

NOVAK

An illustration of a woven basket and a high-heeled sandal on a beach. The basket is made of light brown straw and has a dark brown strap with a buckle. The sandal is a high-heeled sandal with a dark brown strap and a buckle. The basket and sandal are on a sandy beach with waves in the background.

AND THE BODY ON THE BEACH

A Costa Blanca Mystery

ULLI EIKE

A dead woman found in the blazing sand of Benidorm.
A husband desperate to close the chapter before anyone
starts asking real questions.

A calculating blonde vamp pulling the strings from the
shadows.

Witnesses who saw everything — yet noticed nothing.
And a former investigator who wants nothing more than
to enjoy a cold beer served by the beautiful waitress... until
the case lands squarely at his feet.

Novak and the Body on the Beach

A sun-drenched crime mystery set on Spain's Costa
Blanca — sharp, atmospheric, and impossible to put
down.

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BENIDORM, PLAYA DE LEVANTE

10.30AM

"Over my dead body." Rosemary Burns glared down at the mobile phone lying on the beach towel in front of her. "And that's the end of the matter, as far as I'm concerned." She ended the call with a sharp jab of the red button, not waiting for a reply from the person on the other end. Then she shifted her weight onto her right arm and turned slightly so she could look at the man on the towel beside her. "Did you get that, too?"

Andrew Burns, her husband, twisted his long face into a resigned smile. "You're quite sure you don't want to think it over again, Rosie?"

She rolled her eyes. "We are not selling the bar. We'll get the place back on its feet."

"Not if you sack our best member of staff."

"Milena stole."

"She didn't. She took some out-of-date food we wouldn't have been allowed to use anyway."

"She should have asked."

"She did ask me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe you, Andy. You just want to protect her. And I didn't like her brother, either. He spent far too much time in the bar, kept Milena from her work, and did shady business on the side while he was at it."

Andrew didn't answer. He couldn't argue with that one. Dealing drugs in their bar was unacceptable. At least they still agreed on that much.

"Are you coming in for a swim?" she said, changing the subject to defuse the tension that had built up between them over the last minute.

Andrew Burns shook his head. "No, you go on. I need to get to the bar — I've got two important suppliers coming at eleven. But I'll probably come back down afterwards."

"Fine," she replied. "If not, I'll be back in good time before the lunchtime rush starts."

She got to her feet and picked her way across the soft, shifting sand towards the sea and the refreshment she'd been longing for.

A quarter of an hour later she came back ashore and turned to look out at the sea once more. The gently rippled surface of the water sparkled in the morning sunlight, and above it the sky blazed in exactly the shade of blue that gave the colour its name. Only the shrieks of children playing and the chatter of adults in the front-row beach spots spoiled the perfect picture.

She turned and wound her way back through the other bathers to her spot. The towel next to hers was empty. It would be at least another hour before he came back down to the beach. If he came back at all. There was always something to do at the bar.

In summer the air and water were so warm that

towelling off was pointless. So she simply flopped down onto her towel on her front, shielded her head with a wide-brimmed sun hat, put on a pair of oversized sunglasses, and gave her shoulders a fairly cursory reapplication of sun cream. Then she fished a folder of invoices and bank statements out of her beach bag and began leafing through it. But within seconds she realised the swim had worn her out. She pushed the papers aside, rested her head on her folded forearms, and began to doze.

ACT ONE:

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS THE PERFECT MURDER?

"Novak, your dog's too fat."

"... she said, and served the fat dog a large portion of fillet steak."

"It's not fillet, it's kitchen scraps. The lean cuts, though. And vegetables."

I sighed and said nothing. The problem, obviously, wasn't the balanced meals Isabel served Annie, but the fact that my portly companion begged for second and third helpings wherever else she got the chance. And no, that wasn't down to my upbringing of her — it was a leftover survival strategy from before we'd met.

"Have you decided what you're having to drink yet?"

The fact that the most attractive woman west of the Prime Meridian, in my humble opinion, had found the time to attend to me too very nearly sent me into a fit of unbridled enthusiasm.

"As a matter of fact, I knew before I even set foot in this establishment."

"A *pinta*, I take it?"

"You're psychic now?"

"No. You're predictable."

While I was still hunting for a reply that was both intelligent and witty, my phone, lying on the table in front of me, chirped out the opening bars of *Smoke on the Water*.

I glanced at the screen.

Victoria.

"Sorry, I need to take this."

"Of course you do." Isabel, too, had managed to read the name.

Was it just me, or had the ambient temperature just dropped by a couple of degrees?

"Hold off on the beer, would you," I said, displaying near-prophetic powers of my own. I picked up the phone and took the call.

"Novak, I need your help," came Victoria Marsh's smoky voice. "Right now."

"What's this about?" That much information she could at least give me up front.

"A possible murder."

For three seconds, I said nothing at all. "Wouldn't that be a job for the police?" I ventured, eventually.

"If it were, I wouldn't be calling you. Now get that pretty arse of yours moving and get over here."

Her attempt to use a compliment to sugar-coat an otherwise unambiguous order only half worked.

"What's in it for me?"

"Your hourly rate, and a bonus if you succeed."

If I succeeded? Presumably that meant I not only had to catch a murderer, but, if at all possible, the right one.

"Fine," I said, giving in. "I'll be at the Crossroads in half an hour." I looked over at Isabel, who had, in fact, waited at my table the whole time. Out of curiosity, I assumed. "Sorry, *cariño*, the big beer's going to have to wait. Victoria needs my help."

"Thought as much."

It got colder still.

I watched her walk away, long, easy strides. White blouse, short black skirt, perfectly tanned legs ...

Annie's cold, damp nose, nudging into my palm, brought me back to reality. "Yes, all right," I muttered under my breath. "At least you got what you wanted."

Forty minutes later, Victoria Marsh greeted me with a hug and air-kisses on both cheeks — her way of demonstrating that she saw me more as a friend than a hired hand. Then she turned and led the way to the small table for two against the wall that served as her office on an ordinary day. She took her time about it, giving me the chance to admire her swaying hips in a little white dress that would have held its own next to Marilyn Monroe on any subway grate.

"What are you drinking?" she asked, dropping into her usual seat and gesturing for me to take the other one.

I glanced at her glass and changed my mind on the spot. "Tanqueray and tonic's fine, thanks."

She tapped the earpiece in her ear and passed my order on to the bar staff without taking her eyes off me for even

a second.

I managed, for my part, to lose myself in her green cat's eyes as well — even though there'd been no shortage of alternatives. The two most interesting of which were held up by two strips of white fabric that met at the back of her neck, beneath the blonde mane. Either side of the thin fabric, enough skin remained on show to give any grown man's imagination plenty to work with. Possibly an infant's, too.

"So, Vicky," I said, getting to the point. "What's this wild story you were hinting at on the phone?"

She waited a moment, because just then a handsome young bloke in a red Crossroads polo shirt set a goblet-sized glass, piled high with ice, down in front of me. Half of what space remained he filled, right before my eyes, with gin from the green bottle. I waited until he'd finished the job, then tipped the little bottle of tonic water that came with it straight into the enormous glass, all in one go. I wanted — for Victoria's sake as much as my own — to stay reasonably sober.

"A friend of mine was found dead on the beach this lunchtime," Victoria Marsh told me, her voice no longer entirely steady. She reached for an envelope lying on top of a stack of papers and pulled out a photograph.

A proper photo, on card stock. Clearly taken out of a frame, as the colours hadn't faded at the edges yet. It showed Victoria and a couple around the same age, mid-forties or so, all smiling into the camera together.

The woman I didn't know wasn't playing in the same league as a Vicky Marsh — who was? — but I'd have called her decidedly attractive. The man had a trimmed full beard and the beginnings of a paunch, and came across as likeable enough too. All three were dressed in white, which didn't surprise me in Vicky's case, at least.

