



Unsolicited

A Booklover's Mystery

Julie Kaewert

UNSOLICITED

“An action-packed, suspenseful thriller, with mystery that grows downright spooky before it is all very satisfactorily wrapped up in an exciting man-against-the-sea climax off the coast of Nantucket. There’s never a dull page in this international page-turner.... We hope to hear from [Kaewert] again. She is good.”

—*The Denver Post*

“*Unsolicited* appeals on several levels, not the least of which is the character of Alex, a protagonist directly from the Dick Francis school of strong yet vulnerable, self-reliant young men. The author skillfully incorporates the compelling subject of the missing manuscript ... into the framework of the story. Adding to the pleasure here are the vicious rivalries between various publishers in London, giving the novel an air of authenticity unusual in mysteries.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“A roller-coaster ride of thrills ... With typical British style and wit, *Unsolicited* is one of the better examples of the English way of writing. Eschewing sex and violence, [Kaewert] creates a story with an actual plot. How amazing.”

—*Star-Banner*, Ocala, Fla.

“I was thoroughly captivated by this book. The plot moved along at a fast pace, and certainly held my interest throughout. All of the characters are believable, and Alex, himself, is a likable and effective protagonist. As I read, I was reminded more and more of the early Dick Francis novels.... Like Francis, Ms. Kaewert writes about a milieu with which she is familiar and this adds to the realism of the novel. I recommend this new mystery highly, and await further offerings from this author.”

—*Mystery News*

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Julie Kaewert



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UNSOLICITED

A Booklover's Mystery

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About the Author

PARTIAL LIST OF *UNSOLICITED* CHARACTERS

BARNES APPLETON—reviewer for the *Sunday Tempus Book Review*

SIMON BOW—managing director and owner of Bow and Bow, Ltd., literary publishers

IAN HIGGINBOTHAM—managing director of Plumtree Press and friend of the Plumtree family

NICK KHASNOURI—Plumtree Press accountant

ROMNEY MARSH—Ministry of Defence official; one-time friend of the Plumtree family

ALEX PLUMTREE—owner of Plumtree Press; in love with Sarah Townsend

MAX PLUMTREE—brother of Alex and journalist with *The Watch*

ALISON SOAMES—respected publicist at Soames and Sons; daughter of Rupert Soames

RUPERT SOAMES—owner and managing director of Soames and Sons, Publishers, Ltd.

GEORGE STONEHAM—Alex Plumtree's best friend

LISETTE STONEHAM—Alex Plumtree's secretary; wife of George Stoneham

SARAH TOWNSEND—investment banker; much admired by Alex Plumtree

When I received the telegram in Skópelos, I should have wired my regrets immediately. “Thanks, but no thanks. Having far too much fun leading sailing holidays. Mu respectfully decline offer to take charge of family firm. Stop.”

Instead, I said I’d be on the next plane, and it nearly cost me my life.

I’d had reservations about coming back to manage the small, sedate publishing house I inherited, but my worst fear was that I would die of boredom. No one told me that book publishing was a murderous business, and that within a single week in the not-so-distant future I would barely escape death in a dozen exotic forms.

The treachery of the business wasn’t immediately apparent; far from it. For my first two years with the company it seemed that nothing could go wrong, and I was lulled into a false sense of well-being. It came as a nasty surprise when, on a drizzly October evening almost two years to the day after I’d returned to London, I got the first inkling that all was not as it should be.

I climbed out of Farringdon tube station jet-lagged and woozy, fresh off the plane from Boston. I’d spent two utterly unproductive days there trying to close a copublishing deal with an American company, and didn’t much feel like going out that evening. But a promise was a promise. Two weeks earlier I had agreed to attend the publication party of a competing book publisher, Soames and Sons, to celebrate the release of *Fleet Street Beat*, the memoirs of one of London’s more respected tabloid editors.

I turned down a cobblestoned alley under a sign that said CHURCHILL’S REAL ALES and sighed. Why Soames and Sons was throwing its party at this tourist trap of an old brewery, miles from the nearest tube station, I couldn’t imagine. I’d been here once before, and the smell of rampant fermentation was still fresh in my mind.

I told myself to give Soames and Sons credit; at least they had a reason to throw a party. It was more than I could say for my little company.

No sooner had I straightened my tie and entered the brewery’s yawning stone hall than Alison Soames wiggled up to me in a tight electric blue suit. She was the new blood at Soames and Sons, which I often thought should be renamed Soames and Daughter, as Rupert Soames had no sons.

“Alex! You came.” She was flushed and slightly out of breath as she took my arm. Alison’s décolleté fashions and breathy voice tricked some people into thinking she had more beauty than brains, but she didn’t fool me.

I looked around and smiled, shaking my head. “You’ve done it again, Alison. I don’t know how you expect us to compete.”

It was clear to me now why Alison, a public-relations genius, had decided to have the party here. The brewery’s size and general atmosphere of decay had allowed her to create a full-scale replica of Fleet Street, the infamous home of London’s journalists. Pasteboard facades of the familiar buildings lined the walls, and costumed actors set type by hand at old-fashioned printing presses positioned throughout the room. I gazed in wonder at several giant rolls of

newsprint hanging overhead, suspended from ceiling-mounted cranes.

I was impressed by Alison's authenticity. Not many people knew that when London papers had actually printed their news in Fleet Street, there had been no other way to get the barrels of newsprint into the cramped old buildings but through upper-storey windows. Cranes had hoisted the two-ton cylinders in from the back alley like tin cans on strings.

She gave me a look of mock reprimand, tilting her bleached blond head to one side. "Don't give me your hard-luck story, Plumtree. You're the one with the best-seller."

I smiled modestly. There was no point in telling her that, barring a miracle, within a week or so I would have to close the doors of Plumtree Press for good.

Alison beckoned to a passing waiter and lifted a pint off his tray. She thrust it into my hands as if in condolence. "Drink it and weep, Plumtree."

Standing very close, she ran her hand down my back in a way that made me shiver. Then she winked and was gone. I stared after her for a moment, feeling slightly confused in her wake. Alison never failed to interest me, physically if not otherwise, and she would probably be a lot of fun if I were in the market. But I wasn't—not at the moment, anyway.

I took a sip from the dripping mug, trying not to spill it on my suit, and got my bearings.

