

Daughters of Fire

Barbara Erskine

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

I



‘Have you any idea of what you have done to this department?’ Professor Hugh Graham threw the magazine down on the desk in front of him. It was folded open at an article entitled, ‘Cartimandua, the First British Queen?’ ‘You’ve made us a laughing stock! And me! You’ve made me a laughing stock in the academic community.’ He spoke with the soft lilt of the Scottish Borders, usually scarcely noticeable but now emphasised by his anger.

Behind him the sun, shining in through the office window which looked out onto Edinburgh’s George Square, backlit his thick, unruly pepper-and-salt hair and cast the planes of his weather-beaten face into relief. ‘I don’t think you and I can go on working together, Viv. Not when you clearly hold my views in such low esteem.’

‘Rubbish!’ Viv Lloyd Rees was thirty-five years old, five foot four, slightly plump and had short fiery red hair which had been cut to stand out in a hedgehog frame around her face, emphasising her bright green eyes. In spite of the Welsh name her accent was cut-glass English, another fact that irritated intensely the nationalist that resided deep in the professor’s soul.

‘Are you telling me that suddenly no one is allowed to have their own opinions in this place?’ she went on furiously. ‘For goodness’ sake, Hugh! We study Celtic history. We are not a think tank for some politburo!’

‘No.’ He leaned forward, his hands braced on the shambles of papers and open books which lay strewn across the desk behind his computer monitor. Somewhere under there, presumably, lurked a

keyboard and mouse. 'No, you are correct. We study. We examine facts. We spell them out –'

'That's all I've done, Hugh. I've spelled out some facts. Interpreted them . . .'

'Your own interpretation, not mine.'

The atmosphere crackled between them.

'Mine, as you say. It is my article, Hugh. Not yours.'

'Fictional twaddle!'

'No, Hugh. Not fictional.' Her temper was rising to match his. 'Intuitive interpretation.'

But there was more than that, wasn't there, if she was honest. He was right.

'Intuitive!' He spat out the word with utter disdain. 'Need I say more! And your book. Your much vaunted – hyped – book. Do I assume it will be along these same lines?' He gestured at the supplement lying on his desk.

'Obviously. Haven't you been sent a copy to review yet?' She met his eye in a direct challenge.

She had fought it. She had fought it so hard, that strange voice in her head, the voice she had conjured from her research. The voice that had wanted her to write the book, and now wanted her to write a play. The voice she could not tell anyone about. But its promptings had been too subtle, its information too specific to pretend it wasn't there. She hadn't managed to catch the information, to keep it out of the book, the book which was going to be published in exactly four weeks' time on 14th July. She had tried to sieve the facts, separate the known from the unknown. She had failed.

She waited miserably to see what he would say next, as she did so staring fixedly at the small box lying in a ray of sunlight in his in-tray. She did not want to meet his eye.

There was a long silence as Hugh tried, visibly, to calm himself. In his early fifties, of middle height and with deep-set, slightly slanted hazel eyes, he was a strikingly handsome man. Today he was also formidable as he glared at the woman who stood before him on the layered threadbare rugs which carpeted the floor of his small, overcrowded, first-floor study.

'Your by-line here,' he went on at last, ignoring her question, "'Viv Lloyd Rees of the Department of Pan-Celtic History and Culture at the University of Edinburgh",' – the last dozen words, normally abbreviated to DPCHC by its members and students, were

heavily emphasised – ‘I trust that will not be appearing on this famous book of yours. I am withdrawing the funding for your research facilities. And your post here will not be renewed at the end of the year.’

Viv stared at him. ‘You can’t do that!’ She was paralysed with shock.

‘I am sure I can find a way.’ He folded his arms. ‘This department prides itself in scholarship, not guesswork. There is no room here for fantasists.’ Leaning forward, he picked up the *Sunday Times* magazine by one corner and tossed it across the desk towards her. ‘You may as well take this. I shall not be looking at it again.’ He refolded his arms and sat watching her from beneath frowning sandy brows.

The knowledge that he was right in many of his criticisms, and that she was already in an agony of guilt about them, made her angrier than ever.

She had been overjoyed when he had asked her to come back to Edinburgh to work with him and accepted the lectureship and research post with eager optimism. It was a chance to put the past behind her, to start again and forward her career under the guidance of the man she most respected in their field.

