

THE UNDERSTUDY

Chapter One

As soon as he stepped off the plane Marek started to sweat. It was only April, but already this place was far hotter than London. It did his hangover no favours. Inside the terminal building he found a drinking fountain, then sat down and waited until the crush around the luggage carousel had died down. He was one of the last to collect his bag and head out through the glass doors towards the buses and taxis. His brain felt dry and swollen. Idiot, he said to himself.

Some of the younger people in the office had insisted on taking him out for a farewell drink the night before. At the time, he'd been touched, but now he was cursing them. If only he'd said no to the double whisky at the end, drunk more water, gone home a little earlier – if only *everything* had been different. If he'd caught his charter flight this morning there'd have been a tour guide to meet him at the airport, a coach to deliver him to the hotel and nothing to do for the next two weeks but stumble from his room to the pool or the beach. As it was, it had taken all his powers of persuasion and ingenuity to get them to put him on a plane at all. He was lucky, the girl at Gatwick kept telling him. She was by no means *obliged*... Yes, yes, yes. (Idiot.)

Marek looked around for a taxi, trying to remember where he'd put the letter with the details of his hotel. It wasn't in his coat pocket, nor in the travel wallet with the ticket. If he could just remember the general sound of the resort name perhaps he might be able explain things to one of these taxi drivers. He racked his brain. Something with an M? Or was it an H? How did you say 'hotel' in Greek?

He watched a group of Ramblers in their stout and sensible shoes assembling at one end of the bus shelter outside. In the distance, scores of more unhealthy looking men were piling onto several coaches: mathematicians arriving for an international conference someone had said. His eye skipped on. Then saw her.

She was standing off to one side, away from the main crowd, a tall, slightly angular young woman with pale brown hair hooked back behind rather prominent ears. It was the peculiar quality of her stillness that drew his eye, that and the way she was dressed – grey shirt, black jeans – incongruously sombre in the middle of all the brightly coloured holiday costumes. She was holding a hand-written sign that had slipped to one side as if she'd been standing like this for some time. 'M. Pearce' it said – misspelled, of course, but he had learned very early in life to be flexible on that score: Mark, Marcus, Marek, Pierce, Pearce, Piesniewicz – he answered to anything vaguely along these lines. His mood switched from despair to elation. 'Hey! Hullo, there! Miss!'

She looked at him in confusion.

'Pierce,' he said. He pointed to her sign, grinning. 'Marek Pierce. That's me.'

'Oh,' she coloured. 'Sorry. I ... I've seen so many people coming out I'd practically given up hope...'

'It's too hot to rush. I let them all go ahead of me.'

Her hand was cool and dry-skinned, pleasant to the touch; he almost didn't want to let it go. His rescuer.

'Sorry to have kept you waiting,' he said. 'I didn't expect... In fact I was just looking around for a taxi...'

'A taxi?' She frowned. 'It should have said on your schedule that I'd be meeting you. Didn't Belinda give you a schedule...?'

Belinda? Who was Belinda? He shook his head. 'Never mind. I'm here. You're here. That's all that matters, isn't it?'

Still she didn't move.

'Are we waiting for anyone else?'

Another of those awkward smiles. 'I'm sorry. The car's just over there...'

It was a neat blue Fiat, the kind of car that hire companies favour. Only now, as he slid into the passenger's seat, did he understand quite how bad he was feeling. Exhaustion and nausea washed over him in alternate waves. If I could just close my eyes for ten minutes, he thought. Somewhere

on the edges of his attention he was aware that his companion was talking about the weather: '... later on, of course, it gets incredibly...'

His brain began to distort her words into a song of exhaustion, forcing them into a maddeningly repetitive rhythm. If she'd only stop talking for five minutes so that he could rest.

'...any earlier, of course, and it's quite...' Five minutes was all he needed. Five minutes of silence. The sleep lust was becoming almost unbearable.

'Look...' He sat up a bit and shook himself. 'I really appreciate your being here and everything but to be honest I've got the mother of all hangovers right now...'

She looked startled. 'Hangover?'

'You must have heard of the condition in your line of work.'

There was a considerable pause. 'There are some painkillers in the glove compartment. But there's nothing to drink them with.'

'If I can just close my eyes...'

He leaned back in his seat.

The road was bleak and straight. Through the blur of his lashes he saw a man in a pointed hat standing under a tree beside a lake with an evil looking herd of goats. I must be dreaming already, he said to himself. Come away, come away, said the sleep rhythm in his head. Let go of that last rope.

Float. Vaporize. Let oblivion suckle you and clean the inside of your skull. Give in to the sweet blackness. Black sweetness. Give. In.

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As she drove, Frances stole curious little glances at her companion. He was not at all what she'd been expecting. She'd imagined someone altogether taller and smarter, older, more authoritative. When she saw him walking towards her at the airport – a compact young man in black jeans, a very crumpled light-weight jacket and the kind of black-rimmed glasses Arthur Miller used to wear in the early 1960s – she'd been sure he was walking towards someone else.

