

One

SOME THINGS CHANGE, some things never change. The grooms were about to cut the cake when I caught sight of Jojo lurching through the wedding guests, a bashed-up puppet on badly mended strings, head nodding, knees loose. I raised my third glass of fizz to my lips and kept my eyes on the grooms, hoping Jojo would take the hint and piss off, but there was no escaping Jojo. He waved a hand and made a beeline for me with an urgency that suggested the streets beyond the Glasgow Art Club were teeming with military insurgents or zombies on a spree. Jojo was out of breath and wheezing whisky by the time he got to my side. He put a hand on my shoulder.

‘Christ, there should be a limit on how many tartans are allowed in one room.’

The two Bobbys had gone for a traditional theme. The Art Club looked like a boozy gathering of clan prodigals made good, an oversweet, whisky liqueur advert of plaid and

heather, ghillie brogues and fluffed-up sporrans. Bobby McAndrew had gone full Bonny Prince Charlie with a lace jabot and cuffs. Bobby Burns had settled on a bow tie in the same tartan as his kilt. I was in no position to judge. The Bobbys had been good to me. I was showing my respect by wearing a Harris Tweed jacket and Black Watch trews.

I whispered, 'Glad to see you're doing your bit for sobriety.'

Jojo was a tartan-free zone. He was wearing a rumpled black suit over a white shirt. His funeral tie was loosely knotted around his neck. It might have been part of a *Reservoir Dogs*-style decision or the only tie he could find. Or maybe it was his own funeral Jojo was anticipating. His skin was grey, the bags under his eyes a blue-black cascade.

Jojo propped himself against the wall, sending an oil painting skew-whiff. The naked woman in the picture had been admiring herself in a hand-held silver mirror when someone, the painter presumably, had interrupted her. She was half turned to face the intruder, revealing the full stretch of her bare back. The painter had paid special attention to her spine, the ridge of vertebrae beneath her skin that led down to a hint of cleft. The painting invited you to imagine what happened next: fight or fuck? Jojo turned to see what he was leaning against and snorted. 'Bare-arsed and an expression like butter wouldn't melt.'

The Bobbys had already given speeches testifying their love for each other. Now they were fiddling with the two plastic grooms from the top of the cake, amusing their guests by casting aspersions on the white fondant icing. There were no parents of the grooms in attendance. Bobby McAndrew's wee mammy (as he always called her) had passed away six months before and Bobby Burns' relatives fell into the

never-to-be-mentioned category. Bobby McAndrew gave me a stern look and I nodded, trying to convey that I would keep Jojo in order. Bobby Burns put an arm around his new husband and called the assembled guests his 'chosen family'.

Equal weddings, surrogates, gay community, queer allies, trans rights, drag queens spilling-the-T-on-prime-time-TV. The world changes, the world stays the same.

Jojo nudged me in the ribs. 'Families are meant to share. I wouldn't say no to some of their gelt.'

Some of the guests turned their heads in our direction. A Belle Époque panto dame in oyster satin and ostrich feathers raised a finger to her lips and *shushed*.

I put a hand on Jojo's shoulder. 'Fancy a drink?'

Jojo looked at me. 'Plenty of drink here.'

But he let me cup his elbow and guide him back through the crowd of guests, out of the Art Club and into the grey, afternoon drizzle. I had been hoping to decant Jojo into a cab, but he slung an arm around my back and we half walked, half waltzed along Bath Street.

'Here's a place.'

Jojo took out his phone as we descended the stairs towards a brightly lit basement café bar that was doing a brisk trade in lunches. He stumbled and almost lost his footing. I caught the back of his collar, steadying him.

'You started early.'

The energy that had propelled Jojo across the floor of the Art Club had vanished. The phrase dog-tired had been invented for him.

'Started early, started late. I've been going for days, Rilke.'

The café was a floral bunting, lacy doily place that served cocktails in mismatched china teacups. A mother-and-daughter couple vacated a table by the window as we entered. I steered

Jojo towards it, not bothering to wait for their plates and glasses to be cleared. Jojo sank into a seat and started to pick at the remnants of the women's discarded salads. He was thinner than I remembered. Gaunt and hollow-cheeked.

A waiter hovered, ready to clear the table. Jojo put a protective arm around the leftovers and asked for a rye and dry. I told the waiter to make it two. He looked doubtful, but he was young, and it was clear Jojo had potential to be a handful. Maybe I looked like I could be a handful too. He left Jojo to his salads and returned with our drinks and the bill.

Jojo barely noticed. He had his phone on the table and was scrolling through Grindr, commenting on profiles. He held the screen of his phone up for me to see.

'I had him last week.'

The man in the photograph was somewhere in his mid-twenties, blond and preppy with a come-hither innocence.

'Lucky you.'

Jojo shrugged. 'He was the good time that was had by all, if you know what I mean.'

'I hope you washed your hands afterwards.'

Jojo stuffed a tomato in his mouth and chewed. He had had the kind of baby-faced good looks that age badly. His chipmunk cheeks had sagged and the dimples that had been cute when he was younger looked vaguely sinister in his fifty-plus-year-old face.

'It's a whole new world from when we were kids, Rilke. Remember the bars? The looking over your shoulder all the time? Who'd've thought poofs would be allowed to marry? Who'd've thought they'd want to?'

I took a sip of my drink. Beyond the café window the rain grew heavier.

‘Still no harm in being careful.’

Jojo blew a raspberry. Tomato seeds sprayed across the table. He wiped them with the cuff of his suit. ‘Says the Night Crawler.’