Everyone was hard at it, the journalists drinking and the publishers talking as fast as they decently could. Most of the book reviewers from the major London papers and magazines were there, as well as the managing directors or senior editors of publishing houses like mine. They studiously avoided looking at their watches to determine which train they could take to their country retreats for the weekend; after all, it was well worth the investment of a Friday evening to establish a rapport with an influential reviewer. The return, in the form of a review in a Sunday paper, could be on their doorstep in the space of a few weeks.

With gratitude I spotted Barnes Appleton, the most influential reviewer of them all, and headed in his direction. A chat with him was a worthy excuse for not performing my regular duty for the evening, which was a sort of Plan B in case the American copublishing deal didn't come through. Loathsome as the thought was, I would have to gauge the interest of several competitors, including Rupert Soames, in purchasing a chunk of my company.

It was unfortunate that the only people likely to be interested in a piece of Plumtree Press were my father's most bitter competitors, several of whom were downright obnoxious. Beyond even more than the personalities involved, I hated the idea of selling out. Aside from the feeling that I was betraying my father and three generations of Plumtrees before him, I hated it because Plumtree Press had come so close to having more profit on its bottom line this year than any of its competitors had seen in decades.

Just not close enough.

Barnes Appleton saw me coming and raised his glass in greeting. He reminded me of a chubby leprechaun: short, fairly jolly, rosy cheeks. But this benign image masked a force to be reckoned with in the world of print. He wrote for the *Sunday Tempus*, and had won the prestigious Beecroft Award, the British equivalent of the American Pulitzer prize, the year before. His exposé on a third-world dictator had actually gotten the ruffian thrown out of office.

Barnes was also a recovering alcoholic, and of all his achievements I admired that one the most. I thought it must take a lot of courage on his part to come to these industry functions where alcohol flowed like the River Fleet.

“Alex,” Barnes said, looking pleased. “I hoped I’d see you here tonight.” He had to tip his head back to look up at me, and I was aware of our extreme difference in height. At six foot five inches, I was a full foot taller than he, and I wondered if he would get a sore neck talking to me.

“Well,” I said, raising my eyebrows. “Same here.” I was surprised at the warmth of his greeting and somewhat flattered. We were acquaintances, certainly, but no more. I wondered what was up. “How’s the critiquing business?”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about.” He glanced at someone over my shoulder, gave me a worried smile, and steered me off toward a nearby printing press. Assuming he was trying to avoid someone, I played along.

When we were safely behind the press, Barnes glanced surreptitiously around the room and frowned. Finally he spoke, barely moving his lips and speaking so softly that I had to lean over to hear him.

“I’m not sure I should be telling you this, Alex, but I think you’ve a right to know.”

I looked at him with interest. I’d never seen him act so mysteriously.

“Know what?”

He reacted as if I’d shouted. He looked around nervously and held up a palm. “For God’s sake, Alex, don’t make a scene—act your inscrutable self.”

“All right, all right,” I said, chastised. His habit of looking around was contagious.

When he spoke again, it was in a stage whisper. “Something very big has happened with that sequel you gave me to preview.” He swept the room again with his eyes. “And someone out there is doing his best to prevent me from telling the story. I wanted you to know before —”

“Barnes! Alex.” It was Alison Soames getting her money’s worth. The opportunity to talk to Barnes Appleton was one of the reasons she’d organized this party. With a mixture of fascination and dread, I wondered how close she would stand this time.

Barnes rolled his eyes.

“What are you doing over here all by yourselves?” She put a hand on each of our backs. Alison did a lot of touching, and people criticized her for using femininity to swell the bar balances of Soames and Sons. But I thought her very bright and genuinely kind, and accepted her flirtatiousness in good humor.

We turned and looked at her, and she rewarded us with a dazzling smile. I wondered briefly if it were possible for teeth to be that white naturally.

“Barnes.” Her throaty voice was thick with innuendo, but the smile was all innocence. “I know you objective observers don’t like to be told when a publisher likes your review, but your piece on our new Mountbatten biography was a work of art.”

That was diplomatic, I thought. Barnes had, in fact, skewered the book, but had done so artfully, parodying the author’s overblown prose throughout. I’d laughed out loud myself when I’d read it. But Alison knew that people would buy the book just to find out what Barnes had been writing about.

She touched his arm, and he looked down as if a mosquito had landed on it. He was happily married to a barrister—a very pretty one—and didn’t like the thought of people seeing Alison touch him.

She removed her hand and withdrew slightly, unoffended. Without missing a beat she

continued, "Tell me. Of all the reviewers at the *Tempus*, how were we so lucky as to get you?"

"What can I say?" Barnes smiled modestly, pink cheeks glowing, trying to make the best of the situation. "It'll do well, I think."

"Let's hope so," Alison said fervently, pressing her hands together and glancing at the ceiling. "We—"

She did a double take, her startled gaze returning to the ceiling. Her face froze, and she automatically looked up. I had the impression of something huge and white falling fast—on top of us. I dived for the ground sideways, taking Alison and Barnes with me.

It was enough. A ton of newsprint—one of the cylinders suspended from the ceiling of the warehouse—slammed into the floor inches from where we had stood, creating a seismic, earthquakelike vibration and a deafening boom.

On the floor, the three of us looked into one another's stunned faces. In fact, Barnes's and Alison's faces were all I could see, as my glasses had come off in the dive.

Alison in particular was easy to see, as she was lying on top of me. It wasn't altogether unpleasant, and I waited for her to disengage herself in her own time before starting the hunt for my glasses. I didn't publicize it, but I was legally blind, and those glasses were all that stood between me and a seeing-eye dog. If they had been damaged, I was in trouble; they were a prototype pair made of a new German plastic. The wonder material, which was still not in full production, was able to incorporate the same correction in a quarter-inch-thick lens that required half an inch of ordinary glass. My previous lenses had been over half an inch thick, and the bulk and weight of them, not to mention their appearance, was unworkable. Contact lenses would have been the obvious solution if the shape of my eye hadn't precluded them.

Alison took advantage of the situation somewhat, generating a certain amount of friction as she slid off. I felt around as inconspicuously as I could for the frames. The rest of the room seemed to be suspended in time; no one spoke or moved.

I finally arrived at the conclusion that my glasses were nowhere within reach. They were a royal nuisance.

I turned to Alison and broke the reverberating silence. "Must you be so authentic about executing your party themes?"

She rewarded me with a shaky smile, and we slowly picked ourselves up. Voices began to buzz around us.

"Oh"—Alison's face abruptly disappeared and swam into view again—"these must be yours." Bless you, I thought as Alison pressed the glasses into my hand. I put them on, relieved that they had survived unscathed, and joined Alison and Barnes in contemplating the giant roll of paper that had nearly smashed us to a pulp.