The past was in Dublin. His name was Andrew Brennan and for four years she and he had had a passionate affair, an affair which she, in her perhaps deliberate naïveté, had assumed would lead if not to marriage, at least to a live-in relationship once he had obtained the divorce which he promised was only a matter of time. It never happened. Of course it never happened; had never even been on the cards. When she finally brought herself to accept the fact, she had broken it off and written to Hugh in response to a rumour that a lectureship might be coming up in his department. He had invited her to join him and she had bought a tiny flat in the Old Town with a monstrously large mortgage and put Andrew and his protestations behind her with sufficient alacrity for her to wonder just how much she had really loved him. Even so, at the beginning it was hard in many ways. Harder than she expected. She had friends in Edinburgh from her student days but the gap in her life was huge. She missed Andrew’s close companionship, his unquestioned lien on her spare time, and it was this newly raw loneliness which led her to see more of Hugh Graham and his wife than perhaps she should.

Alison Graham became one of her closest friends. They confided in one another; she told Alison about Andrew; she told her about her sadness after her brother David, like their father a respected consultant paediatrician, had emigrated to Australia with his wife and their baby and she told her about her sense of utter bewildered loss after her parents had followed them five years later to Perth. Alison and Hugh had been there for her. They had supported her. They had all seen a great deal of one another and gradually she had begun to suspect that she was falling in love with Hugh. She drew back. Nothing would persuade her to threaten her friends' marriage. She went to see them less often and avoided Hugh where possible. Puzzled and hurt by her sudden rejection without suspecting its reason, Hugh had become angry. Then unbelievably, heart-breakingly, Alison had died.

His anger had not abated after she had gone, far from it, and his easy friendship with Viv had deteriorated into something like enmity in their professional relationship. She found that he had an unbearable, overweening ego. He refused to acknowledge that the study of history had changed its emphasis; that maybe scholasticism should nowadays allow itself a more popular, approachable face, and above all he refused to admit that anyone else could be good at it! The man who had been the youngest, most ambitious professor ever to head the department appeared to have sunk into staid orthodoxy.

He was returning her gaze steadily, studying her as though she were some kind of strange specimen he had found in a bell jar in a laboratory. Every line of his face was set with disapproval. The look stung.

Taking a deep breath she launched back into the fray. 'You are calling me a fantasist!' Her voice was shaking suddenly. 'May I remind you that you are the one who gave me a first-class honours degree, *Professor*.' She emphasised the word sarcastically. 'You thought my standard of work good then. You helped me get into Aberystwyth to get my Masters and then my doctorate from the University of Wales. You underwrote my application to go to Dublin and you helped me to get the position at UCLA. Then you, *you*,' she repeated, 'offered me a research grant and a lectureship here! You encouraged me to write the book!'

'And you were an excellent student. Otherwise I would never have offered you the job in my department.' He shrugged. 'And

you were a first-class historian when you first came back here. My friendship and my trust in you has obviously gone to your head. In your anxiety to gain recognition and self-publicity you have lost touch with reality. So you are no more use to me. I suggest you go and write romances somewhere where your claims to all this inside knowledge of Iron Age life can do no harm and leave the writing of serious history to those of us who know how to do it!

Staring at him as he sat there Viv felt, for a moment, as she was surely supposed to, like a naughty school girl who had been caught cheating and knew it, and had then been called up before the head. She drew in a shaky breath to ward off the hurt, trying to keep her voice steady. 'So that's what this is all about. At last!' She was deliberately disingenuous. 'You're writing a book as well! Why didn't you tell me? Oh, I was supposed to guess, was I, that that is what you are doing?'

'Indeed you should, as this period is my speciality.' He threw himself back in his seat. 'It would have been a fairly easy assumption to make.' She was wearing a baggy magenta sweater and tracksuit bottoms. Just looking at her gave the professor a headache. Especially when she was angry.

'And you're writing about Cartimandua in spite of the fact that it was no secret that she is my subject!' Viv narrowed her eyes.

