

PLAY WITH STRANGERS

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CHAPTER I



The screaming sounded very far away. At the first scream he sat upright, alert. My God, where was Christine? By the second scream he had already jumped up and was running towards the heavy door.

A curled up corner of carpet tripped Jonathan in his haste. His knee cracked on a set of library steps and twisting sideways he fell full-length on the polish-scented floor.

Lying there momentarily, he heard a third scream. Scrambling up desperately he pulled open the large door and burst into the hall.

‘Downstairs,’ he shouted, spinning an astonished Peter around on his heels and rushing to the open door along the hall.

What they saw as they peered past Charlotte reminded Jonathan of the set-piece scenes in the wax-work Chamber of Horrors which had so disturbed his sleep as a child. A pool of deep red blood glistened on a large table, soaking into slices of bread which were scattered upon it. She lay on the floor; face down, head on one side, her left arm stretched out. It was what first-aiders called the recovery position, but there would be no recovery here Jonathan thought. The hand appeared to be entangled in some infernal device. From the wound in her wrist radiated a pool of blood which lapped up to her glossy hair as she lay still and white.

‘You’ve seen enough. There is nothing we can do for her,’ Charlotte said quietly, ‘nothing at all.’



‘Stop the car Jonathan, please. I want to get out.’

He pulled up where a patch of bright green grass enlivened the dull heather. There was a tangy smell of sheep.

‘There,’ Christine said, pointing.

Jonathan shielded his eyes, trying to make out the details of the castle against the angry evening sky. All he could see were the outlines of the projecting turrets on the corners. Scottish Baronial style, Christine had said. All the rest was black.

They strolled across the closely-nibbled grass. Woolly bodies ambled away warily into the heather.

‘Kind of scary, that sky,’ Jonathan mused, ‘like a town on fire.’

‘It means bad weather, you know.’

‘Bad weather? I thought a red sky at night meant fine weather.’

Christine laughed. ‘But it’s not red you see, It’s yellow. Sailors say a deep yellow means rain, and pale means strong winds. Which is it going to be?’

Jonathan looked at the sky and back to his wife. ‘Bit of everything I should think. But where do you pick up these ideas?’

‘Oh, I’ve been around.’ Christine grinned defiantly, head on one side, flicking back her bouncy brown hair. She noticed a slight frown on Jonathan’s face. ‘But I’m married to you now, and I’ve been very happy for six years, so stop looking so serious. Come on; let’s go there if we must.’ She held his hand warmly as they walked

back over the short wiry grasses and clumps of heather to the car.

In the cosy interior once more, they were silent for a while as they approached their destination, each afraid to upset the fragile balance of the decision they had jointly made. Jonathan felt obliged to speak first, now they were so nearly there, still wishing to make Christine share responsibility for the decision he had persuaded her reluctantly to accept.

‘How do you feel about it now – a long weekend in this beautiful landscape, a romantic castle, lots of free food and drink. They probably have four-poster beds too. And you know what you always say about four-poster beds.’ He glanced at Christine mischievously.

‘Never mind what I said.’ Christine looked out at the gloomy moorland and ominous sky. ‘You know I think it’s weird, but I’ve said I’ll do it and I will. Aunt Charlotte made it sound so important to her, and she is mother’s oldest friend.’

‘I’m glad you see it like that,’ Jonathan said. ‘So what if a lot of silly people want to act up a bit. We get a good weekend and the main thing is I’m hoping someone will give me some business – God knows we need it.’

The castle had seemed quite close when they stopped, but they soon discovered that the road took a long and tortuous route around the loch. Christine saw that the mountain streams which normally sped and gurgled their ways under the road were in places beginning to creep over it, swollen as they were by the late melting snow and recent rain. A bit more rain, she thought, and this road will be quite impassable. There was still time to turn back; any excuse would do she reasoned. But she

never liked giving up.

Jonathan changed gear to drive slowly through another minor flood. He sympathised with Christine's sense of loyalty to Charlotte, but he knew he had played on that to persuade her to come. 'She's not really your aunt is she?'

'No, just mother's best friend in fact. I used to spend holidays here when I was young you know.' She remembered the kindness shown to a lonely child. No, she wouldn't let Charlotte down now. 'Charlotte's husband died young, you see,' she added. Christine's mother had told her about it when she was older: how he had died as his firm went into bankruptcy; how he had poured all his money into the business, believing he could save it. So although he had left the castle to Charlotte there was scarcely any money for her to live on and the old building was a financial burden.

'You said once that he went bankrupt, just before you were born,' Jonathan said, echoing her thoughts.

'Yes, and then Charlotte turned the castle into this hotel. But there's not much trade up here, as you can imagine – seasonal tourists and a few sportsmen. Maybe if this North Sea oil thing gets going properly that will help. Anyway it isn't really a castle, just a Victorian businessman's folly, although Aunt Charlotte used to say the cellars were part of a much older house that was there before.'

'And now this American businessman has talked her into organising these traditional weekend house parties? He's the one I want to meet,' Jonathan added.

'Yes,' she repeated. 'It's sort of business and pleasure combined; and it would be a regular income for her.'

Jonathan grunted enviously. 'I wish I had a regular

income. It's not very clever choosing to be a business consultant in the 1980s when it seems like everyone's going bankrupt and won't pay their fees.'

'Perhaps you give them the wrong advice,' Christine said bluntly.

'Well seven out of ten new businesses go bust anyway; that's par for the course. But why do I have to pick the duds – or why do they pick me?'