"Look at that," said Barnes, wide-eyed and pointing. "It's broken right through the wooden floor." The cylinder had evidently landed off-balance before toppling over onto its side, and there was a neat crescent-shaped imprint in the false, raised wooden floor.

I looked up and saw that the cable of the ceiling-mounted crane was intact, its hook swaying some thirty feet above us. Evidently the problem hadn't been a frayed cable. Perhaps the hook had been faulty—the metal fatigued—and it had snapped.

I was contemplating the hook when a movement near the ceiling caught my eye. Something

dark had moved on one of the metal walkways that ran around the room at two-store intervals, a sort of modern minstrel's gallery. I squinted, straining to catch it again, but it was gone.

"Back in a moment," I said to Barnes and Alison, making for a door on the wall to my right. The room began to buzz as I entered a narrow, dank hallway and banged through a set of double doors toward what I thought was the office section of the building. These office buildings resembled nothing so much as rabbit warrens; fortunately I'd once had a self-guided tour of this place while searching for the well-hidden toilet.

On the other side of the doors I found myself back in the twentieth century, in a deserted room of desultory beige-burlapped cubicles. An exit sign glowed red on the opposite wall, and I ran towards it, hoping for a stairway. I was in luck. I listened for hurried steps descending but heard nothing. Taking the steps two at a time, I bounded up to the first landing, then the second, then the third, where I stopped short.

A maintenance man stood on the fourth landing, in grey trousers and a white shirt emblazoned "Acme Sanitation Services." He looked up at me in irritation, then resumed his listless mopping of the linoleum. For a fraction of a moment I entertained the notion that he might have been the one on the gallery, if indeed there had been anyone there at all. He was the only available candidate.

But his flaccid face and half-open eyes told me that he wasn't quick enough—or awake enough—to have rushed down the stairs, got into character, and mopped a whole flight of stairs without even being out of breath. The fourth flight of stairs behind him was fresh, damp and bore no footprints.

On the off-chance, I said, "Have you seen anyone come down these steps in the last few minutes? Dark clothes, in a hurry?"

Had I been a bit of chewing gum on the floor, I might have received a more enthusiastic response. He glanced at me again, but didn't answer.

"Please, it's urgent." I tried again, punctuating every word. "Anyone? Here?" Indicating the steps behind him, I made a little running motion with the fingers of my right hand and felt like an idiot.

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. Crazy Englishman.

Deciding he didn't speak English, I nodded my thanks and stepped around him, throwing open the door to the hallway. There were more offices here, and a door to the fourth-floor gallery.

I opened the door and stuck out my head. No one. Looking down, I saw that people were congregating around Alison and Barnes, who looked slightly bewildered. The controls for the ceiling crane were only a foot away from me on the wall, and the hook that had suspended the paper from a height of two stories swung in random air currents two levels below.

Easy enough to figure out the controls, open the hook, drop the paper, and duck through the door into the empty offices.

But why?

I made my way back down, past the Acme man. He still hadn't made it past the third landing, and I eyed him suspiciously. All my life people had teased me about my vivid imagination. Maybe I hadn't really seen anyone. It had only been the merest suggestion of movement, after all, and it was dark up there.

I had an uncomfortable feeling that it hadn't been an accident, but I decided to keep the cheerful thought to myself.

Glad to be back with the crowd, I made my way toward Alison and Barnes amid sympathetic murmurs and concerned inquiries. Rupert Soames hovered near Alison like a bear guarding his young, furiously berating the manager of the facility. The pasty-faced young manager quaked in his boots, and I couldn't blame him. Rupert looked fierce at the best of times, a hulking, twenty-stone giant of a man with wiry reddish gray eyebrows that formed an angry V at the bridge of his nose. Like a bear, he could be particularly intimidating when angry and seemed to arouse an almost primal fear in those unaccustomed to him. It occurred to me that anyone who got past Rupert to date Alison, who still lived at home, was a man of great courage.

Alison, obviously embarrassed, did her best to silence him.

"Really, Father, it's not his fault. And everybody's all right," she said urgently. "Can we just get on with the party now, please." It was an order, not a question. Alison could be a business when she wanted to. She saw me and grabbed my arm, relieved. "Alex. Help me out, would you? The band." She nodded sternly across the room to where they stood, unsure whether to pack up or continue. "Tell them I don't care if there's an earthquake, if they want to be paid, they'll—"

Neither of us saw it coming. Rupert, whom I studiously avoided because of his long and bitter rivalry with my father, landed a whopping punch in my rib cage. I heard a whoosh of air escape from my lungs as I sank to the floor. Stunned, and instinctively curled up in a ball, I spotted a wing-tipped foot coming fast in the direction of my head and I lifted my arm. It was a healthy kick, and I was glad my head hadn't taken it.

"Soames, for God's sake!" It was Barnes Appleton's voice, disgusted and incredulous. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

If it hadn't come from Barnes, whose approval Soames desired more than that of any other reviewer, I doubt that it would have stopped him. He must have hesitated in his attack because when I next looked up, Barnes and half a dozen others, including the respected literary publisher Simon Bow, were bodily restraining him.

Alison, who had been staring at her father in disbelief, now closed her mouth and took charge of the situation with her usual aplomb. As she knelt to help me up, perfume emanating from her cleavage like smelling salts, she looked up at Simon Bow. "Simon, would you be good enough to take Father outside?" Her angry eyes flicked between her apoplectic father and Bow, who was still restraining him. "And you." She looked at the brewery manager. "Get that band playing. Now."

"Y-yes, Ms. Soames."

By this time, Rupert appeared to be coming to his senses and looked more embarrassed than enraged. He glanced at those restraining him, then at the buzzing crowd, and seemed to realise that once again his temper had cost him dearly. Finally, his eyes rested on Alison, who was kneeling at my side. It seemed to sink in then that he had put the last nails in the coffin of her carefully planned press party.

"Alison, I—"

"Get out," she said with impressive force, jerking her head toward the door. "Now."

Simon Bow, with characteristic diplomacy, said, "Come along, old boy. Let's get a breath of

air. Over here, that's the way."

As Simon steered him off, Rupert shot me a look that was more venomous than his physical attack. I looked him in the eye as I sat catching my breath, telling him as clearly as I could that I wasn't afraid of him.

I did, however, make a mental note to watch out for him in dark alleys.