He shrugged. He did not mention the fact that his book was as yet barely more than a few files of notes, an outline and a chapter or two, and that it was unlikely that anyone at all beyond his editor at the university press knew about it as yet. 'No,' his tone was disdainful, 'as it happens I am not writing about Cartimandua. She would hardly merit a serious study. Whatever you claim, not enough is known about her. No, my book will be – is – a treatise on the British opposition to the Roman invasion with Venutios as its central figure.'

'Cartimandua's husband.'

'Indeed.'

She took a deep breath, trying to retrieve the situation. 'But surely that doesn't matter? There is room for both books.' She eyed him with a quizzical lift of the left eyebrow. 'And whatever you think of my article,' she glanced at the magazine lying on his desk, 'I can assure you that mine is a serious study.' That at least was true. More or less. She paused, looking at him thoughtfully. 'Can

it be that you are afraid my sales will so eclipse yours that you will be embarrassed? Surely the great Professor Hugh Graham wouldn't worry about that?'

'No, strangely, I do not fear that.' He gave a grim smile. 'My book will be published by the university press. Yours, I understand, is being produced by a commercial publisher. That means you are bound to sell more copies than I do, I am sure. To an ignorant public who are not concerned with intellectual probity. No, I have given you my reason for my objections. Your research and writing are not of the standard I expect and require from someone in my department. Now, if you would excuse me, I have work to do.'

'I'm sure you do.' Viv tried and failed to keep the irony out of her voice. 'I won't keep you.' She turned to the door, still shaking with anger. Then she paused. God! She had completely forgotten why she had come to see him in the first place. Turning back, she forced herself to smile. 'Before I go, I need to ask you a favour.' Not an auspicious moment, but it was the purpose for which she had walked so unsuspectingly into the lion's den twenty minutes before. 'I wanted to ask you if I may borrow the Cartimandua Pin before you return it to the museum.' It had been a while before she had realised that was what was lying there in its box, in his in-tray. 'You won't grudge me that, at least. I am appearing on *History Discussion Night* on Channel 4 next month and I would like to show it when I talk about my book. It would interest the viewers to see a piece of jewellery contemporary with the period.'

Hugh folded his arms. 'Impossible.' It was an instant response. Unconsidered. Automatic.

'Why?' She held her temper in check with an effort.

'I've given an undertaking to the museum not to let it out of my sight.'

'But it's your property. You only loaned it to them in the first place. And it's already been out of your sight!'

'Exactly. It is a priceless artefact so I do not propose to lose track of it again.' He bristled. The pin had been presented to his archaeologist father by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the 1950s after the excavation of the fortifications at Stanwick.

'So priceless in fact that rather than keep it in the department safe, you've chucked it in your in-tray next to your stapler.' Gesturing towards it, Viv took a deep breath. 'I'd take better care of it than that, Hugh! After all, I'm not contemplating melting it down.'

She reached over and picked up the transparent Perspex box in which the enamelled pin nestled in its protective packing.

‘Put it down!’ Hugh’s voice was like acid. ‘Don’t touch it!’ His father had hated the brooch. A scientist to his core, he had nevertheless had a superstitious horror of this beautiful object and refused to let anyone in his family handle, or even look at it.

‘I’m not hurting it.’ The naughty child in Viv had surfaced again in spite of her anger and she fought an absurd urge to stick out her tongue and dodge away from the desk out of his reach, waving the box under his nose. ‘Do you think Venutios really gave it to Cartimandua?’ Carefully removing the lid, she studied it closely. The light from the desk lamp caught the coloured enamels and the exquisitely engraved gold as she turned it this way and that. It exuded an aura of richness and power.

‘I doubt it.’ Hugh’s tone was repressive.

‘It’s very beautiful. And expensive. And the right date.’

‘Put it down.’ He was becoming more and more agitated.

‘Think how it would capture the viewers’ imagination on the telly.’

‘No!’

‘But you lent it to Hamish for his lecture tour.’

‘That was a personal favour.’

‘I only want it for one evening before you return it to the museum. It would be a personal favour to me.’

‘No.’

‘Because you don’t like my style of writing?’

‘Exactly.’

‘That’s childish!’

‘No, it’s an academic judgment. Put that box down, please.’

