keep ’em keen. Isn’t that right, girls?”

The hens roared their assent.

“So get your arse on that stool.” Brenda pulled a pair of styling scissors from her handbag. “This is my last haircut as a free woman and I can feel in my bones it’s going to be a good ’un.”

Paula did as she was told and watched Brenda eyeing her in the mirror.

“I’m assuming you don’t much care what kind of style I give you, since you were about to wreck it yourself,” she said.

The other three crowded round as she made a couple of practice snips in the air.

“What about a fringe?” one suggested.

“Are you out of your tiny mind, Louise?” Jasmine snapped. “Her eyes are her only half-decent feature. Give her a fringe and nobody’ll ever notice them.”

Jasmine turned her attention to Paula. “Have you thought of trying concealer on those bags?”

Before Paula could answer, Louise said, “Who are you calling out of her tiny mind? I’ve only had eight vodkas.”

“Yeah, but they were all doubles,” Jasmine reminded her.

“Ladies, please,” Brenda said. “A bit of hush while I’m working, if you don’t mind. Now, what do we think about layers?”

“I don’t see that you’ve got any choice with hair like that,” said the one who had mentioned the cavalry.

Staring at Paula, she added, “*Have* you tried concealer? You look like you haven’t slept in a month.”

Paula didn’t reply.

“Jodie,” Louise scolded, heaving her ample rear onto the vanity unit, “leave the poor girl alone and give Brenda peace to weave some of that South Yorks magic.”

“Yes, fuckin’ shut up the lot of you,” Brenda ordered and began snipping.

Louise handed Jodie and Jasmine each a miniature of Bacardi from her handbag. She held one out to Paula. “Go on,” she urged, “you look like you could use it.”

Paula hesitated then took the bottle. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” her new friends chorused, raising their miniatures.

Paula unscrewed the cap and knocked the contents back in one. “Bloody hell,” she gasped.

“Way t’go, girl,” Jasmine said and threw hers back. Jodie followed suit.

“What about me?” Brenda demanded.

“You can wait till you’re finished,” Louise said. “We want her looking better not worse.”

“Eck-zactly,” Jodie slurred, pulling herself up to sit beside Louise and nearly knocking Paula’s bag onto the floor.

“Here, what’s this?” she asked, holding up a packet of blonde dye that had fallen out.

“You’re a hairdresser,” Jasmine said. “You work it out.”

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Jodie said. Pointing to the cleaner’s cubicle, she added, “I wonder if there’s anything through there to mix it in.”

“You stay here. I’ll go.” Louise placed a restraining hand on the other woman’s shoulder. “You’re so pissed you’d probably end up cutting it with toilet cleaner.”

“Hang on a minute,” Paula said. “Who says I want to dye my hair?”

“What else would you have a box of Natural Born Blonde in your bag for?” Brenda reasoned, snipping away as if she was on speed.

“I wasn’t planning to do it right now.”

“No time like the present,” Jodie said gleefully. “I never go anywhere without my moulding wax.” She pulled a huge tub from her bag. “And we can style you with the hand drier.”

“But you’re all drunk!” Paula exclaimed.

“So?” Jasmine put in. “You’re letting her cut your hair.”

“It’ll take ages,” she tried again, “and your friends are waiting.”

“They’ll be fine,” Jasmine said. “There’s a full bottle of vodka in the bus.” She began massaging Paula shoulders. “Just sit back, chill and in no time we’ll have you looking like...” she paused. “Who will she look like, Jodie?”

“Keira Thingy?” Jodie suggested.

“She’s far too old to look like Keira Thingy,” Louise said.

“Sienna Miller then,” Jodie tried.

“I haven’t got the cash to look like Sienna Miller or Keira Knightley,” Paula protested. “The machine in the foyer was broken.”

Brenda stopped snipping. “You don’t think we charge for toilet makeovers, do you? You provided your own dye and the hot water’s laid on. It would be completely against our code of practice to take money in a public toilet under such circumstances.”