Perhaps he really was unbalanced, as my father had suggested on several occasions. The thought had first occurred to my father when Rupert stuck a banana in his tailpipe almost ten years ago, nearly asphyxiating him, and then again five years later when a brick sailed through his office window from the direction of Soames and Sons.

Through the years there were dozens of similar incidents, and it became something of a family joke. "Rupert's gone barmy again," my father would say, smiling and shaking his head at the dinner table. We would clamour for the story, and he would tell us of Rupert's latest exploits.

It may have been the sight of me in close proximity to Alison that had set him off, not to mention that she had just nearly been killed. In his mind, because of his competition with my father, a Plumtree represented a threat. He probably thought I had something to do with the newsprint mishap.

I shifted into a semblance of an upright position, assessing the damage on the way. My room would be blue, green, and purple in a couple of days, but it was bearable. It wasn't until I straightened all the way, too quickly, that I felt a stab of white-hot pain. I gasped and the room spun wildly.

Alison took my arm in a way that was, for once, devoid of sexual overtones. "You're hurt," she said, worried. "I saw your face just then. I'll get a doctor."

"No—no. I'm all right." And I was, really. I'd had worse punishment at the hands of my older brother, who had loved to beat me up as a child. Rupert may have cracked a rib or two, but it was nothing compared to the damage Max used to inflict.

Alison was looking slightly the worse for wear herself, I noticed. Her shoulders sagged with disappointment and there was a smudge of mascara under her left eye.

"I'm sorry about your party," I said. "But look at the bright side. It might be more newsworthy this way."

"Mmm." The ghost of a smile twitched at her lips. She was a good sport, I thought. "And I'm sorry about my father. This obsession of his with your father—and now you—has only got worse since your father died." She looked down for a moment. We had never discussed the subject on the few occasions we'd met, but somehow I'd known she thought it ridiculous, too.

With an obvious effort, she changed gears and squared her shoulders, looking me in the eye. "You're sure you don't want a doctor?"

"Yes, thanks. But I don't think I'll stay for the dancing. It was a *memorable* party." I felt her eyes on me as I started to walk away.

"Alex."

I turned and looked. "Yes?"

"I'm glad you—well, you know." She looked at the floor with uncharacteristic shyness, then up at me again. "Thanks."

I assumed she meant my unceremoniously shoving her to the floor. "Any time at all,"

said, and walked through the musty hallway into the night. The deed I had dreaded could wait, I thought, for another day—if on another day I could bring myself to sell a part of Plumtree Press.

The mysterious conversation with Barnes Appleton came back to me as my shoes tapped along the cobblestones. I wondered what he had to tell me. He said it was important, and confidential, but Alison—followed by half a ton of paper and her rabid father—had prevented further conversation. When I looked for him after my scuffle with Rupert Soames, Barnes had been surrounded by the usual admiring crowd. I intended to call him later that night and find out.

Checking my watch, I headed for Farringdon tube station. There was barely half an hour before Sir Harold Plumpton's show, "Personalities," at nine o'clock. I rarely watched television, preferring books, but that night was different.

I was one of Plumpton's guests.

It was rumoured that even the Queen was a regular viewer of this popular talk show which was hosted by an ex-Member of Parliament only slightly more garrulous than he was corpulent. I hoped I wouldn't come off looking a twit. After all, this was probably the last time I would enjoy such notoriety, I thought grimly. Unless something happened soon, I would no longer be an object of fascination for the British public. I would be a laughingstock.

Gingerly descending the steps to the train, I found that my ribs didn't hurt as much as I would have expected. I entertained the hope that they were merely bruised and lowered myself into a seat on the waiting train.

It was my pride, I thought, that had sustained the real injury. I thought back to the happy days of just a few months ago, when one day it struck me that I had done it. After just two years of mind-numbing work, I had begun to transform Plumtree Press, the staid publisher of scholarly anthologies, into a dynamic trade publishing house.

I had focussed on developing a line of fiction while my father's trusted colleague and friend of forty-five years, Ian Higginbotham, had kept the academic anthology side of the business ticking over. Ian's expertise had made my risky new idea possible, and we had been rewarded with the nation's most-talked-about best-seller. Following the example of a best-selling American author, we had chosen a title straight from the King James version of the Bible for its familiarity: *Deliver Us From Evil*.

Then came the sequel, *Those Who Trespass Against Us*, which was now complete with the exception of its last five chapters. I had used its projected profits to sign several respected authors in order to expand the fiction list. It had been easy enough to obtain the funds, as a friend of mine was in an influential position at an investment bank. Through her personal recommendation, she had persuaded the board to lend me a significant amount of money. After all, the sequel to a best-seller was virtually guaranteed the same success as the original book.

Though no one knew it but me—not even the banks, yet—it had all fallen apart. The author, the only writer I had ever known to be ahead of time on our mutually agreed upon schedules, seemed to have disappeared suddenly several weeks ago, leaving me high and dry without the last five chapters of the sequel.

His absence meant that the future of Plumtree Press, which was of course inextricably tied to my own, hung in the balance. The bills were coming due, and the sequel should have been

off to the printer weeks before. I shifted uncomfortably at the thought.

If only my would-be American copublisher, Charlie Goodspeed of Bookarama America Inc., weren't so maddeningly conscientious. Actually, it wasn't fair to blame Charlie for the delay in closing the deal. Charlie Goodspeed himself was a caricature of willingness and enthusiasm, fairly jumping out of his suit to make Plumtree Press's list his own. It was his army of lawyers who had found some arcane point of international law to quibble over in the contracts. Regrettably, they had sent me home sans contract and—still more regrettably—the rather significant cheque due on signature of the contracts.

My eyes felt gravelly. I rubbed them impatiently as my mind continued its catalogue of Plumtree Press's problems. It only made matters worse that I had already kicked off the publicity campaign, certain that my star author would deliver. I knew that an actual review of the book couldn't appear until the book was off the press, but as a preview I had sent the partial manuscript to Barnes Appleton at the *Tempus*, care of the book review editor, so he could get started on it. It was all so embarrassing. Now I would have to tell him that I wasted his valuable time; there was no more manuscript forthcoming. Judging from Barnes's comments at Alison's party, he'd already read what I'd sent him.

I sighed as the train picked up speed. What was it that my grandfather always used to say, "Easy come, easy go." Not that I hadn't worked like a fiend these last two years, but it was really Ian's talent and experience that had brought us such dramatic success—along with a peculiar form of manna from heaven.