Her face flushed angrily. ‘Do you know what – that’s petty and vindictive!’ Gently, almost reverently, she touched the brooch with the tip of her little finger. The enamels felt ice cold. Unnerved, she hastily fitted the lid back on and tossed the box onto his desk, where it skidded down a heap of papers and vanished into the scholarly detritus. For a second, as she touched it, she had felt an almost overwhelming sense of unease.

His visible relief when she put it down was replaced by a scowl. ‘Please don’t let me detain you.’

‘You’re being a bastard, Hugh.’ She shuddered and without quite knowing why rubbed the palms of her hands on the seat of her

tracksuit as though to rid herself of the cloying feel of the brooch.

‘Please go, Viv. I don’t think we have anything else to say to each other.’ Standing up angrily, he walked over to the window and stood with his back to her.

This was insane. Unbelievable! ‘You can’t sack me, Hugh, and you know it,’ she said quietly.

‘As I said, I’m sure I’ll find a way.’ He did not turn round.

Leaning forward, she picked up the discarded magazine supplement. Beneath it the gleam of gold and red and green caught her eye again. She glanced up at the taut shoulders of the man by the window and gave a small smile. It took a tenth of a second to slip the box into her bag.

‘Goodbye, Hugh.’

He did not deign to reply. Nor did he turn round after he heard the door bang. When at last he sat down once more at his desk he did not look for the brooch; he didn’t notice it had gone. He shivered. The room was suddenly very cold.

II



‘I walked out at that point, Cathy. If I hadn’t, I would have throttled him!’

Completely exhausted, Viv threw herself down on the sofa in the living room of Cathy French’s shambolically elegant maisonette in Abercromby Place. She had not mentioned her last defiant action, the removal of a valuable artefact from the professor’s study. She still could not believe that she had done it. She shook her head as she went on. ‘He’s turned into an utter total and complete bastard! And to think how long I’ve spent marking exam papers for him this last couple of weeks.’ She reached out for the glass of wine Cathy had poured for her. ‘What am I going to do?’

The two women sat in companionable silence for a couple of moments. Normally noisy and humorous, the dejection which had replaced Viv’s fury was completely uncharacteristic.

Cathy was her complete opposite in looks. Tall and slim, her dark hair swinging just above shoulder length, dressed in a long skirt

and cotton shirt, she sat facing her friend, wine glass in one hand, spectacles dangling from the other.

‘Is this really irreconcilable? It sounds to me more as if he has had his nose put out of joint.’

Viv grimaced. ‘Can the psychology, Cathy. I’m not one of your patients. Even if Hugh and I could agree on the history – any fragment of the history – we seem to have become incompatible personalities.’ She took another sip from the glass. She loved this sprawling, two-floor flat with its beautiful large rooms, its views over Queen Street Gardens with their lovely trees in full summer leaf and its air of controlled chaotic creativity. It relaxed her. Normally. ‘If he is serious my career is over. Kaput. Finished.’

‘Right.’ Cathy gave a rueful smile. ‘I take it that’s a “no” then? So,’ she took a deep breath, ‘you carry on to what, the end of term? The end of the academic year? Then what?’

‘The semester is already over; the exams are finished. And to be honest, he can’t actually sack me. Not without a specific and very good reason and he doesn’t have one.’ Viv sighed. ‘But he can make my life impossible. He has already said he will withdraw funding for my research. Or at least make sure it’s not renewed. He can do that. And he can change his mind about promoting me. I was hoping to be made Reader next year after Hamish Macleod retires. That would mean a hike in my salary which I badly need. Some of us have huge mortgages.’

Cathy leaned back and crossed her legs, ignoring the jibe. Her flat had been left to her by her father, a renowned Edinburgh doctor and former colleague of Viv’s father, a bequest which made her, according to Viv, nothing more or less than a trust fund kid. ‘If you give him his heart’s desire and leave, what could you do instead? What has happened about the radio documentary you’re writing?’

Viv let out another deep sigh. ‘I’ve screwed that up as well. I showed my first draft to Maddie Corston at the BBC and she thinks it’s rubbish.’

‘Did she say that?’

‘Not exactly, but she implied it. She thinks I need help getting it finished by the deadline.’

‘Ah.’ Cathy frowned. ‘Help from who? Hugh?’