Christine sighed, and contemplated the reality of their position. They were practically bankrupt themselves. 'I do wish you hadn't borrowed all that money Jonathan. And you didn't even tell me.'

'Got to keep up appearances. Who'd employ a scruffy-looking business consultant?'

'Well then, you shouldn't have used it to buy all that new privatised share issue – they're not doing very well now are they? What if they don't pick up? They don't even cover the interest charges do they?'

Jonathan had no answer. Somehow this rugged country made him realise what a facade his life really was. His image, his neat grey suit, stylish shoes, carefully trimmed hair – would they do him any good in the Scottish Highlands with, if Christine was right, a storm coming on?



Jonathan swung the car into the south-facing courtyard of the hotel. The sun was lowering somewhere in the western sky behind those angry clouds. To Christine it seemed that the jagged shadows of the building had reached out to clasp her. She was aware of a deep silence as the tyres came to rest on the grey granite chippings and Jonathan switched off the engine.

They each voiced the conclusions of their thoughts from the journey.

‘I still think it’s weird,’ Christine said, ‘but I’ll do it for Charlotte.’

‘Something might turn up. Come on.’ Jonathan’s footsteps crunched across the gravel.

As they neared the steps to the front door a man came out of the shadows to meet them. Jonathan saw that he wore a black suit of thick woollen material, like that of a railway porter. His dark hair was wetly plastered down. Despite this rather uncouth appearance the man’s movements were restrained, almost gentle. As though he was approaching a wounded animal, thought Jonathan.

‘If you’ll give me your keys, I’ve been told to take your car around the back for you.’ His voice was not the hearty tone of the Highlander, but the lilting, almost Welsh, accent of the Western Isles.

He held out his hand.

Although a little taken aback at this service, and thinking he would have preferred to park his car himself, Jonathan nevertheless did what was expected of him and parted with the keys which he had been jangling in his fingers. And he saw then that this man’s eyes were not at all gentle in keeping with his manner. Their bloodshot appearance also suggested over-use of the whisky bottle.

Jonathan noticed Christine pat her shoulder bag for reassurance and he watched as the car, their only link with the outside world, was driven competently around the building and out of sight. He suddenly realised how restrictive the world could appear without his cosy, ever-present car. He turned to join Christine who was waiting at the top of the steps, impatient now to see the old house again.

They went in. A reception desk stood on the right; Jonathan tapped the brass hand-bell sharply.

Glancing across the spacious square hall Jonathan could see that all the main rooms led directly off it and since most of the doors to the rooms were open he could guess their use. At the far end to the right, under the turn of the large oak staircase, he glimpsed rows of large leather-bound volumes, while through the corresponding door to the left the surface of a large refectory table gleamed dully in the early evening sun.

On his immediate left he looked straight into what was probably a lounge which he calculated would get sun most of the day being on the south-west. Behind the reception desk what was now the hotel office might once have been a morning room facing the sunrise. Further down the hall was a closed door which he surmised would lead to the kitchen 'below stairs'.

Christine was looking around with obvious delight. Just her sort of thing thought Jonathan. Strange how their moods see-sawed: one up, the other down. Good perhaps. Suddenly Christine was enthusiastic while it was his turn to feel uncertain. But then she had her memories of this place which he did not share. Just now it was the present which worried him. Parting with the car keys in this remote place made him feel uneasy now and he wondered why he had surrendered so easily. His preoccupation didn't however prevent his grudging admiration of the Victorian copies of mediaeval woodwork which surrounded him on paneled walls and beamed ceiling. They certainly knew how to produce atmosphere he thought. Even so, there was something false. It was too mechanically perfect he decided; it lacked the craftsman's individual touch. Or

rather, the craftsman, regardless of his own will, had been compelled to follow the architect's design to produce a false perfection.

Jonathan was just about to ring the bell again when a man appeared from the room which contained the refectory table and hurried across to the desk, apologising in a routine way for any delay. He introduced himself as the hotel manager.

As Jonathon finished checking their rooms in the register he asked about the car. He'd not been to many hotels where the car was garaged as part of the service.

'Your car is being well looked after sir.'

'What about our bags then?' pursued Jonathan.

'They are being taken up to your room at this moment.'

'And supposing I need the car, where is it?' Jonathan knew he was fussing, but he was beginning to feel annoyed with himself for giving up the keys so readily. Christine was half-way to the stairs. He sensed her irritation at the delay.

The manager stiffened, being no doubt used to dealing with argumentative guests. 'Now I do not think you will be needing your car for a few days.' His soft, clearly spoken Scottish burr emphasised his firmness.

'But supposing I need to drive somewhere,' Jonathan persisted.

'Well of course we wouldn't stop you sir,' still the soft voice, 'but –' he paused.

'But what?'

'I assume you agreed to abide by the rules of the game when you arranged to come.' The manager glanced at Christine.

Of course, she had made the phone calls. 'It sounds

a good idea Chris, just fix it will you, I'm busy,' he had said.

'Rules, what rules?' Jonathan tried to remain polite. Come to that he thought, what game?

'The rules are that no one must leave the immediate surrounds of the house within the ha-ha; that's the dry ditch around the lawns you know sir.'

Christine nodded.

'Here are your room-keys. Your cases will be waiting. Thank you, sir.' He broke off as another man came in.

Jonathan turned around to see a large man entering through the main door. He did not come in noisily, but somehow Jonathan felt his presence disturbed the quiet and cosy atmosphere of the reception area. The man strode purposefully to the centre of the black and white chequered marble floor and looked around as though about to make a speech, body and head erect in a confident manner.