The manna had come in the form of an anonymous, unsolicited manuscript delivered by courier one day about two years ago. I had glanced at the manuscript and found that I couldn't put it down. It was a riveting novel about the children of London who had been evacuated from the city during the Blitz. In an evil plot hatched by a corrupt official, the children were sold to childless Americans while their natural parents were informed that they had died. The children, in turn, were told that their parents had died in the bombing, and that they were going to foster homes.

That evening, long after I had decided that I would publish the book as the first work of fiction on Plumtree's list, a fax came in from someone who called himself only "Arthur." He identified himself as the anonymous author of the book, and detailed the terms under which he would allow the book to be published, including strict anonymity. That wasn't too difficult, as he had never let me in on the secret of his real name.

All royalties from the book were to be donated to the War Orphans Fund. He said it was pointless to try to find out who he was, as the courier who brought the manuscript didn't know his name and had never seen him. The fax number, he said, was unlisted and untraceable.

I had of course tried in every way I could to find out who he was, starting with the courier and the fax number, and ending with the manuscript itself. Over the years of our association I had come to accept the arrangement and stopped trying. It certainly hadn't hurt sales to have an anonymous author; first England and then America had been fascinated by the idea, and readers had been compelled to visit their local bookstores to discover him personally.

The sudden success had been a shock, albeit a pleasant one. We did three reprints in one month, first of 50,000, then 100,000, then 200,000. I hadn't sought success of this kind, and certainly not at the age of thirty. I chalked it up to divine benevolence and plowed the profit

back into the new fiction list which, by now, I wished I'd never thought of.

As the train plummeted through the underground tunnel, I had an uncomfortable feeling—and not just in my rib cage—that something was very wrong. It was unlike Arthur to be late and still less like him not to communicate. He and I had grown to be friends, in a way; he had a keen sense of humour and seemed to be exceptionally kind. I knew all this from our frequent communications; he normally sent a fax every other day or so to discuss the sequel, to pass on a joke or one of his pithy sayings, or simply to say hello.

Sometimes I had the odd feeling that he knew a great deal about me, and early on I had racked my brain trying to think who, of all the people I knew, Arthur could be. I thought that he must be older, not merely because his novel was set against the backdrop of World War I but because of the rather formal tone of his prose.

But no matter how many names I considered, I always drew a blank. Maybe he would remain a blank forever now, I thought. Perhaps he was injured, ill, or even dead. Perhaps I would never know.

Newly disturbed at the thought, I looked up as the train screeched to a halt at King's Cross station. Standing carefully, I made my way off the train and was grateful that the elbowing masses of the peak period had long since disappeared. After a short ride I changed train again at Holborn, then got off at Tottenham Court Road. I walked the several blocks to Bedford Square in a biting wind and tested the limits of my ribs, gently stretching and twisting to see what response I got.

By the time I'd reached the square, I thought I might be all right for the boat race tomorrow with a roll or two of strapping tape. The last thing I wanted to do was miss the final regatta of the season at the rowing club. It would be my last good excuse to see Sarah Townsend, whom I adored but seemed destined to admire from afar.

It began to drizzle again, a cold, comfortless near-November rain whipped into stinging gusts by the wind. I picked up my pace, catching a whiff of the wet wool of my suit as I wrapped my raincoat more tightly about me. Soaked, sore, and chilled to the bone, I thought of Rupert Soames and wished I hadn't. There was something depressing about his raw hatred.

I walked up to number 52 and unlocked the massive brass lock, pushing open the heavy door. I had bought this building, just three doors down from the Plumtree Press offices, after coming to work for the company. The bottom two floors were rented to an Italian art book company, and I occupied the third-floor garret. It was just right for me, not much to clean, lots of dormers and skylights, and extremely convenient. Sometimes I wondered why I bothered to have a home at all, since I spent most of my life at the office, which was equipped with well-worn leather sofas that were all too conducive to sleeping.

In a small concession to my ribs I took the lift up for once, leaning against the wall as I rose. My watch said nine o'clock, time for Plumpton's show. I let myself into the flat, started the recorder, and took the opportunity of an advertisement to strip off my sodden clothes and climb into a warm woolen robe.

By the time Harold had introduced me as the new sensation in British publishing, I had a fire crackling in the fireplace, a glass of cabernet in my hand (a gift from one of Sarah's business trips to San Francisco), and a frozen lasagna in the microwave.

It was a good thing I had turned on the recorder, because my mind wandered. I kept wondering what good it was to be a sensation if there was no one to share it with.

The phone rang, and I struggled out of the comfortable chair to answer it. "Hello?"

"Al! Hey, buddy, you're not going to believe this."

He was right. I couldn't believe it. I felt as though I had only just left Charlie Goodspeed and his platoon of lawyers in their plush conference room in Boston. Already he was burning up the wire to London.

"Charlie?"

"Yeah, it's me! Listen, we've got that little snag in the contract all worked out. The guys just switched around a few lines and took one out, and—bingo!" I could see him smiling on the other end of the line, Coke can in hand, leaning back and resting his size-twelve wings on his tipped feet on the mahogany conference room table. "We think it looks pretty good, but obviously we need to talk it over with you. Think you can make it over here again sometime this week?"

It was impossible to be angry with Charlie; he was like a child. Frustrating, but lovable. He would offer you the shirt off his back in a blizzard, his last sip of water in the desert. I could see why he depended so heavily on those troublesome lawyers; if not for them, he'd give away his books to make people happy.

It was starting to seem odd to me that they required my presence each time they had some new question about the contractual agreement; but then they were almost paranoid about industrial espionage, by my standards, anyway. I had no reason to believe that this iteration of the contracts was any better than the last three, but if it was, I wished they'd just send me the money.

I fought down irritation and fatigue and tried a rational approach. "I'm glad the impasse has finally been breached, Charlie, but don't you think you could come over here this time? Better yet, if you've got everything worked out to your satisfaction, why not just send the money by overnight mail for my signature?"

"Come on, Al." He chuckled. "You know how I hate to fly. You also know that my leg beagles here won't allow a single word of the contracts out of this office until they're signed—not by fax, photocopy, or fiche. Hey, that was pretty good, huh?" He chuckled at the accidental alliteration. "No, seriously, Al, we're in a very competitive market over here. We can't have documents flying all over the airwaves for our competition to see."

I had attempted to talk them out of their paranoia several times now and got nowhere. I didn't bother to try again. "Charlie, I think you know I'd do just about anything to get the contracts signed and the books rolling out under our joint imprint. But for me to come again this week—even if you pay again—well, I just can't. Plumtree Press can't run itself, you know. And my managing director is away on holiday. I've got to be there."