Paula held up her hands in submission. “Okay, I give in. Do your worst.”

“Blimey, what happened to you? I was beginning to think you’d been kidnapped,” Andy said as she climbed back into the van. “And I wouldn’t have recognised you if you weren’t wearing the same clothes. Since when did they have all-night hairdressers in service stations?”

“They don’t. I’m really sorry I was so long. I got ambushed in the toilets.”

“If that’s an ambush, I hope you got the guilty party’s phone number so they can do it again. You look fabulous. Just like...”

“Sienna Miller?”

“That’s it.”

Paula put on her seatbelt. “Thank you.” A trendy haircut and some blonde dye couldn’t hide the fact that she was a complete wreck, but it was kind of him to say it.

“Onward and upward?”

“Absolutely. Let’s go.” She sounded more certain than she felt.

He pointed to the glovebox. “Choose a cassette then.”

She opened it and sifted through his collection. It was mostly pensioner music, traditional Scottish and Irish stuff by The Chieftains and Boys of the Lough that was guaranteed to set her nerves even more on edge, but there were a few tapes by bands she didn’t know.

She picked one. “What are Seven Hertz like?”

“Which album is it?”

“Electroleum.”

“Brilliant. Perfect if you need to unwind. Stick it on and see.”

Paula slid the cassette into the slot and pressed play. Mellow electronic sound filled the warm, still air of the van.

Despite the temperature, goose bumps rose on her arms as they pulled back onto the glistening ribbon of motorway. As a child, she loved being in the car at night, especially if the weather was bad. Tightly belted into her side of the back seat, the reassuring outline of her mum’s chestnut bob and her dad’s square shoulders visible through the headrests, she snuggled into the upholstery and surrendered to the thrill of being sucked along the tunnel of darkness. No matter how loudly the rain drummed on the bodywork, she knew it could never penetrate this cosy cocoon. Before long, soothed by the lullaby of windscreen wipers and whooshing spray, she slid into sleep. Waking as the car pulled up, there was the sinking realisation that she had squandered most of the magical journey, the knowledge that no matter where they had just arrived, it couldn’t offer anything as wonderful as the tantalising expectation and utter security she had just experienced.

If she had known then how much she would long to return to that simplicity and freedom, she would never have allowed herself to miss a second. Now, night-time roads frightened her, menaced her with their destructive power, and yet here she was, making this journey in the dark.

Turning her head, she caught sight of her new short, blonde hair reflected in the window and suddenly she could see Pete as a child. She closed her eyes. They were sitting together at the breakfast table, that day all those years ago when they had become twins. Pete was crying because the kids at school had been mean to him about having a birthday on Christmas day – they said it was no birthday at all. Her dad, who had been doing *The Scotsman* crossword, looked down at his son's tear-streaked cheeks and took hold of his hand.

"We can fix that," he said. "How would you like an extra-special extra summer birthday instead? On, let's see..." He thought for a moment. "How about the twenty-fifth of July? From now on, your extra birthday will be the day your mum and I got married. How does that sound?"

Pete wiped his face on his sleeve. "Will I get presents?"

"You certainly will. You'll get Christmas presents at Christmas and your birthday presents will be in July."

Pete beamed.

"That's not fair," Paula shouted. "My birthday's only nine days after Pete's and I don't have an extra-special extra summer birthday. I want my presents on the twenty-fifth of July too."

Her brother considered this. "If our birthday's the same, you won't be nearly a year older than me anymore." His face broke into a wide grin. "I won't be the littlest in the class and you won't be the biggest. We'll be the same."

"Are you sure that's what you want, Paula?" their dad asked.

She didn't hesitate. "Yes, I want an extra-special extra summer birthday."

"Well, then, from now on you will both celebrate your birthday on July the twenty-fifth, and do you know what that makes you?"

Pete shook his head.