"That's Rosie," she explained. "Rosemary Burns. And that's her husband, Andrew."

Was it just me, or had something shifted, ever so slightly, in her tone when she said the man's name?

"And Rosemary's dead?"

She nodded and gave a short sniff.

I took a closer look now. Her eyes seemed a little red. Had she been crying for her dead friend? My willingness to help her grew to encompass rather more than filthy lucre.

"And you think someone killed her?" I ventured.

"I can't think of any other explanation."

"Who'd have a motive?"

"Andrew, her husband, for one. They own a bar together that's currently in the red. That's why he wants to sell and she didn't. For him it's just about the money; for her it was her life's dream. Now that she's dead, he's got a clear run at it."

"I see." I thought for a moment and took a sip of the gin.
"Any other suspects?"

Victoria hesitated.

I took that as a yes.

"Yes?" I said, accordingly.

"She wasn't an easy boss to work for," the vamp across the table finally managed to say.

Had she hesitated because Rosemary Burns was rather like her in that respect? Victoria, too, demanded a lot and ran a tight ship.

"What do the police say?" I said, changing the subject.

"Nothing, so far."

"A bit more context, please."

"Rosemary's death was more or less discovered by accident. By some children playing. She was lying motionless on the beach on her towel, her head and face hidden by a large sun hat and sunglasses. Other bathers in the spots next to her alerted the nearest lifeguard straight away, who then radioed for the paramedics."

"Was she alone on the beach? What about her husband?" I pressed, at that point.

"Rosie was alone at the time of her death. She and Andy went down to the beach together that morning and went in the sea together too. Andy left at twenty to eleven. He was meeting two suppliers at the bar. That's all I know. I only spoke to him briefly on the phone earlier."

"Where's the bar?"

"Two streets over from here. A small place, homely atmosphere."

"Okay, go on," I urged Victoria. "The paramedics arrived. Then what?" I knew that in high season there were lifeguard posts all along the beach, along with two or

three first-aid stations, so in an emergency, help could be on the scene within minutes.

"They confirmed she was dead, unofficially, secured the area, and called a doctor and the local police."

The doctor for the official confirmation of death, I reasoned, the police for the formalities and to secure the victim's belongings. "Do we know if she was still alive when her husband left her?"

"Yes, that much is certain." Victoria nodded, visibly reluctant. "Witnesses said she was in the water when he left."

"Witnesses have already been questioned?"

"Only briefly. At the doctor's request — he wanted to narrow down the time of death."

I nodded. "Where did it happen?"

"About two hundred and fifty metres down the beach, towards the old town. Do you know the *Cervecería Casa Alemana*?"

I nodded again. I knew the *Deutsches Haus* well — I'd had more than one excellent breakfast there, and refreshed myself with a *pinta* there of an afternoon on occasion. With a dozen or so large hotels in the immediate vicinity, it made perfect sense that the Burns had put a bit of distance between themselves and the point where everyone else piled onto the beach.

"And then?"

"... Rosie was taken to the *tanatorio* in Villajoyosa — the mortuary. And the *Policía Local* took charge of her

belongings."

"What cause of death was recorded?"

"None, yet."

"None yet? But the scene's already been cleared? And reopened, too?"

"It's the Levante beach, Novak. In high season. What do you expect — that they'll close it for days?"

Fair enough, Vicky had a point. The show must go on.

"There's an area of about twenty square metres still cordoned off with tape, at least until tomorrow. Unofficially, though, they're working on the assumption it was natural causes," she went on. "Heart failure, circulatory collapse, heatstroke. It happens all the time round here at the moment."

All the time was putting it a touch strongly, but naturally there were several hundred deaths on Spain's beaches every year, and aside from drowning — by far the most common cause — those were the ones at the top of the list. Particularly in combination with an unwise quantity of alcohol.

"But you don't believe that applies to Rosie?" I checked.

Victoria Marsh shook her head vehemently. "No. That's nonsense. Rosie was fit as a fiddle, and certainly not the reckless type. The two of them have lived out here for over ten years — they're used to the climate. And Rosie certainly hadn't been drinking at that time of day."

"So you think her husband killed her. Even though he wasn't anywhere near her at the time of death, and even

though the suppliers presumably give him a watertight alibi as well?"

My attractive companion shrugged, and with it, her whole chest rose too. "That's how it looks. And since there's no point taking that theory to the police, I want you to help me."

"Ah, right. Do you happen to have any idea how I'm meant to go about that?"

Her décolletage rose again. "I'm putting my complete trust in your skills as an investigator."

Fantastic. Not even investigators could work miracles, though. I hoped she was aware of that. "What about Rosie's belongings?"

"They're still with the *Policía Local*. And I've made sure they'll stay there for the time being."

"Well, that's something," I said, giving credit where it was due. If I was going to find any hint of foul play in Rosemary Burns's death, it might well be among her personal effects. "So you've got contacts in the police, then?" I checked.

"I have a very good line to the local police. Which is actually part of why I'm rather glad it's not being treated as a crime yet. If it were, the matter would be handed straight over to the *Policía Nacional*, and there I've got precious little influence left," she admitted freely. "But perhaps I should introduce you to Andy Burns, the widower, first. Because here he comes now."

Andrew Burns looked older than in the photo. His stomach had grown, his beard had greyed in patches and was no longer anywhere near as neatly trimmed. He also had small eyes and a large nose. He wore beige Bermuda shorts with patch pockets on the thighs and a pale pink polo shirt that matched his complexion rather too well.

"Vicky, you have to help me," he blurted out, coming to a stop beside our table, breathing hard.

He didn't so much as glance at me.

"Sit down for a moment and calm yourself first." Victoria Marsh had sized up the new arrival with a single glance and responded with professional composure.

I got to my feet, stepped aside, and offered him my seat.

He waved the offer away impatiently. "I haven't got time for that."

Vicky shot me a brief look — possibly an appreciative one — and gestured at the now-empty chair. "Please, Andy. Sit down and have something to drink. Then we'll talk it all through properly."

Andrew Burns hesitated a moment, but evidently realised impatience wasn't going to get him anywhere here. So he dropped into the free chair without a word of thanks and asked for a beer. Whether he'd even registered my presence yet was, at best, doubtful.

Not that it bothered me in the slightest. I pulled a chair over from the next table and sat down on the open side of the table, my back to the rest of the bar, while Vicky used the earpiece to order Burns a beer.

"This is Novak," she introduced me afterwards. "Novak, this is Andrew Burns. His wife passed away this lunchtime. I told you about it."

I nodded and murmured some stock words of condolence.

But Burns still paid me no attention.

"You have to help me, Vicky," he said instead, again. "You've got contacts with the police."

Victoria Marsh looked at him, expressionless. "Help you? With what?"

"They won't tell me anything about what happened to Rosie. They won't let me see her, and I'm still not allowed to instruct an undertaker. They won't hand over her things, either. Can you do something? I think they suspect me."

Vicky and I both suppressed the urge to exchange a meaningful look. The only reaction I caught from her was that her right hand curled on the table, almost balling into a fist.

"That'll be difficult," Victoria said. "The police don't take kindly to being told what to do in matters like this. And you have to admit, Rosie's death really has come as a shock to all of us."

He fell silent and stared at the tabletop. "Yes," he murmured eventually. "Yes, that's true."

"Did your late wife have any enemies?" I asked.

He looked at me with utter incomprehension. "Who are you?"

"Novak," Vicky and I explained patiently, and simultaneously.

"He's a good friend," my client went on. "I've asked him for his help. I want him to take a closer look at the circumstances of Rosie's death."

"I don't understand?" Burns looked back at Victoria, and had gone a shade paler.