‘The Night Crawler was a serial killer. I’ve got my flaws but multiple murder’s not one of them.’

Jojo’s eyes were back on his screen. ‘Aye, well, you’re a serial shagger, so don’t go judging me.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’

Jojo barely made a living running collectables between auction houses and antique shops. There had been an older man he palled about with, a decade or so ago, who I had assumed was his boyfriend. I had not seen him for years – dead or moved on – and as far as I knew no one had taken his place.

Jojo held his phone up to me again, eyes bright with anticipation. ‘What do you think?’

Another blond man in his late twenties, floppy fringe, blue V-neck, whitened teeth.

‘Out of your league.’

Jojo grinned. His own teeth were dingy and wine-stained.

‘That’s the thing, Rilke. No one’s out of anyone’s league anymore.’ He knocked his drink back, downing half of his whisky and ginger in two quick gulps. ‘I’m on the party circuit.’

‘Good for you, but even Noël Coward put his feet up now and again. You look knackered.’

Jojo scooped an ice cube from his drink, shoved it in his mouth and chewed.

‘You got that wrong. I’m rrrrrrring to go. You should come with me. I’ll get us an Uber. I promise you, it’s a different world. Every porno fantasy you ever had come to life.’

He waved a hand at the café, its ironic floral décor and adverts for naughty gins, the mainly female clientele sprinkled with compliant husbands and boyfriends. The wholesomeness of the two Bobbys' nuptials, the excitement of their straight friends at witnessing old queers settling down had been starting to grate on me. For a moment I was tempted, but a glance at Jojo's face, his eager old-man-baby leer brought me back to my senses.

'I need to look back in on the two Bobbys. It's their wedding, remember?'

A glimmer of the old Jojo appeared. The keen-eyed dealer who could calculate untapped profit potential from the back row of the auction house.

'Oh aye. They're good customers of yours. Is it true they moved to a bigger house just so they'd have more walls to hang their paintings on?'

I nodded. 'They're nice guys.'

'A lawyer and a . . . what's the other one?'

'A lecturer at the uni.'

'A lawyer and a lecturer at the uni. They can afford to be nice.'

It was the second time he had mentioned money. I waited for the sting, but it did not come. Instead Jojo knocked back the last of his drink. He took another look at his phone and wiggled the screen in front of me crooning, 'I'm comin' up, so you better get this party started . . .'

There was no point in telling him it was only three in the afternoon. The kind of party he was going to had no regard for time. I slipped a couple of notes on the table to pay for our drinks, got to my feet and helped Jojo get to his.

'I'll tell the Bobbys you send them your love.'

'Do that. Christ, I almost forgot, I got them a wee pressie.'

Jojo reached into his pocket and shoved a small brown medicine bottle half full of liquid at me. I cupped it in my hand, concealing it from the view of the café's customers.

'What the hell's that?'

Jojo's eyes had an evangelical glint. 'Sexual energy. After thirty-plus years the-gether the Bobbys could probably do with some. There's a recommended dose on the label. Tell them not to go over it and not to have too many drams either. It can knock you dead if you don't take care.'

I slipped the bottle into my coat pocket, making a mental note to dump its contents down the nearest lav.

'I'll make sure to pass that on.'

'See that you do. And no snaffling it for yourself. You were invited to the party and turned it down, ungrateful sod that you are.'

I followed him out of the café. Some young guys were having a smoke in the basement courtyard. Jojo gave them an appreciative up-and-down stare that was too bold for safety. He made me think of a man who, after years of carefully crossing at traffic lights, had decided to fling himself across a three-lane motorway without bothering to look left or right.

I rolled a cigarette and offered it to him but Jojo's attention was back on his phone, following the progress of his approaching Uber. He batted the roll-up away.

'Those things'll kill you.'

I lit up. 'We've all got to die of something.'

Jojo glanced at his phone again. 'The cab's halfway along Sauchiehall Street, it'll be here soon.' He looked up, his face suddenly alive. 'I've got something else for you.' Jojo reached into his pocket again and took out a mess of business cards, receipts and scraps of paper. He fumbled through them until

he found what he was looking for. 'I've got a tip for you. A big house in Galloway needing cleared in a big hurry.'

'You're a good man, Jojo. I'll make sure Rose sees you right.'

I reached for the note in his hand. He snatched it away.

'It's a top tip, Rilke. A mansion full of antiques. The old biddy that lives there is getting shifted out to a home. Her nephew wants the job done fast. I told him, there's no one faster than Bowery. It's worth something in advance.'

I reached into my wallet and pulled out a twenty-pound note. Jojo held the piece of paper between his thumb and forefinger, just beyond my reach.

'Fifty and it's yours.'

'What is this place? Sanssouci?'

'Got it in one. Houses like this don't turn up anymore.'

'You're a bullshitter, Jojo. Who told you about it? One of your party mates?'

'This isn't bullshit, Rilke. Believe me, you'll be sorry if you miss it.'

Jojo was drunk and on a downward slide. But there was a note of conviction in his voice. For all that he was a mess, Jojo knew antiques. I reached into my pocket and took out three brown bank notes. Jojo snatched them before I could change my mind and thrust the address at me.

'You're a scholar and a gentleman, Rilke. Remember that's just an advance. This is a good tip. It's worth five times that.'

'That's for Rose to decide.' I patted him on the shoulder, ready to go. 'Take care of yourself, Jojo.'

He looked up at me, skin the colour of ash, eyes over-bright.

'Don't you worry about me. I'm having the time of my life.'

The next time I saw Jojo he was dead.