"I do," Paula said triumphantly. "We'll be twins just like the Little Miss Twins. They live in Twoland and say everything twice. Except Pete can't be a Little Miss Twin because he's not a girl. He's a stinky boy."

Pete ignored this insult. "Please, let's be twins, Paula. I can say everything twice. Please, let's. I can, I can. See?"

"Yes," Paula said. "We'll be twins. I'll be the big twin and you'll be the little twin, and I'll always kick anyone that's bad to you."

It was daylight by the time Paula spotted the turning for the village.

She pointed to the rusty black and white signpost poking out of a hedge. "There it is! Down to the right."

Andy grinned. "I know."

"Really?"

"I know the area quite well. I love Scotland."

They were the first words they had exchanged since stopping for another coffee just after the Border.

The van bounced down the twisting, potholed road. "I hope there's nothing fragile in those boxes," he observed. "My suspension isn't up to this kind of thing anymore."

"Yours or the van's?" Paula enquired, hoping humour might dilute the sensation of panic seeping up from her stomach.

But Andy didn't rise to it. Stopping to let a tractor out of a field, he looked round at her. "I don't know what you're running away from, but whatever it is, you couldn't have picked a nicer place to hide."

Paula smiled weakly.

Packing up

The night before, Paula had answered the door to Andy dressed in an old T-shirt and denim shorts. She had felt him looking at her legs as she led him up the hall. They were the only part of her body she really liked, muscular yet lean and shapely. Her mum was always telling her how pretty she was, and Ollie was forever saying she had beautiful skin and gorgeous eyes – they were a pale greeny-grey, with long fine lashes – but Paula invariably gave the same reply: “*Gorgeous won’t get you up a hill when you’re knackered.*”

“Sorry, I’m not quite ready but I won’t be long,” she said.

“I get the impression this was a last-minute decision,” Andy replied.

Paula chewed her lip. “It wasn’t exactly planned.”

She showed him into the sitting room. There were piles of books, CDs and DVDs everywhere, and four large cardboard boxes sat in the centre of the room. The furniture was modern and simple. An angular sofa, a couple of chairs with cream linen covers and a wall of blond wood bookcases were softened and brightened by arty prints and colourful cushions. The windows had blinds rather than curtains and the floor was pale laminate. The lack of fussy details, ornaments or other knick-knacks pointed to an existence that was normally far more ordered.

“Please, sit down,” Paula said, lifting a stack of magazines from one end of the sofa. She gazed around for somewhere to put them.

“There’s a bit of space under the coffee table,” Andy suggested.

She slid them under the table.

“It’s not actually as bad as it looks.” She wasn’t sure if she was trying to convince him or herself.

“It’s good to see you’ve got decent boxes,” he offered. “I once moved a woman who had thousands of books and she’d put them all in carrier bags. It was one of the worst days of my life.”

“I can’t take credit for the boxes. The flat upstairs just changed hands and I begged them from the girl who moved in.”

Paula had called him the day before, after seeing his advert in the local paper. *Van with driver. Reasonable rates. All work considered as long as it’s legal. Happy to travel anywhere, particularly north of the Border.* She asked if he meant what he said about going to Scotland. He said he did.

“Could you take me and some stuff to Fife then?” she asked. “The other drivers I phoned didn’t want to venture beyond the M25.”

“No problem. I enjoy getting out of the South-East. Spend too long here and you start to forget the rest of Britain exists.”

“I know what you mean.”

“When were you thinking of?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Well, if you want to go during the day, next Tuesday’s the soonest I can do, but if you’re happy to travel overnight we could leave late tomorrow.”

“Overnight?” She sounded uncertain.

“If that doesn’t suit you, why not wait till Tuesday? Or you could try some more numbers.”

“No, overnight’s fine.” She said it quickly so neither of them had time to change their mind.

She was peering into one of the boxes now, left hand tugging on her right earlobe. She looked over at him. “Sorry, did you say something?”

“I said is he coming?”

“Who?”