"Hmm. Well, think it over, will you, Al? I'll give you a ring again tomorrow. Ciao!"

He was gone. I looked at the phone in my hand and shook my head. The man was a human tornado, only much more persistent.

I hung up the phone and went back to my chair, turning my attention to the television as it sank into the cushions.

"... haven't been in publishing long, have you, Alex?" Sir Harold asked the question and looked at me expectantly on the television, a benign smile curving between his rosy cheeks.

"No, that's right. Just two years now. Though in a way, you could say I've been in publishing all my life—visiting the office with my father, hearing him talk about it. I can't

say it felt particularly new when I finally began doing it myself.”

“How did you get your start—the experience, the background—for the success you’ve had? If you’ll forgive me saying it, you are rather young for your position.”

I had to give him credit. He asked the question as if he honestly didn’t know what I would say, though we’d discussed all of this in detail a couple of hours before. I supposed his former career in politics had provided ample opportunity to develop acting skills.

I saw myself nod, slightly embarrassed, on the screen. “First, let’s separate me from the success.” How right I was, I thought morosely. “It’s the people who’ve been at Plumtree Press for a long time who are responsible for that. But as far as my background goes, well, I suppose it’s not exactly the usual career path. After doing some graduate work in English literature, I needed a break from the books, so—”

“Where did you study?”

“I got my undergraduate degree from Dartmouth, in the States, then went to Magdalene College, Cambridge for a Masters.”

“Hmmm. Go on. Away from the books, you were saying.”

The interrupting and prodding were irritating, but I supposed he had to do it to keep his viewers interested.

“Yes, well, to get away from the books I led flotilla sailing trips for five years in America, Greece, Turkey, and the Caribbean. Each flotilla was a group of about a dozen yachts, all skippered by vacationing sailors. They were fiercely independent, but didn’t want the hassle of maintaining their own boats, dealing with foreign port masters, and so forth. Oddly enough, besides having sort of absorbed the family business by osmosis, leading flotillas turned out to be one of the best preparations I could have had.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I’m no management expert. But people don’t like to be managed; they like to be in charge of their own destiny.”

He nodded pensively, encouraging me to go on.

“Each of the yachtsmen on the flotilla trips was in charge of his own vessel—where and how he sailed. I was just there as a backup in case something came up that he thought he couldn’t handle, or didn’t want to. If his—er, ‘plumbing’ backed up, for instance”—there was scattered laughter in the audience—“or the motor gave out, or the tender needed to be patched. We operate on the same principle at Plumtree.”

“You don’t find that they object to your youth and—pardon me for saying it—inexperience?”

I saw myself give Sir Harold a slightly sheepish smile. “Er, actually, I suspect that’s worked in my favor. People see me as too young and inexperienced to be threatening. Besides, the way they can tell me everything they know as experts. I’ve never yet met a person who doesn’t enjoy teaching a beginner how to do something he himself loves.”

Sir Harold nodded slowly. I shifted in my chair and made a mental note not to philosophize about management again. The trouble was, he was disarming, and at the time I hadn’t realised how much I was talking.

He tilted his head to one side and looked serious. “Alex, your parents were killed in the Sporades Islands in Greece when the propane tank on their yacht exploded.” He looked at me for a response. Perhaps he expected me to disgrace myself in a burst of tears.

I took a bite of lasagna and saw myself nod, looking directly at him.

“How did that affect you?”

What a ridiculous question, I thought.

“I miss them very much; they were wonderful people. But we thoroughly enjoyed living together. I think dealing with death is easier when you have no regrets.”

“And you gave up sailing for the helm of Plumtree Press after that?”

I rolled my eyes at his metaphor. I hoped he didn't think he was the first person to think of it.

“Yes.” I didn't mention the six months that my brother had run the company before deciding it was too much work. As the eldest, he was the rightful heir by family tradition, and he had stepped in after my father's death. But he threw up his hands after taking all the cash out of the company that he could, and left it to the company lawyer to send me the telegram in Skópelos.

“It must be a good feeling to know that you've done so well in carrying on the family interests—the top-selling book worldwide this year, and your first foray into fiction.” He delivered this with an avuncular smile as he shook his head in mild wonder. I remembered feeling as if I'd been patted on the head, even as I admired his graceful segue into Arthur's territory.

“Now, Alex, we're all terribly interested in this secret author—er, Arthur.” He smiled. “What can you tell us about him?”

I noted with relief that my face revealed none of the concern I felt about Arthur's disappearance.

“I don't know a great deal more than you do about him, Sir Harold, except that he has a great sense of humour in his private communications and cares a great deal for others. As you may know, all his royalties go to the War Orphans Fund. In the friendship we've struck up over the fax line, he seems to be a very kind person.” I shrugged, smiling.

“And you honestly have no idea who he might be?” His cynical tone implied something that I had been accused of before: that I did know but was using Arthur's anonymity as a public relations ploy.

I shook my head. “Believe me, I'm as eager to find out as anyone. He seems to know a good deal about me, and it's an odd feeling. But I've tried everything I can think of—from following his courier, who receives packets at the post office without return address, to tracing the fax line. I've even analyzed the paper and typeface, but there are no hints there. It's ordinary white bond, and a fairly common typeface—Zapf Calligraphic. Comes on a variety of sorts of personal computers. Now you know as much as I do.”

He looked intrigued. “Will he be writing any more books for you?”

I shrugged and smiled. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Once again, my face effectively hid the fact that the sequel was planned and virtually ready for release—except for the crucial last five chapters. Only the *Sunday Tempus*, happily sworn to secrecy in return for a promise of exclusivity, had its partial copy for review. Watching the TV, I let out a pent-up breath and prayed that I would find Arthur soon.

Thank God, I thought, that so far the only person who knew about the sequel, besides the *Sunday Tempus Book Review* editor, was Barnes Appleton.

I sat up quickly. Barnes. How could I have forgotten to call him?

Sir Harold and I droned on in the background as I went to the phone, dialed director enquiries, and asked for the number. A disembodied voice informed me that the number was unlisted by request.

Of course. No professional critic in his right mind would have a listed phone number. I would have to wait until Monday to call him in his office.

As I put down the phone I noticed that the light on my answering machine was blinking. One blink, one call. I pressed it and heard Sarah's refreshing American accent over a long distance din that I couldn't place. Probably a train station or airport somewhere.