"I want to know what happened to Rosie," the owner of the Crossroads explained, her voice suddenly very firm. "And Novak's going to help me find out. He's reliable and discreet. Surely that's in your interest too. Especially if you think the police suspect you. So please, answer his questions."

Andrew Burns hesitated for a long moment. I could see he'd have liked nothing more than to get up and leave. But at that very moment, a large beer was set down in front of him.

So he stayed. Instead, he nodded slowly, and, so it seemed, reluctantly.

"Yes, I understand. Sorry, Vicky. I hadn't even taken in what's happened yet. I think I'm still in shock."

Anything else would have been a miracle. I found Victoria's methods a touch harsh myself, if I was honest. Even if she suspected the husband had had a hand in Rosemary Burns's death, that hardly meant she had to treat him like this.

"Did your late wife have any enemies?" I repeated, trying to come across as suitably gentle and understanding.

I seemed to have managed it, because Andrew Burns now turned to me with something close to relief. "Enemies is a strong word. There were bound to be the odd bit of friction, here and there."

"With staff, I've heard."

Burns shot Victoria a quick, rather dark sideways glance, but then answered readily enough. "Rosie sacked a member of staff last week. On the spot. She's not exactly thrilled about it, of course."

"What was the reason?"

"According to Rosie, Milena stole from us. But I think it was really about getting rid of her brother. He was forever hanging around the bar. And I'd be very surprised if he isn't mixed up in something shady."

"So the accusation against Milena was false?"

"Not false. She took some out-of-date food instead of throwing it away. Sacking her over that strikes me as excessive."

If that was Andrew Burns's opinion, why hadn't he voiced it and objected to the dismissal?

"But Rosie presented me with a done deal before I could step in," Andy Burns explained, as if he'd read my mind.

"Anyone else?" I pressed on.

Burns shook his head. "Not recently."

"What about the people who want to buy your bar?" I remembered. "Now your wife's dead, presumably nothing's standing in the way of the sale going through, is it?"

Burns looked stricken. Had he genuinely not thought of that yet? Or had he been trying to avoid raising the subject?

I glanced at Victoria. Her expression had changed. She suddenly looked guarded — closed off, even. Clearly I'd touched on something interesting.

Once again Burns took his time before he brought himself to answer. "A group of investors," he said finally, reluctantly. "A consortium that already owns several of the bigger clubs."

I glanced at Victoria again. She knew exactly who was being talked about. So I decided not to press Burns any further on that. I'd get the information out of her later.

"Is your bar so big that it matters to people like that?" I wondered aloud.

"It's not about the bar," Burns replied. "It's about the plot of land. They want to get the whole block under their control, so they can knock down the smaller buildings and put up one of their mega-projects." Burns hesitated briefly. "I think that was the main reason Rosie fought the sale so hard. She knew it would mean the bar being torn down. And she was determined to stop that, whatever it took."

"So it's not just about the bar — it's about a great deal more?"

"Tens of millions," Victoria Marsh put in now, joining the conversation again.

I stared at her. And she genuinely expected me to believe

Andrew Burns was the only candidate with a motive to get rid of his wife? I was about ready to throw the job back at her feet. Novak and Annie were most certainly not the right pair to go up against property developers with virtually unlimited resources and, as a rule, precious few scruples. Next she'd probably tell me the Russian or Albanian mafia had a hand in it, too.

Thanks, but no thanks.

"Are you going to sell now?" I asked Burns, if only to bring the matter to some sort of provisional close.

He nodded. "There's nothing keeping me here any more," he sighed. "I closed the bar the moment I heard about Rosie. And I don't suppose I'll be opening it again. That's it for me here. I'll be heading back to England as soon as I can."

I exchanged another glance with Victoria. I could tell she still suspected Burns, and his eagerness to leave the country seemed to be confirming it for her.

I saw it rather differently by now. Once millions were on the table, you generally didn't have to look much further for motives and suspects. And I could understand Burns's eagerness to reach a quick settlement, in more ways than one. His wife's death had robbed him not only of the person he'd probably loved more than Victoria was prepared to admit — it had also robbed him of his partner, his companion, his motivation to keep fighting a battle that was probably lost already. Finding a clean break and leaving painful memories behind was a course

of action I, of all people, could bring more than a little understanding to.

I was just waiting now for Burns to leave, so I could have it out with Victoria straight. It only took another five minutes before Burns finished his beer and said his goodbyes. I watched him go. He held himself pointedly upright, shoulders back, spine straight. He was clearly reckoning we were watching him.

"He's going to do a runner," Vicky Marsh said, the moment Andrew Burns was out of earshot. "We need to move fast."

I rolled my eyes. "Seriously? You still think he's got his hands in this? Even with millions on the table for other people? Who's behind these investors, anyway? The Russians? The Albanians?"

Victoria pressed her lips together.

"Right, I'm out," I said. "I'm not the Equalizer."

Her lips curved into the faintest hint of a smile. "I know that. I'd never accuse you of that much altruism," she shot back, with a touch of mockery. Then she turned serious again. "A compromise, Novak. Find out for me what happened to Rosemary. Once we know what happened, and who might be behind it, we can renegotiate."

I thought it over. Naturally, I was curious about what had happened. And I could use the money, too. Unlike a certain four-legged someone, I didn't get looked after for free. Or maybe I'd just had one too many sips of gin and tonic. Either way, I gave in.

"I want to take a look at the things Rosemary had on her at the beach," I said gruffly. "Today, if at all possible."

"I'll call ahead and let them know you're coming," Victoria Marsh promised. Her influence with the *Policía Local* was evidently a good deal greater than she'd been willing to let on to Andrew Burns.

ACT TWO:

JUST A QUESTION OF MONEY?

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, a Moke. A Mini Moke, to be precise."

"And I'm meant to get in that?"

"You could always call a taxi. There's Uber round here now, too."

Victoria closed her eyes and shook her head. Then she turned her gaze on Annie, who'd been waiting for me in the shade of the vehicle. "And you? Are you planning to sit on my lap?"

Annie fixed her sad brown eyes on Victoria and waddled closer, tail wagging, let my companion give her light-brown head a pat, and then, with a surprisingly nimble leap, hauled herself up onto the flatbed of the red tin tub, her sagging teats not hindering her in the slightest.

"You insisted on coming along," I reminded the blonde lady.

"No, the *Policía Local* insisted. Or rather, they didn't want you left alone with the evidence." She ended the exchange by dropping into the passenger seat, with a touch more grace than Annie had managed.

Five minutes later we rolled into the car park of the police building. We were already expected. The officer

was about my age, and gave me only a brief once-over before turning his attention to Victoria. "*Señora* Marsh? Inspector Morales. Please, follow me."

He led us down a short corridor to the left of the entrance, opened a door, and showed us in. The room was small and sparsely furnished. A table and four chairs, two on our side, two against the back wall. On the table lay two grey plastic bags, one somewhat fuller than the other.

The inspector, who'd followed us in and closed the door behind him, pointed at the larger one. "*Señora* Burns." Then at the other. "*Señor* Burns." He handed us blue disposable gloves. "Put these on, and don't alter anything."

I did as I was told; Victoria declined. She evidently didn't intend to take an active part in the search.

I picked up the larger bag and carefully emptied its contents onto the tabletop.

A beach towel, standard size, good quality. A thin white summer dress with a floral print. A pair of sunglasses with noticeably oversized lenses. A woven sun hat with a wide brim. And a pair of beach sandals with raffia wedges of a height that rather suggested their owner valued aesthetics somewhat more highly than comfort. Clothes she'd have worn on the way to the beach, the same as a thousand other women. None of it stood out or seemed unusual, although most women on the beach would probably have gone for flatter heels, or flip-flops.