That must be the American businessman who organised this, Jonathan thought. He noted the expensive square cut jacket, the matching trousers which looked a shade too tight and a little short where they ended above well-polished brogues with thick soles. Jonathan concluded this was an outdoor man who was not going to conform to the strict requirements of business dressing; probably didn't need to. On another occasion Jonathan, with his smart conventional English clothes, might have felt superior. But not with this man.

The man was followed by a small and very neat woman. To Christine she seemed to be a typical rich American lady tourist – well-styled expensive pale blue woollen sweater, the cut of the trousers, neat pointed

shoes with narrow heels. Well, any Englishwoman might have all that, not least the Pan-Am shoulder bag these days, Christine reflected. It's the face that marks her out, she thought: the strong almost masculine look of a certain sort of middle-aged white American female, slightly hooded eyes, the set of the jowl that spoke perhaps of tough pioneering ancestry. Above all, the firm mouth, lips pursed into a shape that seemed to say American accent without even speaking. And yet this woman seemed uncharacteristically timid.

To Christine's surprise the woman didn't come right into the hall, but remained at the door, at the edge of that chess-board floor. Christine remembered her own childhood games – wait, roll the dice, hop one square, or across the world: whatever chance commanded. Standing there again, grown up now, she was struck by how readily, even eagerly, people submitted their lives to chance. Why? The woman's attitude was not so much hesitation as resignation, as though she expected something outside herself to determine the next move.

'Come on in Lou,' said the man loudly, not looking at the woman as he spoke while his gaze concentrated on Christine, half-turned to leave, then on Jonathan at the desk. 'You must be some of my fellow guests. Let me introduce myself: George D Dinder at your service.'

I bet the service goes mostly the other way, thought Jonathan.

George D Dinder stood in the centre of the hall, arm outstretched for a hand-shake, so that Christine and Jonathan were obliged to go to him, since they both felt it would be uncivil not to shake the proffered hand.

Ouch! Jonathan thought. He knew what that handshake meant.

‘It’s very fine weather for spring-time in Scotland.’ George spoke much louder than was necessary. ‘I thought we’d be all snowed-up still.’

Jonathan introduced Christine and himself. ‘My wife says that sailors forecast a storm when the sky’s all yellow like now,’ he added civilly, but in fact resenting the excessive self-confidence of the man.

‘Really! And where did you learn that?’ George was now looking intently at Christine, still clasping her hand.

Christine felt a sense of his powerful personality and of her embarrassment at the unfamiliar situation of being lost for something to say. The words she had used by the loch came bubbling out, ‘Oh, I’ve been around.’

The words sounded so different to when she had spoken them to Jonathan. Christine suddenly felt very awkward, wondering what to say next.

There was no need to say anything: George laughed loudly, several times, savouring his intended joke, and then, ‘Not with too many sailors I hope,’ he said. He laughed again, and appeared greatly amused at his repartee. ‘Hey Lou, come on in for God’s sake and meet Christine. Seems she knows how to forecast the weather from sea-weed an’ all that sort of stuff.’ And George strode over to the desk.

Lou shook hands politely, but warmly, and shared a sympathetic glance with Christine who still felt discomfited. Then Lou trailed off to join her husband.

Christine and Jonathan walked up the broad oak staircase. The treads, designed for a more spacious age, were so wide and shallow that Christine found she was naturally walking easily and gracefully rather than climbing. The sensation made her feel somehow rather important.

Jonathan was thinking: I'm not going to like George Dinder; do I really want to do business with him? He'll eat me alive.

As they turned on to the landing Jonathan, following Christine, just glimpsed another man come into the hall. He appeared hurried and uncertain: like a countryman in London, thought Jonathan, afraid he's going to miss the last bus.



Seated in the big armchairs in the bedroom Jonathan and Christine relaxed before going down to dinner. Christine could see that the log fire which crackled in the grate had only recently been lit; the room still felt chilly and un-used. She glanced around. Although the room, like the building itself, was large, she felt it was not at all bleak with its heavy carpet, scattered rugs and traditional furniture. Not like a modern hotel with its space-economising rooms and chipboard fittings.

‘Charlotte certainly does things well,’ said Jonathan, ‘but this enormous place must be quite uneconomic. I suppose she’s making a special effort to impress. I don’t imagine log fires in every bedroom are usual.’

‘Not these days. But talking about impressions, I suppose George Dinder is the businessman she’s trying to sell these weekends to. What did you think of him Jon?’

Jonathan thought a bit before replying. ‘Well, he’s not typical. Most Americans I meet are very polite. He seems a bit of a backwoodsman.’

‘Probably made his fortune catching grizzly bears with his bare hands.’ Christine giggled. ‘Like Uncle Harry.’

Jonathan grinned. ‘Did he do that?’

‘Not exactly. But he knocked about the world a lot after he left the army – expeditions, anthropology; that sort of thing. Wrote articles for geographical magazines; quite famous in his way. But he was no businessman. I seem to remember he was blamed partly for the collapse of Christopher’s firm.’

‘Christopher was Charlotte’s husband?’

‘Yes that’s right. But of course no one blamed Uncle Harry for Christopher’s death. Christopher had been ill long before the firm crashed and I think his illness was the cause of it all rather than the result.’

‘This Uncle Harry sounds quite a character – you do have interesting relations.’

‘Mmm. Charlotte said something about relations on the phone. I don’t have *that* many – perhaps she’s actually invited Uncle Harry. He hasn’t been in this country for years, but I heard he was thinking of settling down at last. It would be fun to see him again; he was always a great practical joker, mum said.’