"Alex, it's Sarah. Sorry about the late notice, but I've just heard that Mike Holloway has the measles." She paused for a moment to let a tinny public address system announcement run its course: "*Attention, attention s'il vous plaît ...*"

So she was in Paris again, most likely. I often wondered how she kept track of where she was, she travelled so much.

"He was going to row with me in the pairs race tomorrow. I wondered if there was any way you could take his place."

My spirits lifted marginally. It was pitiful, really, to be so delighted at being second choice. But I would have done anything for her, anything at all, at a moment's notice. The only problem was that I couldn't show her, couldn't say or do anything that might jeopardise the one consolation I did have—a sort of brotherly friendship that allowed me to spend time with her innocently on occasion.

Her voice finished, "I'll be home late tonight; if you can, call and leave a message. Thank you, Alex—bye."

It was small consolation, a casual phone message when I had spent most of the evening wishing she were with me. I dialled the familiar number and, keeping my voice casual, said I would be no problem to row in Mike's place tomorrow, that I would see her at the club.

I went to the kitchen, grabbed a handful of the Oreo cookies Sarah had brought me from her visits Stateside, and sat eating them as I stared at the television. If it weren't for rowing, I wouldn't know her at all, I mused. I had met her while rowing at university, an opportunity I'd have missed had I not, as some of my father's friends put it, "thrown away my future" by declining my father's alma mater and going to the Colonies instead.

They would never understand how wrong they had been. My choice in favour of Dartmouth, encouraged by my unconventional American mother, had raised many British eyebrows but opened doors into a wonderfully unstuffy world—of which Sarah Townsend was a part.

Sarah and I had been involved with other people while at college, she with my best friend Peter.

I had, of course, observed that Sarah had remarkably long, lithe legs, almond-shaped eyes that turned up slightly at the ends, and a quiet intelligence that sparkled through them. But by the time I had lost interest in the comparatively ordinary girl I'd been seeing at the time it was too late—Peter and Sarah were engaged. The year before last, just three years after they were married (I missed the joyous event, sailing in Turkey), he was diagnosed with a rapidly metastasising form of cancer. It spread like wildfire. They could do very little for him, and within six months Sarah was a widow at the age of twenty-seven.

She'd transferred to London with her investment bank, thinking that the change would

help. In some ways, it had worked; she began to function again and threw herself into her work. She had risen like a rocket in her firm since arriving.

But Peter was still very much with her and between us.

I had long ago come to the conclusion that Peter would be glad for me to care for Sarah, to look after her in his absence. I literally dreamed of doing so, and had dedicated myself to Sarah in a way that bordered on a strange sort of one-way marriage. But Sarah's every move indicated that she felt differently. She avoided looking into my eyes too directly or for too long, and kept a good six inches between us at all times. It had come up openly only once when I'd put my arm around her after a long hike. We'd trekked up Ben Lomond in Scotland with some friends, and were the first to reach the eerily rimed summit.

"No," she'd said, tears starting from her eyes as she pulled loose. "He should be here." She had started back down the mountain alone and I'd followed, cursing myself and vowing to keep my distance.

I didn't know if her feelings would ever change, but I was willing to wait. My brother had nearly ruined things for good with a tactless overture of his own mere weeks after her arrival in England, making her more distant than ever.

"How was I supposed to know she was hung up on this bloke Peter?" Max had whined when I confronted him with his actions. "If you ask me, there's something wrong with a woman like that."

I'd been incredulous, then angry. It had been all I could do to refrain from launching a fist left to his jaw. Instead I clenched my teeth and mustered my self-control. "Don't go near her again," I said with ominous calm. "If you do, there will be consequences. You won't like them."

"You're a real piece of work, Alex," he sneered. "You and your absurdly outdated chivalry make me sick. Just my bloody luck to have a brother like you," he mumbled. He left slamming the door so hard that one of its small panes of glass flew out, exploding into sharp icicles on the floor.

That had been a fairly typical exchange.

I couldn't understand how my brother had become the unfeeling lout he had, but I suspected that the drugs his fellow journalists shared with him—and later sold to him—had something to do with it. I also suspected that drugs had something to do with his almost explosive violence, and a raging jealousy that knew no bounds.

Max was still hung up on Sarah, despite the fact that he had been warned off, and despite the fact that she would never willingly see him again. He thought that because I saw her occasionally, I was trying to take her away from him. It never seemed to register that I had been friends with her for a very long time.

I shook my head in frustration and flicked off the TV, where Sir Harold and I had given way to the news. My body was tired but my mind raced, and I knew sleep would be a long time in coming. Still, there was the regatta tomorrow, and I couldn't let down Sarah. If I couldn't rest my mind, at least I could rest my body. I rewound and labelled the videotape, cleaned up my congealed lasagna remains, turned out the lights, and stretched out on the bed.

There I spent the next two hours contemplating Arthur's whereabouts before deciding to get up and reread his latest book—minus, unfortunately, the last five chapters.

Sleet pelted my windscreen the next morning as I covered the last few miles to Henley for the final regatta of the season. Winter was coming early this year; it was only the end of October. The heater in my Volkswagen Golf, despite its teutonic efficiency, wasn't making much of a dent in the cold. Rowing was a toss-up between pain and pleasure at the best of times and it wouldn't be much fun in this weather.

Being with Sarah, on the other hand, would more than make up for it. I thanked God that I had fought Rupert Soames and won on admitting women to Threepwood, the two-hundred-year-old rowing club founded by yet another Plumtree. It was well worth it, despite the fact that Soames was suing me over an obscure clause of the 1820 bylaws, which could be interpreted as prohibiting women from entering the club. Everyone but Rupert thought the regulation ridiculous, but we had never bothered to convene the board of governors to change it. I could always count on Rupert.

It suddenly occurred to me that the same silver Rover had been following me most of the way up from London. Now he had followed me onto the private gravel road that led to the club, so I knew his destination was the same as mine. Not many of us who belonged to Threepwood lived in London, and none of the other city-dwelling members that I knew drove a silver Rover. Strange, I thought, the way he always followed at the same distance, at least five car lengths behind me. Stranger still, I thought, as I glanced in my rearview mirror again at the entrance to the car park and saw that the car had disappeared.

Puzzled, I pulled into the car park and sat for a moment listening to little bullets of sleet hitting the Golf. My thoughts drifted from the Rover back to Sarah. Sometimes it seemed more difficult to carry on being her friend than to give her up altogether, but I knew from experience that long, hard slogs can win the race.

Besides, I couldn't help it. It was Sarah or no one at all.