I turned my attention now to the other things Rosemary Burns had had on her: a plastic bottle of sun cream, and a

plastic tube of some cream whose exact purpose escaped me. I held it up to Victoria and raised my eyebrows, questioning.

"A moisturiser," she said, as if that explained everything.

I put the tube back down and worked my way through the rest. A paperback, apparently a romance novel, a magazine, a thin folder with a handful of papers inside. I opened it, laid it out on the table, and glanced over at Victoria once more.

This time she actually did put a glove on, stepped closer, and began studying the papers, while I flicked through the book and the magazine, checking for any notes hidden inside.

All that remained on the table now was a packet of paper tissues, a mobile phone, and a larger woven beach bag, which had evidently been used to carry everything else.

"Can you unlock that?" I asked Victoria, pointing at the phone.

She glanced up briefly and shook her head. "No idea."

Damn. I decided against attempting any guesses at the passcode with the inspector present, so as not to annoy him. It mattered more to be allowed back if I needed to come again. So I photographed each item separately, then packed everything back into the bag — all except the folder, which Victoria was still working through.

Then I reached for the other bag and emptied that one out onto the table too. The contents were, if anything, even less remarkable: a beach towel of comparable size

and quality, an Agatha Christie crime novel, a blue short-sleeved shirt with a green-and-yellow parrot print, and a plain black lighter. I checked the shirt's breast pocket but found nothing. So I rolled it back up, photographed each item here too, and put everything back in the bag.

Victoria, meanwhile, had finished going through the folder. She pulled her phone out of her bag and made to photograph the pages one by one as well. But now the inspector raised an objection. "I'm sorry, *Señora* Marsh, I can't allow that."

I could see his point. Letting us take a look at the items found was one thing. Passing on potentially confidential information belonging to the victim to a third party was quite another.

Victoria didn't object to the decision either. She thanked him politely, and a minute later we were back in the Moke.

"Did the papers tell you anything useful to us?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not directly. Though from the accounts, I gathered the bar was in a good deal worse financial shape than I'd assumed. If you ask me, selling really was the only option they had left, if they wanted to walk away from all this with any profit at all."

"Didn't Rosemary realise that?" I raised my eyebrows. "Or did she have some plan we're not seeing?"

"Maybe she was bluffing, trying to drive the price up further," Victoria offered, cautiously. "But that wasn't

really the impression I got."

I said nothing for a moment, thinking it over. Before I considered any motive other than money, I needed to talk to the member of staff, and her brother, first.

"What have you got planned now?" Victoria asked, straight away.

I told her. "Do you know where I can find this Milena?"

"I can find that out for you. Anything else I can do?"

"Depends how much solving this is worth to you," I said.

She raised her neatly plucked eyebrows. "What do you mean by that?"

"We should put a call-out on the popular social networks, ask around for videos taken by any bystanders. There might even be some showing Rosemary before her death was discovered."

"What exactly do you want me to do?" Victoria was sharp enough to follow my train of thought straight away.

"Put up a small reward for any video that shows Rosemary, and a bigger one for whichever contribution helps us crack the mystery of her death."

She thought it over briefly. "Fifty euros, and five hundred?"

Evidently she was prepared to invest a fair amount in looking into the death. My services, after all, didn't come cheap either.

"Sounds good," I agreed. Then I started the engine and drove Victoria back to the Crossroads.

"And? Is it time for the first *pinta* yet?"

I sighed, thinking of the generous gin and tonic I'd enjoyed in Victoria's company. "Sadly, not yet. I'll need to head back to Benidorm at least once more today."

"Ah, right."

"Work," I explained, quite unprompted.

"Work?" Isabel raised one eyebrow, the way only Isabel could.

"There was a dead woman there this morning," I went on.

"I read about it. The internet's already full of it." Isabel frowned now, the way only Isabel could. "What's it got to do with you?" She no longer sounded frosty, just curious, and a little concerned as well.

"The dead woman was a friend of Victoria's. And Victoria doesn't believe it was natural causes. That's why she asked me for help."

"And the police?"

"So far, they're still working on natural causes. Whether there'll be an autopsy isn't clear yet. But at least they haven't released the body or the victim's belongings yet."

"What will you do?"

"Interview witnesses, watch some videos. And once the beach clears out, I'll take a look at where the body was found too."

"Surely that's cordoned off and guarded?"

"Victoria has connections."

"Yes, I know. Watch yourself with her."

Well, well. Had Isabel just warned me off Victoria? And how exactly was I meant to take that? As an unexpected, very subtle expression of affection? Cattiness? Or the sober passing on of experience?

If it was the latter, where had Isabel got that knowledge from? Nestor came to mind — her eldest brother, who was just as well connected here in Altea as Victoria was in Benidorm. Was there some connection between the two of them, perhaps? Friction, even? I was inclined to rate Isabel's own experience as the more likely explanation. Pity. I'd have preferred the affection. Then again, one didn't entirely rule out the other.

"So, have you decided what you want, then? We're still a bar, not a waiting room," Isabel said, switching back to business.

I thought about it only briefly. "Bring me a large *Clara*, please," I ordered, against my better judgement.

"*Fanta* or *Casera*?"

I went for the less sweet, calorie-free lemonade, so as not to end up round like Annie any time soon, who lay dozing contentedly beside me in the shade of the wall.

Isabel had barely set the drink — roughly equal parts beer and lemonade — down in front of me when a message came through on my phone. Victoria hadn't wasted any time. The first amateur videos from the beach had already come in, and Milena would meet me at the Bar María around four.

I checked the time. Half past three. Good. I could use

the time to go through the first batch of videos. Satisfied, I took a long pull from the tall glass and, seconds later, felt the mild dose of alcohol already starting to tickle my nervous system. And as if it had only been waiting for exactly that cue, my brain promptly offered up two fresh pieces of information.

The first was uncomfortable. I was becoming increasingly convinced that I'd missed something while going through the items collected from the beach. But the feeling was so slippery that I had no idea where to even start with it.

The second was more promising. I signalled to Isabel, and as soon as her duties allowed, she came back over to my table.

"What can I get you?" she asked, presumably referring to the menu.

"How well do you know the Strip in Benidorm?"

"Not my world. But I obviously know where the Crossroads is."

I gave her a few more names. "Do you know those bars too?"

"Only by name. Why?"

"Apparently the whole block those bars sit on is due to be knocked down and rebuilt from scratch."

"I don't know anything about that." Her gaze drifted across the terrace. Another customer was already trying to catch her attention.

"What about Nestor? Would he know anything about it?"

Who's behind the project, that sort of thing?"

"No idea. You'll have to ask him yourself." She began to pull away from the table.

"Would you do that for me? You know he's not exactly fond of me."

She studied me with an unreadable look and turned away without a word.

I watched her go, and hoped her warmth of heart didn't extend only to Annie. Then I took another pull from the glass and picked up my phone. I wanted to at least skim through the first batch of amateur clips that had come in. Once I was home tonight, in front of the bigger computer screen, I'd go through all of them properly.

There wasn't much to see on the videos. Most of the onlookers hadn't started filming until the lifeguard was already bent over the body, and by that point there were already so many bystanders crowded round the scene that hardly anything of Rosemary Burns was visible in the shots at all. Nearly every camera then followed the removal of the body. Only two showed the scene afterwards, by now almost deserted, with two *Policía Local* officers marking out a large square and securing it with yellow-and-black tape.

"Are you Novak?" a woman's voice said, and I looked up.

"Milena?"

The young woman — early thirties, I'd guess — nodded. She had naturally red hair, pale skin, freckles, and was attractive in a strangely wild sort of way. She wore a white

T-shirt, a short denim skirt, and flip-flops. A bum bag was strapped round her slim waist.