Andy leant over and picked up a threadbare stuffed animal with a long tail that was sitting on a pile of books. “Your friend here. Is he a rat?”

She managed a brief smile. “That’s Arthur. He’s a very elderly dormouse.”

“So is Arthur coming to Scotland?”

She held out her hand and Andy passed him to her. She put him in the box nearest to her. “That’s the easiest decision I’ve made all day. I was sure I’d be done by the time you got here, but deciding what to pack’s taken far longer than I expected.”

“Is it a permanent move?”

She shrugged. “I won’t know till I get there.”

“That’s exciting.”

Paula picked up a handful of CDs, checked through them and put them into one of the boxes. Lifting them out again, she discarded a couple and returned the rest to the box.

“If you’re not certain what to take, it’s probably better to pack too much rather than too little.”

“I suppose.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“Do you want to bring some music for the van? It’ll need to be cassettes – the facilities are pretty basic.”

“I only have CDs.”

“You’ll have to make do with my choice then. Most people drive themselves when I move their stuff, so I only have my own taste to consider. I take it you’re not a car owner.”

“I don’t drive. I prefer the view from the passenger seat.”

“I love driving, especially long journeys. They give you so much thinking time.”

“Was that a hint?” she asked quickly. “I won’t intrude on your peace, if that’s what’s worrying you. I’ve no plans to tell you my life story.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was just trying to say I’m happy alone or with company.”

“Sorry.” Paula gnawed on the corner of a fingernail and glanced around the room.

“Actually, I think I’m the one who’s intruding. Why don’t I leave you to it for a while? It’ll be much easier to get organised without me breathing down your neck.”

She ran a hand through her hair. “No, no, it’s fine. I’m fine. I really am organised.”

It was his turn to smile.

“My dad says I remind him of a swan sometimes,” she offered, “desperate to give the impression that I’ve got everything under control even though it’s obvious I’m paddling frantically under the surface.”

“We all do that.”

She nodded. “I’ve just got to finish these and put a few last things into a case. Then I’ll get changed and help you into the van with the bike.” She looked at him pleadingly. “I could make you some tea or coffee.”

“No, you concentrate on what you need to do. I’m going to stretch my legs and buy some water for the journey.”

“The corner shop at the far end of the road should still be open.”

She made to follow him to the front door, but he held up his hand. “You carry on. I’ll see myself out.”

When he returned twenty minutes later, she had stacked the boxes from the sitting room into the hall, and by the time he had taken them out to the van, two more, one containing a giant spider plant, the other a trio of bushy ferns, had taken their place.

Paula was putting a pair of suitcases by the door when he came back in. “Nearly there,” she said.

She reappeared after a few seconds with a sports bag. “That’s the last of it apart from the bike. I’ll just pull on my jeans.”

As she turned to go back into the bedroom, he said, “That’s unusual.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. "What is?"

He pointed to the outside of her left ankle, where the tattooed characters P&P formed a little curve just above the bone.

"What does it stand for? Not 'Post and Packing' I presume?"

"Not post and packing," she confirmed curtly and closed the bedroom door with a sharp click.

19 Shore Road

“Isn’t that wonderful?” Andy inhaled deeply. “There’s no smell on earth to beat it.”

Paula shivered in the breeze from his open window. “I can’t smell anything.”

“Give it a couple of seconds. There’s no medicine like the sea. It’ll lift your heart and blow all the cobwebs away.”

She turned away from him to take in the row of Edwardian villas they were passing. They had freshly painted doors and window frames, and their cottagey front gardens were a riot of colourful neglect. The shiny SUVs and people carriers lining the pavement marked them out as weekend boltholes for well-heeled families from the Central Belt. The panorama of fields and trees on the other side of the road offered no clue to what lay less than a mile ahead, beyond where the road dipped out of sight, but before long, their occupants would be gathering up buckets and spades, pushchairs and fishing nets, sand-heavy rugs and carrier bags of swimsuits, and setting out on the day’s expedition to the shore. Children would dig holes and hunt for crabs, while parents sheltered with books and newspapers behind striped windbreaks. At lunchtime, they would share egg sandwiches and crisps, and drink through miniature straws from little cardboard cartons of apple or orange juice. Paula smiled inwardly at the thought.