He was direct, that much was clear – the way he announced his hangover, no messing about, no pretending it was something he'd eaten on the plane, just straight to the bald and unforgiving facts. And now the way he fell asleep: quickly, unselfconsciously, head tipped against the side of the car, his mouth slightly open, his neat, well-made nose and chin pointing skyward. The more she saw of him the more Frances was beginning to be grudgingly impressed. Only a very confident man would behave like this at the beginning of a job. Someone less self-assured would have struggled to stay awake and make conversation with her in the car. People who had any dealings with Harry usually tried to ingratiate themselves with her. Keep in with Frances if

you want anything from Harry, they said to each other behind her back. And it was true, in the last few years she'd become Harry's right-hand woman, the holder of the keys, the voice in his ear. But this man didn't seem to care. He just went right ahead and made himself comfortable. Harry would like that about him, she thought. Harry responded well to confidence.

She glanced at her watch as she turned down to the quayside: 11am. On the other island they would have finished breakfast by now. She wondered whether Harry had remembered to take his tablets.

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After what seemed like a very short time, Marek became aware of a change in the noises around him. Instead of the steady rhythm of the car engine there were thuds and bumps and muffled yells. He wanted very much to carry on sleeping, but the noises were pulling him up like a little fish, up, up, up to the surface of consciousness. Now he was fully awake and very much afraid. Something was wrong. Everything was dark and very loud. All around him was a kind of roaring. I have died and gone to hell, he thought. And then, even worse: Not dead yet. Still time to panic. Can't breathe. Can't see. Must get away. Must defend myself.

He swung around blindly, throwing all his weight into the move. She was there to meet him. Even before he fully understood what he was doing,

she was ready. Her forearm came up to block his swing. She caught his wrist with her other hand and held him, and like this they stopped. He was staring at the woman with big ears and she stared back, silent, unblinking. It was a moment of peculiar harmony, as if they were meeting in a faraway place, stripped down and perfectly matched. He felt he saw right to the centre of her. He saw her essence, and he was sure that it was the same for her.

Then the shutters came down again. She let him go and he sagged back against his side of the car. His back was slippery with sweat.

'What's going on? Where are we?'

'The ferry of course,' she said coldly.

'Ferry? What ... ?'

'The ferry to the other island, of course.'

'The OTHER island? What the hell are you talking about?'

Around them the car deck was filling up. The air rang with the slam of doors and the shouts of the crew at the mouth of the boat, directing the last of the vehicles onto the ship.

She frowned. 'Did Belinda not explain?'

'Who is this Belinda? What's going on? I didn't book anything with a ferry. *What's going on!?*'

Something lurched and shifted in him. Paranoia burst into flower: rich and complex, pulsing with colour. Oh Bolt, Bolt! So merciless and righteous! Just because I wouldn't admit to the disciplinary charges! Always have to be

the 100% winner, don't you Mr Bolt? Lure me away from home, far from English soil, away from family and friends, get me drunk and onto the wrong plane and then.... What? But he saw that the woman had gone a kind of bloodless colour, the colour stationery catalogues describe as 'ivory'. Her breathing was quick and shallow. She was just as startled.

'Let's start again, shall we,' she said. 'Where do you think you're going?'

Marek wiped one hand across his face. 'To the hotel, of course. The Marionette or the Mariner or whatever the place is called... I can't remember the damned name. I thought you knew it. Where do *you* think we're going.'

'Robyn's house,' she said firmly, making one last desperate attempt to drag him into her version of things. 'Robyn's holiday place.'

At the far end of the car deck they were winching up the gate. The noise went through him like a band saw.

'Robyn, Belinda. I've never heard of any of these people. What's going on? I thought you were the Sunsplash rep... '

Her face went a shade paler, if that were possible. 'Who are *you*?'

'Marek Pierce, of course. I told you that, back at the airport.'

'*Marek?* Didn't you say ...? I'm sure I heard... Didn't you say *Mathew...?*' She stopped. Everything went very flat. For a moment he had the impression she might attack him. Then she turned away, towards to the still-opened mouth of the ferry. 'Hell.' She began to scrabble with the car

door. 'That means he's still back there at the airport. He'll be... He'll be...

They're going to have to let me off...'

Marek watched her stumbling back towards the mouth of the ferry, squeezing herself through the gaps between the cars and the streams of people flowing in the opposite direction. She reached the crew just as they had completed the closing of the gate. Her hand waved at the bright scrap of sky. He heard fragments of her voice, high, fluting, meaningless, above the roar of the engines. The men shook their heads. No, no. Impossible. He saw her body twist and return, trying to control the panic, trying to wheedle and plead but she was too wired to be really charming. And what was the point? Couldn't she see it was beyond these men to do what she wanted? She might as well be asking them to stop the globe or reverse the tides. The gate was up now.

The men seemed to be shouting back at her. He could imagine it: stupid woman. Stop making us feel bad. Why did you get on the boat if you didn't want to cross? She turned and began to make her way back to the car, slack and defeated.

Marek opened the glove compartment and peered inside. It was impersonally clean: a couple of maps, the folder of hire documents and, as she'd said, a packet of painkillers. He snapped off four of them and slipped them into his pocket for later.