I told myself to buck up, grabbed my kit bag, and sloshed through the messy wet slush towards the pillared entrance.

A flash of colour caught my eye, and I saw Sarah jogging towards me with a long red scarf around her neck, dark hair gleaming. There was nothing I could do to prevent my heart from skipping several beats.

She caught up to me, slightly out of breath, and fell in with my step. "Hi." She didn't have to look up as far as Barnes did; she was a leggy five foot ten.

"Hi yourself," I said, marvelling that she would run out in this weather just to say hello. "Have a nice time with the Frogs?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, you know, they hate doing business with American banks. And they refuse to speak French to an American. So I spoke French the whole time, and they spoke English, and neither of us ever said a word about it." She shrugged. "What can I say? They need our money, and I was happy to give it to them."

"For an extortionate fee, of course."

"Of course," she agreed cheerfully. "They can afford it."

She ran lightly up the steps and pulled open the front door. As we stood dripping juice inside, I had the feeling she wanted to tell me something.

“Alex, I really appreciate you standing in for Mike today.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” I said.

She hesitated, and I knew there was more. She was completely transparent to me, perhaps because I cared to notice everything about her. It often surprised her that I knew when she was pleased, upset, sad.

“Well, what is it?”

She looked at me, bemused. “I forgot. You read my mind.”

“Come on, out with it.”

“Well, it’s a lot to ask, Alex, really.”

“Nothing’s as bad as the suspense. What is it?”

She steeled herself. “You’ve been so good, I hate to ask it. I mean, things like stepping in for Mike and fixing my plumbing at three in the morning. And rescuing me from your brother.” She looked down at her sneakers and sighed. “If you weren’t such a good friend, I wouldn’t ask.”

I cringed inside. Just a good friend. Still, it was better than nothing.

“Oh, Alex, I’ve got myself into a jam.” Her arms flopped against her sides in a gesture of frustration and defeat. “It’s Alan.” Alan was her boss at the bank, a lecherous man twenty years her senior who, according to Sarah, had revolting personal habits. “I told him that I couldn’t go out with him because I’ve got a date. I’ve fobbed him off before, but this time I made a mistake.”

She frowned and picked at the fringe of her scarf. “He asked where I was going on my date, and my temper got the better of me. I said I was going to the Waterside Inn.” The Waterside Inn was one of the most elegant—and expensive—French restaurants in England, on the Thames in the Berkshire countryside.

“Ah.” I looked at her, but she was still preoccupied with the microscopic fibers of her scarf. “I think I understand. You don’t really have a date to the Waterside Inn, but you want me to take you there anyway, because you know he’ll go and take his mother if he has to, out of spite, just to see if you really have a date.”

“How did you know that?” she said, looking at me incredulously.

I sidestepped that one, not wanting to tell her that I could sympathise with her boss. “Well, we can’t have your career going up the spout, can we?”

“No,” she said. “We can’t.”

We were late; people were rushing round us, getting ready for the first race. I was in it and she hadn’t even changed yet.

“Right,” I said. “Waterside Inn. I’d be delighted.”

She beamed an incandescent smile in my direction. “Alex, you’re a peach. I’ll pay, of course.”

I waved the mention of money aside. If only she knew how much I wanted to take her home there at any price. “On what night is this deception to take place?”

“Er—tonight, actually. I thought eight o’clock.” She looked up at me to see if I minded.

I laughed and shook my head. “You don’t expect much, do you? Lucky for you I’m not busy tonight.” I looked at her sideways. “What would you have done if I’d been otherwise?”

engaged?”

She shrugged but had the good grace to look embarrassed. “I didn’t think you’d let me down.”

It didn’t occur to me to mind being taken for granted; I was grateful for any crumb she might toss in my direction. I smiled and nodded. “You were right.”

She looked relieved that I hadn’t taken offence. “Right. See you at the dock, then.” She was off, jogging towards the women’s locker room. I moved off in the opposite direction with an unrestrained grin. If ever there had been a romantic setting, the Waterside Inn was it. At that rate, before long we would be moving on to candles and Rachmaninoff.

Perhaps I was inspired by the thought, or else I was in good form at the end of a long season. At any rate, to my great pleasure our eight won the heavyweight race. To my even greater pleasure, I escorted Sarah to victory as well, for which I earned an enthusiastic—sisterly—peck on the cheek. She was a powerhouse in a boat. She wasn’t big or visibly muscular, but she was highly skilled and had those long legs as well as remarkable endurance.

I was settling down to a victory pint with her and most of my eight at the customary post-race party when I felt a tap on the shoulder.

“Plumtree, my boy.” It was Simon Bow, the distinguished grey-haired eminence of Threepwood and the publishing industry in general. I stood and faced him.

“Hello, Simon.”

Perfectly groomed as usual, he gave me his well-modulated smile, which I was certain he practised in the mirror. “I didn’t get to talk to you last night after the fracas at the party. You must be feeling all right, or you couldn’t have won your races.” The measured smile again.

“Yes, thanks. Rupert did let me escape in one piece, after all.”

Simon chuckled. “How’re things at the Press? Still nose to the wheel on the mass market stuff?”

Simon Bow was an expert at cloaking insults in innocuous verbiage, but I was equally expert at cracking the code. His barb was aimed at Arthur’s novel, which was much more popular—read profitable—than the literary masterpieces Bow and Bow, Ltd. published. I liked to think he was just jealous.

I could read Simon Bow like a book because everyone in our tiny, incestuous London publishing circle knew everyone else’s business. Family firms like Bow’s and mine had carried on generations—sometimes centuries—of competition. It was because there were relatively few of us, I suppose, that we were so intensely competitive. Yet we all continued to keep our offices in Bedford Square in the West End, a vague sense of suspicion hanging over the square like a fog.

I smiled civilly. “Yes, *Deliver Us* is still keeping us busy; we can’t seem to order the reprint fast enough. But then, all of this hard work has the advantage of keeping me out of trouble.”

It may have been less than kind to hint at Simon’s recent troubles; he’d been caught re-handled by photographers with a girl half his wife’s age on a Mediterranean holiday last month. Still, if I didn’t show him I could give as good as I got, he’d walk all over me.

Simon laughed with genuine amusement and lifted his glass in a toast. “Touché, Alex. So much like your father.” Looking at me, he probably saw a pretty good resemblance of my father, Maximilian Plumtree; the same dark hair and incongruous blue eyes behind thick horn-rimmed glasses, and—I’m told—the same inscrutable expression.

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