As they left the villas behind, she tried to visualise what they would pass next, but nothing came. The bottom of the dip seemed to signal the beginning of Craskferry proper. There were houses on both sides of the road now, short terraces and a few individual cottages, all with a simple, symmetrical Georgian elegance and all utterly unfamiliar. She had hoped... What had she hoped exactly? That she would recognise everything instantly, after more than twenty years? Perhaps not, but it would have been reassuring if something, some small detail, reignited even a flicker of memory, a glimmer of recognition, just enough to confirm she had made the right decision.

Give it time, like Andy said, she reproached herself silently. There’s no rush now.

He pulled up at a T-junction. “Which way?”

Paula consulted the printout of the letting agent’s email. “It says turn right at the junction with Main Street.”

“Okay, that’s here.” He flicked on the indicator even though the roads were deserted. “Then what?”

“First left and sharp right takes us onto Shore Road. It’s number nineteen.”

He followed her instructions.

“Look, the odd numbers are on the beach side. It must have a sea view.” He sounded excited.

“The description says it does. You can park there.” Paula pointed to a space in front of a four-storey tenement with a crumbling cement façade whose door opened directly onto the pavement.

Andy manoeuvred the van into the space. “So which one is it?”

“This is seventeen so nineteen should be next door, but all I can see is a gap, and the house on the other side’s far too grand.”

Andy leant over the steering wheel and craned his neck. “What’s it supposed to be?”

She rechecked the email. “The ground floor of a charming seaside cottage built in the 1830s.”

“Oh dear.”

“What do you mean ‘oh dear?’”

“You should ask for a refund.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” Paula demanded.

“It looks more 1840s to me.”

“Jesus, you frightened me.” She bent down to retrieve her bag from the footwell so he wouldn’t see how close to tears the harmless joke had left her.

“Do you have the key?” he asked.

“It’s supposed to be under a flowerpot to the left of the door.”

“Come on then.”

The house was set back three or four metres from its much larger neighbours. It had a little front garden, just a couple of beds of blowsy pink roses on either side of a short path of crushed shells. Andy felt under a terracotta pot of orange and yellow nasturtiums.

“Here.” He held up a ziplock bag containing a ring with several keys.

Paula selected the largest one. The heavy storm door opened with an easy clunk to reveal a tiled vestibule with a wooden umbrella stand and a single door panelled with intricately etched glass.

“This is strange.”

“What is?” Andy asked.

“The agent said it was a flat, with the owner living upstairs, but there’s only one door.”

“Go in and see then. I’ll unload.”

Paula took a deep breath and opened the inner door. Directly opposite her, across the dark green linoleum, was another front door where the bottom of the stairs should have been. It had a little nameplate that said *McIntyre*. She could feel her face beginning to crumple.

“That’s not on.” Andy put the box of ferns down in the vestibule and joined her in the hall. “You can’t have complete strangers walking through your flat any time they like to get to their front door. If I were you, I’d phone the agent and ask for something else.”

“There isn’t anything,” Paula said glumly. “This was all she had left. She said it had just come on her books.” She waved at the pristine magnolia walls. “Smells like the paint’s barely dry. She said the layout was a bit unusual and that was why it was quite cheap. I thought she meant the bedroom was off the sitting room or something.”

“Are you sure there’s nowhere else?”

“Not a thing. She said I was lucky to find anything at all at this time of year. The village is packed with holidaymakers.”

“We’d better get on then.” He picked up the box. “Where do you want this?”

“Let’s try in here.” Paula opened the door immediately to her right.