‘Good God, no! He doesn’t know about it. If he did it would be another nail in my coffin. No, she’s suggested that I meet up with an experienced producer she knows who she thinks would help

me write it.' Viv was defensive. 'Some stranger who knows nothing about Cartimandua. Who has probably never even heard of her. Someone who's going to waltz in and wave her wand and make it work even if she knows sod all about the subject.'

'If she knows about radio, Viv,' Cathy put in mildly, 'perhaps it's good advice.'

'Maybe.' Viv was still doubtful.

'Who is she? Would I know her through Pete?'

Pete was Cathy's partner and they had been together for four years. He was a travel writer and independent TV documentary producer and came with baggage: a daughter and an ex. Viv envied Cathy her easy relationship with this lovely, supportive man, but not the complications his family appeared to cause in her life. His former wife, as tall and thin as he was, compounded her many faults, apparently, by being exquisitely blonde, beautiful, elegant and clever. Her only advantage, according to Cathy, was that she had decided to live once again in her native Stockholm. Viv had never met her.

Being in the world of TV and film, Pete might well have come across the woman Maddie was suggesting. Viv rummaged in her bag for the piece of paper with the name on it.

'She's called Pat Hebden. She lives in London.'

Cathy let out a shout of laughter. 'Small world! I do know Pat. And your editor is probably right, she would be helpful. She's got a lot of experience. She's been in radio for years. She does a bit of writing and producing and she's an actress as well. She's even stayed here once or twice when she came up for the Festival.'

Viv took another sip of wine. 'It sounds like a conspiracy! So you think I should meet her? Would I like her?' She was still apprehensive.

Cathy hesitated for only a second. 'She's quite a character. I think you'd get on. And meeting would do no harm, Viv. Who knows? It might be a huge success. Why don't I ring her, or has Maddie done it already? Yes, the more I think about it, the more I think it would be a fantastic idea. OK, so writing this drama is one thing you can do to earn some money. What else?'

Viv thought. 'Well, there is the book of course, but that's not going to make me a fortune. Otherwise not much. I work in a small world, Cathy. Hugh could pretty much scupper me. All he needs to do is put the word round that I'm trouble or unreliable or a

useless historian and no department would look at me.' Putting down her glass she slipped off the sofa onto the floor and reaching up for a cushion, wedged it behind her head. 'I can't believe this has happened, Cathy! I can't believe just reading an article can turn him into an enemy like this!' Purring, the large tabby cat which had been watching the proceedings from the arm of the sofa leaped heavily into her lap and settled down.

Cathy eyed him fondly. 'Pablo knows success when he sees it. He is giving you his seal of approval.'

'Soft old thing.' Viv scratched the cat's ears.

'Surely there's more to this than just an article.' Cathy raised an eyebrow. 'Are you sure you haven't antagonised Hugh in some other way?'

Viv shrugged. 'I suppose I might have, inadvertently.' She had been so pleased for her parents when they had left Britain. Envied them their new exciting life, had even been out to see them twice. That was the problem. They never stopped trying to persuade her to follow them down under, but how could she? Her career, her interests, and her obsessions were all tied to the world of the Ancient Celts. Hugh had understood. They had been close, then. It was her fault she had fallen in love with him; and it had been her decision to erect a barrier between them.

'We used to get on well,' she said wistfully, 'but if I'm honest we haven't for a while now.' She didn't elaborate. 'And the trouble is, I'm going to be so vulnerable. If Hugh reviews this book he will trash it. He and his cronies in the academic world will rubbish everything I've said. And if he doesn't review it everyone will want to know why. Either way I'm sunk.'

'Then you'll have to fight him.' Cathy grinned amiably. 'Come on, lady, where is that feisty female who stormed in here just now spitting nails? And you know as well as I do,' she added, 'being completely cynical about it, that the more controversial the book is, the more you two row in public, the better it will sell. When are you going to give me a copy, by the way?' With a rueful laugh she slipped down onto the floor to be on the same level as her guest and topped up both their glasses once more. Pablo stood up, stretched and stepped carefully across the table to sit instead on his mistress's knee. 'So, remind me. Why is this book so controversial?' she went on. 'What is so shocking about it that it has wound him up like this?'