‘Yes, you make it sound as though he’ll be wearing animal furs.’

‘Oh, no, he’s quite civilised I believe. At least he used to be. But anyway, Charlotte talked about relationships, not relations I think. She said she needed relationships – she didn’t mean romantic ones – just some sorts of links between people’s lives. That’s why she asked me.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘Well she said to set this weekend thing up properly she needed some relationships between the guests, real or imagined, but preferably real since for better or worse they can’t be changed then; so the rules are real you see.’

‘And talking of rules,’ Jonathan interrupted, re-

membering his argument with the manager, ‘have you any idea how this thing is going to be run? I feel I’m being controlled already. Giving up those keys – that was a smart idea to build up the tension – and that smarmy manager treating me like a kid, and George Dinder. You did all the talking on the phone to Charlotte. I just thought it sounded a good excuse for a long weekend up here and maybe some great business contacts.’

‘Yes, well, I wondered if you’d really thought about what it could be like. You wouldn’t listen when I tried to explain. Someone’s going to be murdered and we’re supposed to have great fun working out who did it, and why. But Charlotte said she didn’t want simple clues like a cosh left in the dining room, for example, like in that silly board game we used to play.’ ‘Anyway,’ Christine continued from where Jonathan had interrupted, ‘perhaps she has invited Uncle Harry after all.’

Jonathan’s thoughts had gone back to the point about relationships. ‘But we haven’t any relationship with George D Dinder.’

‘Don’t you think so?’

Jonathan looked serious. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You said you didn’t like him. You said he’d eat your business alive. That’s a relationship of sorts.’

‘Did I say that? I certainly thought it. When did I say it?’

‘When we were unpacking.’

‘Is that what Charlotte means by a clue then?’

‘Could be.’

Jonathan now looked worried. ‘But I’m not going to *murder* him,’ he protested.

‘Probably not,’ said Christine teasing, ‘but someone might think that you would.’

‘Well, anyway, I only said it to you.’

‘What makes you think we’ll be on the same side?’

‘You mean, I won’t be able to trust even you?’

Jonathan began to feel a disturbing sense of unreality creeping over him. Perhaps it was the tiredness after the long drive, the unfamiliar surroundings.

‘It’s only a *game* silly.’ Christine looked up at the sound of a knock on the door.

‘Come in,’ called Jonathan automatically. He turned around to see the door opened by an attractive girl. He judged her to be in her mid-twenties. She had sleek blonde hair and a fine complexion, but Jonathan noticed that her cheeks were quite flushed. He could imagine that she would be rather busy with all the special arrangements, for she wore the black and white of a hotel maid.

‘Excuse me Sir. There’s a message for Mrs Robson.’

Christine smiled, ‘Yes’. She too saw the girl’s flushed cheeks and thought there was an unease which was not due just to pressure of work.

‘I was asked to let you know that Captain Donaldson has arrived.’

‘Oh! That’s Uncle Harry,’ cried Christine. ‘I suppose it might have been a bit of a shock seeing him suddenly after all this time – and embarrassing if I didn’t recognise him. How thoughtful of Aunt Charlotte. Thank you.’

The maid left. Jonathan was grinning, for at that moment the wind which had been rising gently while they had been talking suddenly hit the house with a large gust and the sound of heavy rain.

‘There you are,’ he said, ‘I’m most impressed. Two prophecies coming true at the same time.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘Well, Uncle Harry turning up *and* the storm.’

‘Oh, rubbish. I was only guessing. It’s common sense and a bit of intuition, that’s all.’

‘I can see you’re going to be very useful this weekend. Seriously though, what’s this game like? I thought we’d just have a nice weekend and watch old Dinder playing Detective-somebody-or-other.’

‘I think we’re all here for a purpose,’ mused Christine, ‘Charlotte sounded as though she’d given it a lot of thought. It’ll be like one of those house parties in novels where everyone is snowed up and someone is killed, and whoever did it, it’s got to be someone in the group. We’re not snowed up of course, but it seems we’re on our honour not to leave. I suppose we have a role to play.’

‘But no one has told us what to do yet,’ argued Jonathan, ‘have they?’

Christine shook her head.

‘Do you think some of the other people here will act it all out and we’re just observers, or will old Charlotte creep up on us and say, “Would you mind being murdered for a bit?” and pour ketchup over me and tell me to lie on the floor. And everyone will stand around and say, “Poor fellow, there must be a jealous rival for his wife’s affections – who can it be?” And Dinder will work out who it is and win the prize, and go off feeling jolly pleased. Then he’ll recommend the hotel to all his buddies in the States for long weekends.’

‘Well there isn’t – a rival I mean.’ Christine smiled at him warmly. ‘But I suppose it must be something like that – what else could happen? Except perhaps there won’t be any blood,’ she said thoughtfully.

‘Well I hope there’s more to it than *that*,’ said Jonathan. ‘I could think up a better story myself.’

Anyway, there's the dinner gong, so let's go down and see what fate and Aunt Charlotte have prepared for us.'



CHAPTER 2



‘Do you know, Christine dear, I’ve invited Uncle Harry? You remember him, don’t you?’ Charlotte stood to one side, arms outstretched as though she would embrace them both.

‘Of course. Uncle Harry, I was so pleased to hear you were coming.’

Jonathan winced a little. Christine often was not exact enough for his mind. So pleased to hear you were *here*, would have been correct. He’d frequently said, listening to Christine recounting events over a telephone, that he wouldn’t want her as a witness at *his* murder trial. It was just a joke. ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter,’ she would reply, ‘people know what I mean.’