The square sitting room contained a worn chintz sofa, a couple of matching armchairs and a TV on a small table beside a cast-iron fireplace. The carpet was a swirly mess of red and green. Two net-curtained windows looked out onto the street.

A pair of oak doors in the centre of the back wall led them into a study with an old kitchen table for a desk, and a quartet of empty bookcases. A picture window running the width of the room revealed a long, narrow back garden and, beyond a wall with a gate in the middle, the sea, sparkling gold and silver in the early morning sunshine as it rolled away to meet the perfect turquoise sky.

The beach itself was hidden behind the wall, but Paula could see it in her mind’s eye. It was the one thing she could picture with certainty: the wide strip of sand, the peeling paint of the small flights of wooden steps that provided each back garden with its own private access, the disused granary building beside the harbour wall, the cliffs in the distance – they were as sharp as if she had seen them yesterday.

Andy gave an impressed whistle and set the box of plants on the table. “That’s some view. Maybe this place isn’t so bad after all.”

“Maybe not. I’m going to explore.”

She found the bedroom opposite the sitting room. It had the same hideous carpet, a small double bed made up with pale blue sheets still creased from the packet, and a wall of wardrobes with white louvered doors. There was a dark wood dressing table in front of the net-curtained window, with a dining chair upholstered in red velvet in place of a stool.

Next door was a shower room that looked as if it had never been used. A tub of grout sat in the white sink and there were two large tins of magnolia paint on the floor by the toilet. She glanced in the mirror. The person looking back had flatteringly cut and tousled blonde hair, but her eyes were dead.

The kitchen was at the far end of the hall and shared the same spectacular sea view as the study. It was clean enough but the avocado units and cream tiles with stylised maroon flowers were pure seventies.

“Where shall I put this?” Andy lent the electric blue tandem against the kitchen door.

Paula looked at it as if she had never seen it before. “I ... I don’t know. It’ll be too long for the cupboard under the stairs but there doesn’t seem to be any other storage.”

Andy walked over to the window. “What about out there?” He pointed to a large shed halfway down the garden. “Shall I take a look?”

She unlocked the back door and watched as he walked the length of the grass. There was something tremendously attractive, sexy even, about the easy way he moved, a relaxed confidence that said he was completely comfortable in the world.

Andy checked all around the shed, tried the door, peered in the window. “It’s perfectly secure and there’s plenty of space,” he shouted. “All I can see is a lawnmower and a wheelbarrow. Have you got a key?”

Paula examined the ring. “I don’t think so,” she called back. “The only one left is labelled ‘beach gate’.”

“Then you’ll have to ask your neighbour.” He nodded up at the first floor.

Together they lifted the tandem down the outside steps and propped it against the kitchen wall.

“It should be safe enough here for the time being,” Andy said.

“The agent said she’d arrange some basic supplies. Why don’t I put the kettle on?”

“Good idea. I’ll finish unloading.”

Paula found a litre of semi-skimmed milk in the fridge along with a small bottle of freshly squeezed orange juice, a block of mature cheddar and a packet of organic butter. There was a paper bag of tomatoes and a punnet of mushrooms in the vegetable drawer at the bottom. A box of free-range eggs, a pack of teabags and a large wholemeal loaf had been crammed into the bread bin. She wondered if the agent was feeling guilty about not mentioning the lack of privacy. She had probably thought Paula wouldn’t take the flat if she told her, but a few groceries couldn’t excuse such an omission.

She could hear Andy moving about in the hall.

“Do you fancy a mushroom omelette to go with your tea?” she called.

“That would be great.”

Paula gathered utensils from the unfamiliar cupboards and drawers. Stooping to light the gas for the frying pan, she felt a draft on the small of her back. She spun round but there was no one there.

“Andy?”

He stuck his head around the kitchen door. “You okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No, no, I’m fine,” she said hurriedly. “I thought you came in.”

“Nope.”

She bit her lip. “Just my imagination.”

Her hands shook as she cracked eggs into a bowl. “It’s nothing some sleep won’t fix.” But even as she said it, she knew it wasn’t true.