"You wanted to talk to me?"

Her voice sounded brittle, and she spoke with a clearly audible accent.

"Sit down. Want something to drink? On me," I said, opening the conversation.

"Coke," she answered, in a single word, and sank into the chair opposite me.

"You've heard Rosemary Burns is dead?" I checked.

"Yes. I'm sorry about that."

"Even though she fired you?"

Milena shrugged. "It was bound to happen."

What was — being fired, or dying?

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"She was only ever looking for a reason to sack me. It was just a question of time before she found one."

The conversation wasn't going at all the way I'd pictured it. I got the chance to order the Coke, and used the brief pause to think.

"So she wanted to fire you regardless of the reason?" I concluded, then.

"Right."

"And why?"

"She didn't like me."

I said nothing for three seconds. Milena answered quickly and, as far as I could judge, openly.

"Was there a reason for that?"

She shrugged again.

Isabel brought the Coke over, and Milena took an immediate sip.

"I heard you've got a brother?" I pressed on.

For the first time, something shifted in my companion's expression. I thought I recognised tension there. And something else, too. Something like relief? Was there another reason for Rosemary Burns disliking Milena — one the young woman didn't want to bring up?

"Who exactly are you? What right do you have to ask me all this?" she pushed back, a little, now.

"Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Andy said I should talk to you. That it's about Rosie's death. That's all I know."

"I've been hired to look into the circumstances of her death," I explained. "I'm not the police, but people generally find it more comfortable talking to me than to the cops."

"Hired by whom?"

I let the question slide. "Back to your brother. I heard he spent a lot of time at the bar. Was there trouble with Rosemary because of him?"

"He never did anything to anyone," the redhead insisted. "He just wanted to be near me."

She reached for her glass again, and I could have sworn her hand trembled, ever so slightly.

"Where were you this morning, between eleven and twelve?"

"At home."

"Can anyone confirm that?"

"Dimitri. My brother."

"I'd need to talk to him too, then," I said, seizing the opening.

Instead of answering, she reached into the bum bag, pulled out a phone, and spoke a few sentences into it in a language I didn't recognise.

"He's coming to pick me up in a minute," she said then. "Maybe he'll answer your questions, too."

"In the meantime, can you tell me anything about the relationship between Rosemary and Andrew Burns?"

"What is there to tell?"

"Did they get on well?"

Milena shrugged for a third time. "The way an old married couple gets on, I suppose. There were disagreements now and then, but on the whole it seemed to be working fine."

"Disagreements about what?"

Again, Milena hesitated briefly before answering.

"How to run the bar, for instance. It wasn't taking much money. Rosie wanted to invest in new fittings and some kind of entertainment programme; Andy would rather have saved the money."

"I heard there'd been talk of selling the bar?"

"I don't know anything about that."

The answer came fast. And at the same time, Milena showed no sign whatsoever of surprise at hearing it. But

before I could get any further with that contradiction, a stocky, dark-haired man stepped up to our table. About Milena's age, and he looked me over with what I'd have called a cold, suspicious stare.

Milena turned her head, and I thought I saw her flinch slightly at the sight of him.

The two of them exchanged a few sentences in their own language, then Dimitri turned to me.

"Leave us alone. We've got nothing to say to you."

"Milena says she was with you this morning?" I asked, unmoved.

"So what if she was. It's none of your business."

I glanced at Milena. He hadn't quite blown her alibi apart, but out of sheer bloody-mindedness, he was refusing to confirm it. That clearly wasn't going down well with her — the next few sentences she fired at him, which I likewise couldn't understand, had a distinct edge to them.

Dimitri backed down straight away after that. "Sure, Milena was with me. All day." He grabbed her upper arm. "Now let's go."

"Your call," I said to Milena, to let her know I'd back her up against the lout, if it came to that.

But she got up without another word, gave me a nod, and let her brother lead her away.

I pulled a ten out of my pocket, slid it under my glass, and watched the two of them head for the next side street and turn into it. As soon as they were out of sight, I got

up, glanced first at Isabel, then at Annie, and set off after the odd pair of siblings.

They didn't disappoint me. As I rounded the corner of the building, the shouting had already started. Loud enough that I could hear the words the two of them were exchanging. In their mother tongue, though.

But I hadn't fallen off the turnip truck either. I already had my phone ready in my hand and switched on the translation function, with automatic language detection.

Romanian. That didn't surprise me. There were plenty of Romanians in Spain — not least because Romanian was also a Romance language, and so closely related to the other Romance languages, Spanish and Italian included, at least where the word stems were concerned. Which made it considerably easier for a Romanian to pick up Spanish than a non-Romance foreign language.

I was too far away to get a complete recording of decent quality. And I was careful to keep enough distance that they wouldn't spot me straight away. But the fragments of sentences my phone's microphone did manage to pick up were quite something. Assuming the app wasn't feeding me complete nonsense, what I could now read on the screen cast the whole story in an entirely new light. Andrew Burns had apparently developed feelings for Milena that went considerably beyond what was appropriate for an employer. And Milena, according to her brother, hadn't rejected them — or not firmly enough,

at any rate. I also found out why this was winding Dimitri up so badly. But that was information I'd need to verify before I could add it to my pile of facts.

I managed almost two minutes of eavesdropping on the two of them, undetected, before they noticed me and fell silent.

Dimitri signalled to Milena with a sharp gesture to wait, and came towards me with a face like thunder. Annie wasn't at all keen on that. Her hackles went up, and she began to growl, low in her throat.

"Shhh," I hissed quietly, and she actually fell silent, though she kept her threatening stance.

"What's this about? Are you following us?" Dimitri snapped at me, the moment he was within striking distance.

I'd had the good sense to keep my phone out of sight, and had since let it disappear into the back pocket of my jeans. "No, not at all. I'm guessing we're headed the same way, aren't we? I'm making for the big car park behind the town hall."

I gestured in that general direction, which had, so far, matched the direction we'd both been walking anyway. It wasn't an especially prophetic feat on my part — any visitor from out of town wanting to reach this stretch of the seafront would leave their car there. I doubted he believed me, but what was he going to do about it?

"Leave us alone," he snarled, with a distinct edge of menace, and then slouched off.

I gave the pair of them a generous head start now, though by that point they'd lowered their voices anyway, so there was no way I was going to catch anything more, however hard I tried. I checked my watch. By the time I got to the beach in Benidorm, it would be half five, maybe later. I could just as well let my earlier excuse become the truth. With Annie trotting along beside me on the lead, back to her relaxed self, I set off for the car park.

I'd never claim Annie had been trained in any real sense — certainly not by me — but one thing had recently, and quite wonderfully, taken hold without fail. If I asked her to wait somewhere for me, she did, without a fuss. I could leave her in the shade of the Moke, with Isabel at the bar, or on the Crossroads terrace. Her trust in me had grown large enough by now that she'd simply curl up wherever I left her and practise a bit of patience. For a reasonable stretch of time, anyway.

Since I knew dogs were strictly forbidden on the beach, I left Annie in the shade of a bench and made my way along the wooden boardwalk towards the shore. Most of the bathers had already drifted back to their hotels or the beach bars by now, getting themselves ready for the evening, one way or another. The cordoned-off area sat right by the boardwalk, and only about ten metres from the waterline — a clear enough sign that the Burnses had staked out their spot early in the day.

I crossed the soft sand to the tape and walked round it

once, in full. I didn't step inside the cordon. If there was still anything to be found in there, better it not be found by me. What mattered more, for the moment, was simply taking in the scene — the distance from the water, the exact height of the promenade above it, the lie of the surrounding land. And the precise position, which I now saved as GPS coordinates on my phone.

By the time I got back to the promenade, a *Policía Local* officer was already waiting for me. No one was stationed there permanently, it seemed, but the cordoned-off area was evidently being watched all the same.