There was no time to make the point; and maybe it didn’t matter. Someone was banging a dinner gong. They all drifted fairly informally into the dining room.

Charlotte stood at the head of the table, waiting until everyone found a place. She had asked Jonathan to sit third on her right. He whispered to Christine, ‘I see Dinder has the place of honour –’ He broke off as Louise took her position between himself and George at the top of the table.

Wishing not to appear secretive to Louise, Christine replied in a normal voice, but changed the subject. ‘You see you didn’t need your monkey-suit after all.’ She patted the sleeve of his dark jacket.

Jonathan saw that only Harry, sitting directly

opposite, was wearing a dinner jacket. He might have passed for everyone's idea of an elderly Professor of Archaeology, except, as Jonathan knew, professors of archaeology these days often were thrusting young men who wore scruffy jeans. Harry had an active, rugged, kindly face; his hair was basically short in style, but in need of a trim. The clipped grey moustache gave a hint of his military past. Beside Harry, across the table from Christine, was a man whom Jonathan had heard Uncle Harry introduce as his 'agent', Jose Cotta. A handsome man, probably in his late fifties; Jonathan judged from his features that he was Spanish or Portuguese, perhaps South American.

As they sat down Christine glanced up at the small hammer-beam roof and then at the walls panelled in dark oak to a height of about six feet, like her college dining-room in miniature she thought. At one end a fire blazed cheerfully in a large stone fireplace. Rain beat in gusts against the tall windows. The light was subdued and everyone was talking quietly. Which I suppose, she reflected, means that Dinder isn't talking at all.

Soup was served by the maid who had brought the message to Jonathan and Christine's room. She's certainly unusually attractive thought Christine, noting her full figure, fine hair and complexion, and her graceful manner as she moved silently around the table. Her face showed no sign now of her earlier agitation. Several times Christine felt that the glances of both George Dinder and Uncle Harry appeared to rest on her figure a little too long. Christine sensed as any woman would that another was the centre of attraction. Not that she cared in this case. Strange though, Uncle Harry didn't seem the sort to stare.

Jonathan's thoughts were more calculating. Why, he wondered, would such a lovely young girl choose to live and work in this out of the way old-fashioned place? It was one more thing which instinctively he felt somehow didn't fit. He saw that the hotel manager had now exchanged his brown tweed suit of the afternoon for a dinner-jacket and black tie and was filling the role of wine-waiter. His tall upright figure, slightly hooked nose and greying sandy hair certainly added some dignity to the meal, Jonathan felt – not like some pale-faced little teenage waiter scurrying around.

'Who are those two?' Christine said quietly, thinking there was enough conversation for her question not to be overheard.

Jonathan shrugged. On Charlotte's left, opposite Dinder, was the man he had seen come in at the front door earlier, looking more composed now. Beside him was a girl with well-groomed blonde hair cut to shoulder length and set off by a plain black dress. She had a placid look, not the air of weary eagerness he had seen in so many professional women. 'I don't know,' he said, 'did you expect me to?'

Across the candle-light they both saw Uncle Harry's eyes twinkle in a smile.



'Can I hold it please, Uncle Harry?'

Christine and Jonathan were by now past the formalities of small talk with Harry and Jose. It became clear that Harry had not flown over just for the weekend, but was intending to settle down in England as soon as could be arranged. Christine was delighted to find that

the four of them got on very well. By the time she and Harry had shared some details of family events of years ago she began to feel they were truly relations. Harry was a great teller of stories, and Jose was very good at correcting his wilder claims, which added a spice of tension and humour to Harry's tales.

'That's a very curious pipe you have Uncle Harry,' Christine said. She had been intrigued by it for some time. Harry rarely put the pipe to his mouth – it was not lit – and most of the time it was laid on the table partly covered by his outstretched fingers.

He held it up for her to see.

Christine saw that what she thought was a Meer-schaum, with a carved Middle-European face, had in fact the face of an Aztec carving with pouting lips and flat cheekbones under the squarish eyes. As she leaned forward to see better across the table, her breath disturbed the candle flames and the shadows of the face moved so that it seemed to grin at her. Christine could not decide whether she thought it repellent or attractive.

'Can I hold it please?' she repeated, putting out her hand.

A small movement of Harry's arm would have transferred it to her grasp, but he did not make that movement and only held it still as the little face mocked her.

'Sorry my dear.' Uncle Harry replaced the pipe in its former position on the table. 'When you travel rough, you don't have many possessions, but they become part of you don't you see? Sort of personal. This pipe has been in some tight corners with me and Jose here.'

Jose nodded wisely as though there was nothing more to be said.

‘I had it specially made by an old Indian carver living in the rain forest,’ said Uncle Harry, ‘when my other pipe was broken. Got him to add this bit underneath for storing pipe cleaners.’ Harry indicated a straightish lower stem attached to the curved main stem by delicately carved brackets. ‘Not easy to get pipe cleaners in the jungle. Can’t stand being in a difficult situation, and just when a chap needs a good smoke then the darned pipe won’t pull properly.’

Jose smiled and his eyes gleamed in a tolerant expression. ‘Actually the old Indian ran a workshop in the shanty town of Sao Paolo,’ he said.

‘Don’t spoil a good story Jose. The fellow lived in the jungle five years before, till they cut the forest down around his ears, for some damned chemical factory. I think my account gives the true flavour of the story.’

‘Harry, you are an English romantic,’ smiled Jose, ‘but I agree; perhaps both our stories are necessary for the whole truth.’