Paula was serving the omelette when he reappeared.

“That’s the lot in.”

She put their plates on the table. “Sit down. I’ll get the toast. I hope you don’t take sugar, because there isn’t any.”

“I gave it up before I quit smoking.”

Andy poured the tea and chinked his mug against hers. “Here’s to your new home. I hope you’ll be very happy.”

“That very much depends on whoever’s up there.” Paula raised her eyes to the ceiling. “Here’s hoping they’re agoraphobic.”

“What brings you to Craskferry anyway?”

She hesitated. “I came across it in a Sunday supplement feature on Scottish seaside villages and thought it looked...” She had been going to say familiar but realised that would only invite more questions. Instead she concluded limply, “like a nice place to spend some time.”

It was obvious from his expression that he knew he was being fobbed off.

“Sorry, I...” she tried again.

He silenced her with a wave of his fork. “It’s okay. None of my business. And what I said earlier about running away, I’m sorry. I was tired and being flippant, and I shouldn’t have. I should stick to driving and humping boxes.” He took a mouthful of omelette. “This is excellent by the way.”

“Thank you. Things are a bit complicated right now. I mean I’ve got a lot going on and I... I’ve got to get settled here, find a solicitor...” Paula lifted her mug with both hands and swallowed some tea. “The past few weeks...”

She shook her head and looked down at the red gingham tablecloth, unable to continue.

“It really is okay. Remember what I said about the healing power of the sea? It can fix things if you let it.”

A tear slithered down her cheek. She went to wipe it away, but he took her hand in both of his. Her instinct was to pull away, but the warmth of his touch dissolved the tension in her hand and arm and she felt herself relax.

“You’re going to be fine,” he said with absolute conviction.

“Am I?” Paula whispered. “How could you know that?”

Tiredness was making her head swim. Feeling weightless, she leant across the table towards him. The urge to wrap her arms around him, to let go of everything and take refuge in his quiet strength was as powerful as it had been the night before. Their lips were almost touching. He was going to kiss her.

A soft voice observed from the doorway, “You must be Miss Tyndall.”

Andy let go of her hand and jumped to his feet. Paula started to get up as well.

“No, no, stay where you are.” The stout, grey-haired woman had a wicker shopping basket over one arm. “I was on my way out and wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

“Are you Mrs er...?” Paula struggled to recall the name on her upstairs neighbour’s door. Her memory was constantly letting her down these days.

“McIntyre. Well, if you have everything you need, I’ll leave you and your...” She looked at Andy. “Your friend to finish breakfast.”

To Paula’s horror, Andy said, “I was just leaving actually. I have a dentist’s appointment to get to.” He patted the right side of his bottom jaw. “Oil of cloves can only do so much for toothache.”

“Aye, there’s nothing worse than a toothache. I’ll bid you good day then.” Mrs McIntyre headed back down the hall.

Paula willed Andy to sit down again but he didn’t.

“It was great to meet you,” he said. “I think you’ll find what you need here.”

“You can’t leave yet.” The feeling of panic was overwhelming. He was going and she would be left alone. She reached out for his hand but he slid it into his pocket and followed Mrs McIntyre.

It took Paula a moment to react and by the time she caught up with him he had reached the front doorstep. She grabbed his arm. “Please, don’t you want to stay and... I thought maybe... that you wanted to...”

He gently removed her hand from his arm. “I can’t stay, not when you’re like this. It would be wrong and we’d both regret it.”

She made one final attempt. “But you can’t drive all that way without any sleep.”

He stepped out onto the path. “I’m only going as far as Edinburgh. I’ve got an old friend there who’s a dentist. I’ll get some sleep at his place.”

Before she could humiliate herself any further by getting down on her knees to beg, or ripping off her clothes, some deeper part of her took charge. "Have a safe journey then, and thank you," she heard herself say. "I'll recommend you to anyone who needs their stuff moved."