"Were you looking for something in particular down there?" the *oficial* wanted to know.

"No," I answered, truthfully. "I just wanted to get a look at where it happened." I gave him a sheepish smile. "Inspector Morales knows I'm interested in the case. I already spoke to him today."

Which was nothing but the truth. And since I hadn't broken any rules, that ought to have satisfied his curiosity well enough.

He nodded, his face giving nothing away. "You're aware you're not allowed to leave the dog unattended?"

Seriously? "I was only gone five minutes, and I had Annie in sight the whole time."

Fortunately, he left it at a warning. "Bear it in mind, in future."

I promised him I would, collected Annie, and did what the officer had, until now, been stopping me from doing: I

photographed the buildings along the promenade in the immediate vicinity of where the body had been found. Then I picked up my phone and tapped one of my speed-dial icons.

"Jasper," I said, greeting my cousin — not just Dutch, but something of an IT genius to boot. "Got time to do me a small favour?"

"Depends how small, Novak," he answered, after a brief hesitation.

"I'm about to send you a location. Can you check whether it falls within range of a public webcam? And if it does, who runs it?"

"Can't you do that yourself?"

"You'll probably turn up twice as many live cams as I would. My search skills run out about two inches past the Google box."

"You're probably right about that. I take it this is urgent?"

"If I still want a shot at any saved footage, then yes."

"Right, I'll get on it once I've finished my current task."

We said our goodbyes, and I sent him the coordinates and the photos I'd just taken straight away. After that, I weighed up whether I ought to pay Victoria one last visit, or whether I could finally treat myself to my well-earned *pinta*, courtesy of the lovely Isabel.

"Excuse me," a passer-by I'd never seen before said to me, just then. "Got a light?"

"No, sorry," I said. "I don't smoke."

ACT THREE:

EVERYTHING SUDDENLY MAKES SENSE

It took me eight hours to understand what I'd said. Not exactly a masterstroke of detective work, but at least it meant I still managed to crack the mystery within twenty-four hours. But let's take it in order.

First, Jasper got in touch to say there really was a webcam covering the area in question. The resolution was too low to identify individual people, but at least it should show movement on the beach, and between the various spots where people had laid their towels.

I passed the news straight on to Victoria, so she could bring her connections and influence to bear. Then I crossed my fingers that recordings had actually been kept of whatever the livestream had been broadcasting.

I decided against another visit to Victoria, since the Crossroads would have filled up by then. Instead, I made a small adjustment to my plans for the rest of the evening. I swung by my place, parked the Moke, and got into the campervan. I drove that over to Altea, to the big car park behind the town hall, and parked right at the back, in the quietest spot. I grabbed the laptop and headed straight for my favourite bar, no detours. It was still early enough to find myself a quiet corner on the terrace, where I could spend the rest of the evening with beer and video footage.

Since I had my bed with me, I no longer had to worry about drink-drive limits tonight. Which meant I could finally let Isabel grant her wish and bring me a *pinta*. After Annie had had her water, of course. When my beloved brought me the tall glass, frosted over, she made me doubly happy in the same breath:

"I spoke to Nestor, Novak. He and Silvia are at a reception this evening, no time for me. But Silvia's going to drop by the bar tomorrow morning, and she's happy to answer all your questions about the investors."

"You're a treasure, Isabel," I said, perhaps a touch too effusively. My mood, though, had just shot up considerably.

Silvia, Nestor's wife, was the one person in Isabel's family who liked me without reservation, and made sure I felt it every time we crossed paths, rare as that was. She was also a fine example of what tended to be true of the wives of successful men in general: routinely, wildly underestimated. In practice, nothing much got done around there without her doing the legwork. Silvia would in all likelihood be able to answer every question I had. And where she couldn't, she'd get the information with a quick phone call, since socially she was every bit as well connected as her husband.

I drained the glass halfway in one go. Then I winked at Annie. "We're in business."

She gave herself a shake by way of reply, and settled down against the wall, wedging her long muzzle between

the wall and her water bowl. Seconds later, she was asleep.

I opened the laptop and found I had a new message. From Victoria. The webcam in question turned out to be part of a hotel's own surveillance system, one that kept every camera's footage on file for twenty-four hours. A member of the hotel staff had gone to the trouble, on Victoria's behalf, of copying the whole morning's worth of webcam footage. And there it was, in the attachment to the email.

I hit play, and needed a few minutes to get my bearings. Then, working from the photos I'd taken myself during my walk round the site, I found the spot in the footage where Rosemary and Andrew Burns had settled in. I fast-forwarded to the moment they spread out their towels. I couldn't make them out — even telling man from woman was impossible. The figures dissolved into small, greyish-black smudges. But the position was right.

Half past nine. I kept fast-forwarding, until Andrew — I assumed — got up from his towel and left the beach. It was now roughly ten forty. Which fitted with an eleven o'clock appointment. From that point on, I jumped ahead in one-minute steps, trying to catch the moment Rosemary came back from the sea, while also checking whether anyone had approached the abandoned towels in the meantime. Nobody had.

Ten forty-seven. Rosemary — I assumed — returned to her spot, lay down on her towel, and from that point on

was no longer distinguishable as an individual figure in the footage at all. From that moment I let the video play frame by frame, though at double speed, so I wouldn't end up drunk before the police even turned up on the beach.

Which happened at eleven fifty-four. In the eight minutes before that, the woman's death had been discovered, a lifeguard had approached, the paramedics had arrived, and a crowd had gradually gathered around the spot where Rosemary Burns could now only be presumed to be lying. In the hour between those two fixed points, nothing had happened. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Nobody had gone near the towels, nobody had bent down over them, and nobody had — figuratively speaking — dealt the woman her death blow. People had strolled up and down along the waterline, bathers near the woman had headed down to the sea or come back up from it. But not one of them had come anywhere near Rosemary Burns.

"*Merde*," I swore, in French, because my mother once told me you could say anything at all in that language and it would still sound good.

This footage cleared everyone. Rosemary Burns had climbed out of the sea, fit as a fiddle, and been found dead barely an hour later. No outside interference, or so the livestream footage seemed to prove. This couldn't possibly have been murder. I was starting to come round to the natural-death theory — heat, or drink. But I wasn't

a theologian; I was an investigator. Believing things wasn't my job.

I turned back to the amateur videos. Their number had doubled over the course of the day, but the new arrivals, after some thorough viewing, turned out to offer nothing new. Almost all of them showed, more or less clearly, the lifeguard carrying out a first examination of the lifeless body shortly after discovery — a moment no video had actually captured — and then raising the alarm for the paramedics. They came jogging up in pairs barely a minute later; one started chest compressions on the spot while the other kept checking her vital signs, over and over. The lifeguard, meanwhile, asked the onlookers to give the first responders room, and was already on the phone to the doctor and the police at the same time.

Over the next few minutes, the area round the body filled up more and more, and by the time the doctor and the police finally arrived, there wasn't much left to see of the scene itself. A few shaky shots, showing more of the edge of the towel than of Rosemary Burns herself, were about the best any of the footage had to offer. Usable images only picked up again with the removal of the body on a stretcher, laid onto a wheeled gurney on the boardwalk and rolled up to the promenade. There it vanished into the ambulance, which pulled away almost at once, blue lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Only two videos showed the *Policía Local*, meanwhile, running a cordon around the now-empty spot, and an

officer collecting the dead woman's belongings. Everything went, piece by piece, into a grey plastic bag. The towel went last, and finally, right at the very end, one of the wedge sandals that had been hidden underneath it. A second bag was brought out for the other beach spot, which, given the handful of items there were to collect, felt like something of an overreaction.