‘Thank you Anne,’ said Charlotte as the maid cleared away the sweet-dishes at the end of the meal. The manager-cum-wine-waiter was pouring coffee. So that is her name, Christine noted and looked at the aunt whom she had not seen for so many years. Charlotte sat very upright in an old-fashioned manner. Her silvery grey hair was parted down the middle and the sides drawn back, but not in a severe way. Rather it looped prettily like a young girl’s, setting off her shapely forehead. Round her neck she wore a black choker: so becoming, thought Christine, to a once beautiful neck that was still handsome. From the centre of the choker dangled a large blue jewel which matched Charlotte’s pale eyes.

Jonathan sensed that everyone by now was expecting some words from Charlotte, some explanation of what was to happen. So far, he realised, the talking had taken place entirely within the two groups at the top and bottom of the table. Sipping the tiny cups of coffee, the guests relaxed – sat back in their chairs, or hunched their shoulders over the table. Now, he thought, someone will tell us what to do.

Charlotte's voice was clear. 'I expect you are used to having small tables for dining in hotels, but it seemed appropriate this weekend to get out the old dining table so we can sit around and talk easily. You can see that Robert has given it a good polish.'

Was that all? Jonathan looked at the manager. Was he Robert? Or was that the man who had taken his car? Or was there someone else?

The newly-polished oak planks gleamed in the candlelight. No, Dinder was going to speak.

He came straight to the point. 'We all know what we are here for and why.' He had everyone's attention. 'It seems to me Mrs Alexander that this weekend differs in one important respect from those you are attempting to emulate.'

How Americans like big words, reflected Jonathan.

Charlotte glanced around the table, like a good tutor waiting for her charges to reply.

'In what way Mr Dinder?' Jose's English was well-spoken, with a throaty accent.

'I think I know,' said the young man beside Charlotte. 'We are *expecting* a murder, at least a pretend one,' he said, glancing at Charlotte.

'Not just that,' said George D Dinder, waiting for his moment. 'Instead of deciding who did the murder,

we are probably at this moment trying to work out *who* will be murdered.'

Too right, thought Jonathan.

'Right now, I expect one of us has already agreed to oblige.' Dinder's glance was directed slowly round the table.

'Perhaps Mrs Alexander is waiting to see what each one of us knows before deciding who to bump off, eh?' put in Harry.

'It may not be one of us,' suggested Jose, 'it could be someone else, like the waitress.'

Christine glanced over to the serving hatch, but the maid had now left the dining room since everything had been cleared away except the coffee cups.

'Oh come now,' said the young man, 'I am sure Mrs Alexander would not get us all up here just to investigate some sordid domestic quarrel concerning the staff.' Charlotte looked at the young man intently.

'I hope not,' intoned George D Dinder. 'So it means we are looking for reasons why one of us around this table ought to be murdered, if you forgive the expression,' he said, not looking at all penitent. 'Something in our past, recent or otherwise; something in our relationships with each other, perhaps something we don't know, or have forgotten.'

Jonathan felt this was beginning to get too personal. Still, Dinder had hinted at what they should do: find out about each other. But why had Dinder chosen to draw everyone's attention to this and put them on their guard. Jonathan could see that it wouldn't be so easy now. Information would be guarded jealously, traded warily, refused, given away unawares sometimes, all under a veneer of politeness. Well some people spent their

lives doing that anyway, and at least when the weekend was over the slate would be wiped clean, wouldn't it? No, that wasn't the problem. He sensed that there was something else. He couldn't get it clear in his mind. Something about how you defined people

Charlotte was announcing that drinks and more coffee would be available in the lounge across the hall.

'I say Chris,' Jonathan whispered to Christine on the way, 'you don't really believe all that stuff about pipe-cleaners do you?' But he saw to his chagrin that Christine did not seem to notice his remark, appearing more interested in the company around her.

The groups which had been set up for dinner reformed, and Jonathan and Christine found themselves reluctantly talking to George D Dinder and Louise. Though Louise is quite sweet really, thought Christine.

'Nice to meet you again Mr and Mrs Robson. But can I call you Jonathan and Christine as we are sort of colleagues now for the weekend?'

Jonathan sensed the deliberate intention to charm, the clear repetition of their names. He thought that this man must have taken a course in How to Win Friends and Influence People, but perhaps had not been the ideal pupil. Still, thought Jonathan, he's successful, I'm not.

'Made my money out of cowpats, y'know,' said George D Dinder affably.

Jonathan did not inquire further.

'What's your line?'

'Me? Oh I'm a business consultant,' answered Jonathan. 'I aim to specialise in funding for expanding businesses.'

'Not much call for your sort in this country right now,' George D Dinder laughed as if it were a joke. 'You

should specialise in bankruptcy.’

‘The thought had occurred to me,’ Jonathan replied rather stiffly. It didn’t seem a very positive thing to say. Anyway he’d probably soon experience his own.

‘Now we could maybe use you in Ronald Reagan’s America. Lots of cash slopping around if you can secure it – lots of expansion.’

Jonathan brightened.

George D Dinder beamed at him. Then Jonathan hesitated. He was quite comfortable in Surrey. Whatever Dinder’s line was, it didn’t sound very pleasant. George D Dinder sensed the hesitation like an automatic door closer senses an approaching pedestrian. The charm switched off, the beam vanished, and Dinder turned his attention to Louise and Christine.