On the way to the upper decks, she maintained a frosty silence, as if the whole thing were his fault. 'I just don't believe this is happening to me,' she muttered at one point.

'Happening to *you*? What about me? How long is the crossing?'

'Two and a half hours.'

Marek swore softly. Two and a half hours, plus another two and a half to return, and after all that he'd just be right back at the beginning: no closer to his hotel and none the wiser about how to get there, and today of all days when his skin felt like paper and his head was running a drumming workshop. 'Bang goes the first day of my holiday,' he muttered.

Still, there was no point in getting angry. His priorities now were to get a glass of water to wash down the painkillers, then perhaps a coffee and something to eat. He began to look around for signs of a bar or cafeteria.

'Would you like...?' he began.

She'd gone.

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Frances elbowed her way through the crowd looking for a quiet place to call from. If she was really quick and really lucky she might just be able to save the situation. It wasn't too late yet. She found a vacant toilet and locked herself in, trying not to touch anything, nor breathe too deeply, nor to think too much about why the floor was wet.

She dialled Pearce's mobile number. Her hands were shaking. If she could just manage to get hold of him before he called the house and got Robyn into a panic. If she could just persuade him to wait until she could get back to the other island to collect him. They could return on the very first ferry of the morning and still be there in time for tomorrow's opening discussion. But without Mathew Pearce, she knew Robyn wouldn't go ahead with these meetings, and she knew in her heart that it would be the end of the project. Adrian would go off to shoot his next commercial. Guy would return to the dull mysteries of his City law firm. Before they knew it, it would be winter and Harry would start drinking again in earnest. This was their only chance.

Almost as soon as she finished dialling the message clicked on: 'It has not been possible to connect you at this time. Please try again later.' Shit! Shit! Shit! She tried Belinda's mobile: the same. She repeated the sequence of numbers several times, hoping, hoping, but it was always the same. She was almost in tears. So much work had gone into getting them to this point. How could it fail now? It MUSTN'T.

Harry wouldn't care, of course. If he could see her now he'd be laughing out loud. 'Serves you right, Frances,' he'd say. 'Serves you right for trying to be so bloody prudent and Girl Scoutish...' But she had long ago learned to distinguish between what Harry *wanted* and thought important, and what Harry *needed*.

At last, in desperation, she tried the main office number. This time someone answered: 'A. M. O. Consulting. How can I help?'

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Once he'd taken two painkillers and a downed a bottle of mineral water Marek started to feel a lot better. The bands of pain around his head and neck were loosening. He ordered himself a mint tea at the bar, found an empty table, and the world settled down in a very acceptable way. The sunlight stopped hurting his eyes and became pleasantly mood enhancing. He'd brought an English paper with him from the plane. He shook it out now and began to read.

When he saw the woman coming towards him through the crowd he experienced a pleasurable kick of recognition, as if she were already an old friend, inextricably woven into the fabric of his life, but when he came to hail her he realised that he had didn't know her name.

'Hullo!' he called. 'Hullo! Hi! I'm over here!'

She slid into the seat opposite him.

'Want to have a look at today's paper?'

'God, no.' Her mouth twisted with distaste. 'It'll just be about the bloody war.'

This was true. He folded the paper away and turned to her with his full attention. She was pale, he noticed. The two scratch-like lines around her mouth showed up more sharply than before.

'Are you OK?'

'I've had some bad news. The person I came to meet, Mathew Pearce – the real one – I thought I'd missed him back at the airport, but it's much worse than that. He's not coming.'

'A lot of people are worried about flying at the moment...'

She looked impatient. 'Nothing like that. He's had an accident. I called the main office back in London and they told me. He was on his way here. Belinda was taking him to the airport. And then a truck drove them off the road. Belinda's not too bad. People seemed to think she'll be OK. But Mathew Pearce ... Mathew Pearce...' The woman seemed close to tears. 'Mathew Pearce is in intensive care.' She ducked her head and began hunting around in her bag. 'Sorry. I've been under a lot of pressure recently.'

Marek had the impulse to reach out and touch her arm, but he remembered how quickly she could turn from repose to battle-readiness.

'Have you known him long?'

'No.'

'Is he someone you met over the internet?'

She stopped half way through unwrapping a packet of tissues. 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm just trying to understand the situation. You're waiting to meet a man. You've no idea what he looks like. You find out he's in hospital and you're in bits. The only thing I can think is...'

Her frown tightened, then dissolved. 'An internet lover?' For the first time she showed a glimmer of amusement. 'Good try, but no.' She took a breath, then tugged at the collar of her shirt. 'Would you mind if we go out on deck? It's so hot in here.'

They left the cafeteria, falling into step together. Already. He was smiling.

Stop looking at me like that, she wanted to say – so frankly full of interest. I have no room for looks like that. I am too old for you – maybe not in years but in every other way. Why don't you try that German girl by the window, or the laughing dark-haired creature by the door? They are young and on holiday like you. I am not.

And yet it was not unpleasant to be looked at like that again, she had to admit.

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