I lifted my gaze and looked out at the sea, where dusk had settled in by now. I was on my third beer, and not one iota wiser than I'd been an hour earlier. So I closed the laptop and reached for the menu, to give *pinta* number four a solid enough foundation to land on.

I woke up around two in the morning, and had my eureka moment. I couldn't tell you exactly how the thought had wormed its way into my head, but all at once I found myself asking why Andrew Burns had brought a lighter to the beach with him.

Was he a smoker? If so, where were the cigarettes? That was precisely what had been nagging at my subconscious since yesterday afternoon. The cigarettes were missing. I tried the most obvious explanation: the police had overlooked the packet and forgotten to bag it.

Possible, but wildly unlikely. Police officers were trained to secure evidence. They didn't leave cigarette packets lying around. Unless it was empty and crumpled up. But even then ...

Which brought me straight to possibility two. Andrew

Burns could have taken the packet with him. But if so, why leave the lighter behind? And his shirt? A damp pair of swimming trunks was hardly the ideal place to carry a cardboard packet of paper tubes.

I reached for my phone and typed out a short message.

Is Andrew Burns a smoker?

The reply didn't take long. Victoria was obviously still up, of course. The Crossroads hadn't called it a night yet.

No, why do you ask?

What does he need a lighter on the beach for, then?

The answer came back as a thinking-face emoji. And with that, our brief nocturnal exchange was over.

So was my night's sleep. I got up and switched on the laptop. Annie growled in her sleep and gave a brief kick with her front legs.

I found what I was looking for online fairly quickly. There weren't that many models on the market with the functionality involved. I compared them against what I'd photographed at the *Policía Local*, with Victoria and Inspector Morales looking on. The match was about as close as a match could get.

Andrew Burns hadn't just brought a lighter to the beach, apparently. He'd brought a camera too. A tiny spy camera, hidden inside a lighter casing, one that could not only record photos and video to a memory card, but transmit them over built-in Wi-Fi to any phone within range.

Was Andrew Burns some kind of peeping Tom? That, actually, would have been the more palatable of the two

possibilities. The other one was considerably worse.

I checked the time. Half past two. I needed to talk to Jasper, my IT high priest. And to Inspector Morales. Not at this hour, obviously. I ought to fill Victoria in as well. But she'd almost certainly sleep well into the morning, given she was presumably still on her feet right now. And that was far too long for me to wait.

Sleep, in any case, was no longer on the cards for me. My head was a jumble of images, questions, theories, and half-formed convictions, all tumbling over each other.

Again and again I watched the two amateur videos showing the police collecting the belongings. I studied the photos I'd taken of those same items down at the station. Came up with new theories, threw them straight back out, watched the videos again. And again. Then I fired up the webcam footage once more too. Started it earlier this time — before Andrew Burns had even left the beach. What had happened between the moment Rosemary went into the water and the moment Andrew set off for the bar?

The resolution was nowhere near good enough. You couldn't make anything out. At best, you could guess.

But if my guess was right ... if this new theory held up ...

I ran the collection footage one more time. There was really only one possibility left.

Jasper. Inspector Morales. First thing tomorrow.

I tried to sleep, but stayed wide awake until I could finally, decently, reach for the phone.

We were sitting in the small bar that had belonged to Andrew and Rosemary Burns, and which, once everything was sorted out, would belong to Andrew Burns alone. Alongside me, I counted five people present: Andrew Burns, Milena, Dimitri, and Inspector Morales, along with another officer who stayed in the background. Victoria hadn't come, which surprised me somewhat. After all, I'd been investigating on her behalf, and I'd happily have given her the satisfaction of being proved right: Rosemary Burns had not died of natural causes. I had, however, told her beforehand what I was planning to do, and got her blessing first.

Now the three main players sat before me on barstools at the counter. And I felt rather like Hercule Poirot, about to show off his little grey cells any second now. But I wasn't nearly that brilliant. And I couldn't find a single thing about this situation to enjoy. Not even a little. So I didn't beat about the bush.

"Rosemary Burns was murdered," I began. "And you're the killer." I pointed at Andrew Burns, who turned pale on the spot.

"That's outrageous," he stammered, and made to jump off the stool.

Inspector Morales was quicker. "Stay seated," he ordered, his voice cutting. "Let's hear what Señor Novak has to say."

"If we accept that Rosemary Burns didn't die of natural causes, and if no external injuries of any significance can

be found, then the obvious conclusion is that she was poisoned." I paused a moment, looking from Andrew to Milena and Dimitri. "But how do you poison someone when you're hundreds of metres away yourself? How do you poison someone when nobody else came anywhere near the victim in her final minutes, either?" I looked back at Andrew Burns. "The answer is: by a mechanism. A remote-controlled one."

Burns gave a snort and turned away, while Milena's eyes and mouth flew open, and Dimitri looked even darker than usual.

"The mechanism's simple, and easy enough for anyone with reasonable skill with their hands to build. It consists of a receiver — which could come from an ordinary mobile phone, more or less — a relay, and a poisoned needle driven by a spring. As soon as the relay picks up a signal from the phone, it releases the needle, and the spring drives it into the victim's skin."

I'd had Jasper confirm all this for me first thing that morning, in careful detail.

"But wouldn't a mechanism like that be noticed?" Milena put in.

"Not if you hide it well. If you build it into the wedge heel of a lady's sandal, for instance."

"Rosemary was killed by her own sandal?" The look in Milena's eyes shifted from alarm to horror. "But how?"

"Before Andrew left the beach for his appointment at the bar, he placed the doctored sandal under Rosemary's

towel. Heel up, with a small hole in it for the needle to push through. As soon as Rosemary lay down on the towel — and perhaps even dozed off a little — the mechanism sprang into action and drove the poisoned needle into her stomach."

"Is there even a poison that acts that fast?" Dimitri spoke up now too.

"There are a few. The most suitable ones cause paralysis almost instantly — aconitine, for instance," I explained. "If the victim's asleep, with a bit of luck the paralysis has already set in before she even regains full consciousness and can react."

"But how did Andy know when Rosie was lying on the towel and asleep?" Milena fed me my next cue.

"By pointing a camera hidden in a lighter at her, and having its feed sent, via the mobile unit in the heel, straight to his own phone. The moment he could see she was lying just right, and possibly even asleep, he pressed the trigger. And he had himself a perfect alibi. Nobody ever saw the lighter, because he'd hidden it in the folds of the shirt he'd left behind on the beach."

I looked over at Andrew Burns, whose face had gone grey. I'd unravelled his carefully planned murder in full. Inspector Morales had already examined the lighter that morning, and found the mechanism in the sandal too — the sandal that had been hidden under the towel and collected last of all. All of it had been perfectly visible in the amateur footage. And in the webcam stream, there

was one moment where, with a good deal of generosity, you could just about make out Andrew Burns fussing with his wife's towel before he left the beach.

A confession, of course, would be even better. So I decided to pull the last of the ground out from under his feet as well. Even though it wasn't remotely my style.

"In case you were under the impression, by the way, that you'd sell the bar and start a new life somewhere with Milena, I'm afraid I have to disappoint you, Andrew," I said. "Milena's already married. To Dimitri. Even if the two of them prefer to pass themselves off as brother and sister."

Both Romanians reacted to that revelation with an angry hiss. And Andrew Burns suddenly began to shake, uncontrollably. I glanced at Inspector Morales, who gave his colleague a signal in turn. The two of them got up and moved towards Burns.

"How do you know that?" Milena asked. "We never told anyone that."