Jonathan thought, now I know why the losers pick me: lack of killer instinct. He felt excluded from the group which included his own wife. She didn’t seem to notice and Jonathan wandered over to a large oak bookcase with a Latin motto which he did not understand carved on the frieze. He watched as Dinder placed his right hand on Christine’s shoulder as he regaled her with some anecdote, at the same time extending his left hand to Louise who also shared the joke. With the stimulus of conversation Louise seemed more vivacious than Jonathan had thought when he met her in the hall on arrival.

‘I could throttle that man,’ said Jonathan, half to himself.

‘I say, steady on.’

Jonathan turned to see the young man standing beside him.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jonathan. ‘I hope that Dinder isn’t

a friend of yours.'

'Not exactly, but that's not what I meant. You're giving away clues.' The young man took a notebook from his pocket and tapped it on his cheek in a knowing manner. 'I thought it would be a good idea to write things like that down. If I play a game, I mean to win it.'

Jonathan thought the last sentence sounded a bit artificial coming from this man who had seemed so flustered a few hours back. It was probably an expression he had picked up from someone else. For all his brashness now, he did not look like a winner, not like Dinder. But then Jonathan had not won much himself, except Christine. He glanced across to where she seemed to be in rapt attention as Dinder regaled her with some story, Louise in attendance.

'Pretty silly game,' said Jonathan, 'I mean nothing's real.'

'We are real,' said the young man.

'Well flesh and blood yes. But neither of us knows if the other one is acting, whether Mrs Alexander has assigned roles to us, whether what we say is true. In a real murder story there are facts. People may tell lies, but underneath are real facts if you can get them. But here we have facts, perhaps lies as well, and a third sort of information – pretence. If I say for the purpose of the game that I am the ex-King of Bavaria how do we decide that is true? Do you suppose Mrs Alexander will adjudicate as umpire? Funny sort of game where the rules are made up as we go along.'

'It happens in war games, even in military exercises. The umpires decide after a fight how many men are dead and who has won.'

'But that's a mathematical sort of thing, like chess;

in real life people win against the odds.’

‘Not often,’ said the young man, ‘it’s just they usually don’t know what the odds are.’

Jonathan began to feel irritated. He had been looking forward to a relaxing weekend. It was Christine who had been reluctant. Now he realised, from their conversation in the bedroom, that she had a much better idea of what it was all about. And here he was, engaged in a philosophical discussion about fatalism and determinism, while she seemed to be joining in the fun with Dinder.

‘Some people take games very seriously indeed,’ the young man was saying.

Jonathan knew this was true. At business school some students had been quite ruthless in the management games, displaying the will to win, to be top dog – even in a game: the killer instinct, which he had lacked.

‘Well I don’t,’ Jonathon replied bluntly.

‘Come now, suppose someone accused you of the murder this weekend, wouldn’t you feel bound to defend yourself, even in a game? And wouldn’t you feel pretty bad if everyone decided you were the murderer, especially if you hadn’t done it? They do say it happens in real life sometimes. Anyway, look, here we have been having this interesting conversation and we haven’t even introduced ourselves. I’m Peter Brooke, and that girl,’ he indicated the blonde woman talking to Harry, ‘is my fiancée June Sims. She is also my secretary,’ he added.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said Jonathan, ‘I’m Jonathan Robson and that’s my wife Christine.’

‘I think I have met your wife,’ said Peter, ‘not here,’ he added as Jonathan looked surprised. ‘She was a year ahead of me at medical school. I remember the professor

describing her to me as “tolerably brilliant”. It seemed rather an ambiguous thing for a professor to say, don’t you think? I mean, who tolerated whom?’

Jonathan wondered who this young man was who had discussed his future wife with a professor all those years ago.

‘Medical school? So you must be a doctor. Are you here to say when one of us dead?’

‘Well, I probably could do that, but actually I’m a rep for a chemical company now, drugs of course. You see I failed my finals.’

Jonathan thought, so that’s one he didn’t win. Then out loud he said, ‘But Christine didn’t do medicine, she read biochemistry.’

‘Yes, but there is a lot of subject matter in common these days. The way the course was arranged we shared some classes. Very popular girl was Christine. At University I mean.’

Jonathan thought that was very probable. He began to wonder what this man knew about Christine, but did not like to pursue it directly. ‘Do you have a yacht?’ he said suddenly.

‘No, why ever do you ask?’ Peter looked surprised at the sudden question.

‘Oh nothing, I just wondered about your hobbies.’

Peter must have assumed that Jonathan sailed and was looking for a common topic of conversation. He relaxed.

Jonathan picked up the conversation where he had left it. ‘I didn’t meet Christine until after University,’ he explained. ‘She went on to do accountancy and we met at business school. I specialised in company law and now I’m a business consultant.’

‘Very appropriate. Accountancy and law, money and crime!’

‘What do you mean? Company law doesn’t deal with criminals!’

‘Well not the train-robber sort, but do you deny there are some shady deals in business – bribery, blackmail?’

‘Are you accusing me of corruption?’ Jonathan was beginning to feel angry, these hints of Christine’s past and now this.

Peter raised his hand, palm towards Jonathan and made a slowing down movement. ‘Hold on – only for the weekend. It’s a game remember. You see you do get involved.’

Jonathan was not sure if he had been insulted or not. The confusion between reality and pretence made him feel at a loss and he sensed that Peter had him at a disadvantage. ‘Well I have borrowed some money on false security to stag some shares that have flopped,’ he said and then wished he hadn’t said it; Peter’s notebook twitched.

Jonathan decided to change the conversation. ‘How did you come to be invited to this weekend?’ he asked, hoping the remark didn’t sound offensive.