"Almost anyone," I corrected her. "Once my translation app flagged up the tell-tale phrase 'my wife', I had a friend call the Seguridad Social. She introduced herself as your prospective employer, and had it confirmed that you're on the compulsory scheme there. When she asked whether your husband was covered as a dependant, they were only too happy to confirm it. It pays to know someone who knows someone, out here in Spain, Milena." I gave her a wink, and she looked down at the floor. Which, of course,

also explained why Dimitri hadn't been thrilled about the flirtation between Andrew and Milena — even though the two of them had, no doubt, kept their marriage quiet for exactly that reason.

"Do you want to tell us why you did it, Andy?" I asked, in a more conciliatory tone.

"I hated her," he answered, his voice almost entirely flat. "The bar couldn't be saved any more. Selling was our last chance not to lose everything. But she'd rather have let us go bankrupt than see me get a fresh start." He looked at Milena, who was still staring at the floor. "Not that any of that's going to happen now, anyway." He got to his feet, lowered his eyes, held out his arms, and let himself be handcuffed and led away without any resistance.

I took one last look around the bar. Andrew wouldn't be inheriting Rosemary's share, not as her murderer. And what would happen to his own share was now up in the air too. It could take years for a court to settle the ownership. A new development going up on this spot any time soon struck me, at that moment, as entirely out of the question.

I checked the time. Ten to ten. If I got a move on, I'd still make it to the meeting with Silvia at the Bar María in time. Even though, by now, it probably didn't matter much any more.

ALTEA, BAR MARÍA

10.30AM

"Of course I know who owns the block and wants to build there."

Silvia — an attractive woman in her mid-forties, with dark brown curls and a figure that four children hadn't managed to do the slightest damage to — had greeted me with a warm smile and two rather more-than-token kisses on both cheeks. Now we sat together on the terrace of Bar María, and even Isabel had found the time to keep us company.

"Most of the properties are already in Benvest's hands; the group's got first-refusal options on all the rest."

"Who's Benvest? Who's behind it? The mafia?" I asked, a little too hastily.

Silvia chuckled. "No, not the mafia. Benvest stands for Benidorm Investment. The group's made up of well-known Benidorm businesspeople. Your acquaintance's a member too, as it happens."

"My acquaintance?"

"Victoria Marsh. You do know her, don't you?"

I was, for the moment, rather lost for words. I only half-registered Isabel giving a scornful little snort at the word "acquaintance".

Vicky?

What?

I'd completely lost the thread. It must have shown on my face.

"What's wrong with you?" Silvia asked, accordingly.

I gathered myself for another three seconds. "That doesn't make any sense," I finally managed.

"What doesn't make sense?"

"Victoria Marsh set me on Andrew Burns to expose him as a murderer. That torpedoed her own project."

"And why doesn't that make sense?" Silvia gave me a gentle, patient smile.

"Why would she put her own project at risk?" I insisted, stubbornly.

"Because maybe she doesn't want this project to happen at all, Novak? Because she doesn't fancy living and working next to a huge building site for years on end? Because she'd rather have a lively strip full of little bars and big ones alike, than one more all-inclusive mega-hotel that would take her customers away and ruin the whole area's appeal, into the bargain?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Novak, I thought, with a certain resignation, you're not half as sharp as you like to think. And yet it had been staring me in the face. If Victoria wanted to stop the project, voting against it alone would have got her nowhere. Neither would resigning from the group in protest.

No. The perfect strategy was to use someone like Novak to pull her chestnuts out of the fire for her. Of course she

hadn't shown up at the bar this morning. She hadn't wanted to be officially connected to Burns's arrest.

I looked over at Silvia and Isabel, both of them smiling at me with a certain smugness — the latter with an unmistakable, unashamed I-told-you-so edge to it.

I felt I had every right to be annoyed with Victoria. But I also remembered her red-rimmed eyes, and decided I'd rather believe that solving the murder of her friend Rosemary had genuinely mattered to her, personally.

Isabel savoured her triumph for only a few seconds. Then she got up, because new guests had arrived on the terrace.

She'd barely gone when Silvia gave me a wink. "Stick with it, Novak. It'll come good."

"Hm?"

"She's jealous," Silvia whispered, in a conspiratorial tone. "That's a good sign."

"So you're actually on my side, in this case?" I said, surprised.

"No, on hers, mainly. She's earned a bit of luck." Silvia's expression turned more serious now. Stern, even. "So don't you go and blow it, understood?"

"Mm-hm," I assured her, and meant it.

The End

EXIT: CRUISE TO DEATH

The Mediterranean Queen sets course from Genoa to Gibraltar. On board: a group of highly qualified scientists and politicians gathering for an international conference. Even before departure, two murders occur, raising fears that someone has the ship and its passengers in their sights.

Sir Cedric McIntyre, head of the pan-European police force EXIT, sends his best people aboard—Sandrine Duvalier and her team. But even they cannot prevent disaster from striking. When the ship falls into the hands of criminals, all seems lost. But McIntyre has one last ace up his sleeve...

Read an excerpt:

(...)

“Are you traveling alone?” he asked.

“No,” she answered immediately. “I’m part of a delegation. I work for a scientist who’s attending a conference on board. And you?”

“I’m traveling alone, almost entirely for pleasure.”

“Lucky you.”

“Depends on how you look at it. I’ve heard about the conference. Big deal, right?”

“Yes, an international meeting at the highest level. A

dozen scientists, a dozen politicians, and hundreds of assistants, advisors, and security personnel. It's hard to find a free minute to enjoy the view."

"And which category do you belong to? You must be the beautiful agent, mysterious and dangerous."

She laughed—a bright, pleasant sound. "Thank you for the beautiful. But no, I'm the personal assistant to a professor. And I can't tell you any more than that, or I'd have to kill you afterward."

Now he laughed too. "Agreed. Let's leave it at that and enjoy the view."

"I'm afraid you'll have to continue enjoying it alone. I have to go back inside—I'm sure I'm already being missed. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Froehlich."

"Tom."

"It was nice meeting you, Tom. See you soon." She turned without another word and hurried toward the nearest door.

He watched her slender figure disappear inside the ship. "Irina Popescu," he repeated.

"I already have her on the screen," he heard Megan's voice. "Personal assistant to Professor Dimitri, twenty-eight years old, father Romanian, mother Russian. Popescu already has a doctorate in physics, apparently close to habilitation herself. You've picked out a pretty and clever bug, Major."

"Tom."

(...)

Ulli Eike, born in Dortmund in 1961, has been writing professionally since 1985. After a decade in Munich as an editor and editor-in-chief for leading computer magazines, he settled on Spain's Costa Blanca, where he has worked as a freelance journalist and author since 1995.

Today, the German author is best known for his hugely successful Lena Stern crime series. With twenty-one gripping instalments, the novels have earned a loyal readership and secured a strong position within the Amazon Kindle programme.

His wider body of work includes the Agentur Valeska novels (two volumes) set in the same universe, the Caro and Nessie series (five volumes) featuring two sharp-witted amateur sleuths, as well as numerous other novels and short stories.

The action thriller *EXIT – Kreuzfahrt in den Tod* is already available in English as *EXIT – Cruise to Death*, with further translations on the way.

With *Novak and the Body on the Beach*, Eike turns his adopted home into the stage for a new chapter in his storytelling — a fresh, atmospheric setting that marks the beginning of a brand-new series. The first full Novak novel is already in development and is planned for release in German, English and Spanish.

A dead woman found in the blazing sand of Benidorm.

**A husband desperate to close the chapter before
anyone starts asking real questions.**

**A calculating blonde vamp pulling the strings from
the shadows.**

Witnesses who saw everything — yet noticed nothing.

**And a former investigator who wants nothing more
than to enjoy a cold beer served by the beautiful
waitress... until the case lands squarely at his feet.**

Novak and the Body on the Beach

**A sun-drenched crime mystery set on Spain's Costa
Blanca — sharp, atmospheric, and impossible to put
down.**

More from Ulli Eike on Amazon:



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