‘Because of Dinder. He’s in the agricultural chemical business.’

Jonathan laughed knowingly. ‘That’s not how Dinder described it.’

‘My firm has a small UK agency for his company,’ continued Peter ignoring the interruption. ‘Mrs Alexander explained what she was doing and asked if the company would like to send someone up. I think she sees these weekends as future venues for business contacts – or Dinder does; you know, these bonding

sessions everyone is so keen on these days. I was the only one who could make it this time.'

'So you are here purely by chance?' queried Jonathan.

'Purely by chance,' said Peter, looking Jonathan straight in the eyes.

'I'll write that down,' said Jonathan, mockingly.

Peter drifted off to join his fiancée and Harry. Jonathan stayed beside the large bookcase and its cryptic inscription, feeling thoughtful. He had not warmed to Peter. There had been a brief stimulus in the clash of conversation, but no real meeting of interests. Jonathan did not feel he wanted to know Peter any better. He wondered about what had just passed between himself and Peter, and about the conversation at dinner. Dinder seemed in control somehow, when it was supposed to be Aunt Charlotte's show. Dinder seemed to possess or reject everything that came in his path; nothing was comfortably neutral. Jonathan remembered the scene on arrival and Dinder's commanding presence in the hall, how he had dominated the dinner. Louise seemed to be in thrall. He, Jonathan, had been rejected, and Christine Where was Christine?

Jonathan glanced across the room and was surprised to find that he was relieved to see Christine no longer talking to Dinder and Louise, but in conversation with Charlotte. And what about Charlotte? thought Jonathan: how much did she understand of what she was doing? Was she aware of all the real relationships that her contrived house party now contained? Was Dinder really in control of her too, and did he know more than she? Was Peter, for example, really here by chance? It seemed reasonable. There was of course the family

link between Charlotte and Christine, and the business link between Peter and Dinder. It was a reasonable coincidence that Peter and Christine had known each other at University; after all there weren't that many good medical faculties in the country. And Peter had not actually said he knew her, only met her. But Christine had been reluctant to come, Jonathan remembered. Was it something Charlotte told her on the phone, or was it her intuition? Well he could ask her that. But that would not determine whether the Peter–Christine thing was a coincidence or not. Only Charlotte and Dinder, or perhaps Dinder alone, would know that.

What am I going over all this for anyway, he thought suddenly, interrupting his musings? No one was going to get killed because of all that, and even in a game it would be pretty contrived. Jonathan began to get the sense of unreality again that he had felt when talking to Peter. Of things that did not really matter at all somehow seeming important despite himself. Christine had been right as usual, he concluded. It really was weird.



The maid had left a warm nightcap-drink in the bedroom and as they were drinking this Jonathan wondered whether to ask Christine about Dinder. His reluctance to do so stemmed from a fear of letting his imagination, and emotions, get out of control. In his younger days he knew he'd been over-possessive and jealous of his girlfriends. The wonderful thing about Christine, he thought, was that from the moment he had met her he had trusted her intuitively. He had experienced no great need to impress her or to justify himself to her since he felt he was understood, and anyway it seemed

there would be a lifetime enough for any explanations needed. They could wait. He thus assumed that Christine felt the same, although as she was a more phlegmatic character anyway, she probably didn't think about it and took their relationship for granted.

But the spirit of the game began to enter his soul. 'I thought you spent rather a long time talking to Dinder tonight,' Jonathan sounded reproachful. 'And you looked spellbound.'

Christine for once was not sympathetic to his mood and did not seem to sense his implied reproach. 'Oh, yes. I think the success of this thing means a lot to Aunt Charlotte. She asked me especially to be kind to him.'

'That could mean anything,' said Jonathan resentfully.

'Knowing Aunt Charlotte's high moral principles it means just what it says. I just boost old Dinder's ego a bit by listening to his stories with shining eyes. Louise said he fancies the girls a bit you know.'

'Well if you inflate his ego any more he'll float up in the air and off to Valhalla, or wherever he came from,' Jonathan said raising his voice.

Christine looked at Jonathan seriously. 'I do believe you're jealous,' she said, 'that's not like you.'

That's all you know, thought Jonathan, and out loud, 'Not like us you mean.'

Christine took both his hands, 'Look darling there's nothing to worry about, honestly.'

Jonathan felt he had been a bit foolish over nothing. 'All right,' he said, 'let's turn in. This evening has been exhausting, what with the drive up as well. I'm not sure I can face two more days of this.'

After they had been asleep for about an hour,

Jonathan was awoken by an insistent noise. The rain had stopped. As he sat up to listen better he could see the time, 0.57, on his digital travelling clock. He heard a woman's voice, taunting it seemed, but he could not hear the words, and a man gruff and angry. He slipped out of bed and tiptoed over to the window. Just then an outside door banged shut with the rattle of a latch and he heard what sounded like a woman's footsteps, short and quick, but noisy and echoing, far below. Women's shoes make more noise than men's these days, he thought. He opened the window and peered out and thought he saw a figure disappear behind the dark bushes.

He continued looking for some minutes, half expecting Dinder and Peter, and perhaps Uncle Harry, to rush out and make plaster casts of footprints, or at least to search for clues. It's a bit steep play-acting at one o'clock in the morning, he thought; I wonder if Dinder will approve of Charlotte's arrangements? But no one did come out, and he went back to the warm double bed where Christine was breathing gently in her sleep.

Since no one else had become involved Jonathan decided that the noises he had heard must be of no significance.