Apart from the facts that weren't facts, you mean. The details I have tried so hard to weed out which shouldn't be there because they are not part of the historical record. The 'fictional twaddle' which Hugh had spotted at once! Viv didn't say it. Instead she shook her head adamantly. 'The only shocking thing is that I have had the temerity to finish it ahead of the book Hugh is writing himself!'

'Yours is about Cartimandua and the Celtic tribe called the Brigantes, right?'

'And it turns out that Hugh's is about Venutios. Her husband!' Viv scowled. 'Two different views on Iron Age Britain around the time of the Roman invasion in AD 43.'

'But surely,' Cathy took a sip of wine thoughtfully, 'that shouldn't matter, should it? Won't people be interested in the two different stories?'

'You'd think so.' Viv sniffed. 'And they are very different.' That much at least she would admit. 'I'm coming from a woman's point of view, writing about a controversial queen. The antithesis of Boudica. A gutsy, clever Celtic queen, yes, but she cosied up to the Romans and because of that she is – was – regarded by many, including her husband, as a traitor. A quisling.'

'Ah.' Cathy eased the purring cat into a more comfortable position on her knees. 'And Hugh takes the opposite position to you.'

'In everything. He is writing about a man who is regarded as a patriot because he opposed Rome, and about war and military tactics and stuff like that.'

'I still don't see why that should matter. Surely both points of view are valid?'

'In a rational world, yes.' Viv grabbed the bottle of wine and poured herself a refill. She stood up and walked over to the window. 'I've blown it. He used to respect me. He was impressed by my research. He encouraged me to do my first TV show. We used to get on so well.' She heard the wistful note in her own voice and frowned, despising herself for it. He used to like me. That was what she had been going to say. And I used to like him. A lot. Why was she so angry that he had seen through her? Had she really expected him not to react to that article? And when – or if – he read the book, had she really thought he would give it his seal of approval? She took another swig from the glass. 'He's jealous, of course.'

‘Of your success?’

‘Yes. Of my success. He hates it that I’ve appeared on TV more than he has. And that they’ve profiled me in the *Sunday Times* magazine with the article based on my book. And that I’m going to be in another programme – a discussion programme on Channel 4 –’ She broke off abruptly and glanced at her bag, lying on the coffee table. The box with the two-thousand-year-old brooch inside it was in there, lying in the bottom somewhere amongst the litter of her possessions. She hadn’t taken it out since she had thrown it into the bag; hadn’t been able to believe what she had done.

‘You have to stand up to him, Viv.’ Cathy was quietly insistent as she sat stroking the sleeping cat. ‘You can’t go on letting him get to you like this.’

‘No.’ Viv turned back to the window. ‘No, I know I can’t. I’m just not sure what I’m going to do about it. I have a copy of the book for you, Cathy, of course I have. Signed and everything. You must read it and tell me what you think.’

III



Pat Hebden was sitting slumped on the arm of the sofa in the living room of her small Victorian house in Battersea, staring into space, her mobile still in her hand. David Roach, her agent, had called her with the news as soon as he heard it. ‘I’m so sorry, Pat. I thought it was in the bag. It was so you, darling.’

The woman who had got the TV part was fifteen years her junior. ‘But I’m the right age, David. I have the experience. The part was *me*.’

‘I know, darling. I can’t believe it either.’ He had a slight American intonation. Fake. She knew he hailed from the East End of London. ‘But we’ll find the right part for you. It’s out there somewhere. It will just take a little bit longer.’ Ever pragmatic – and anodyne. She could hear the shrug. And the unspoken words: very few parts for women your age, darling. Unless you’re a character actress and the public know you. You’ve spread yourself too thin, that’s the problem. Too many irons in the fire.

She was still sitting staring into space five minutes later, disappointment washing through every fibre of her body. With a groan she stood up at last. Damn it, she wasn't that old. Mid-fifties. Could pass for forty. Or less. With make-up. A lot of make-up. She chuckled wryly. Who was she kidding? They were right. She'd have been lousy in the part.

As she reached for her mobile again her eye fell on the notepad on the table, half hidden under yesterday's *Guardian*. Pulling it out, she stared down at it. *Cartimandua*, it said. **Queen. Romans. Celts. Viv Lloyd Rees. Play? Docu-drama? Ring Maddie Corston!!!**

The way Maddie had described the story there was melodrama. Romance. War. A strong story. Commissioned. Overdue. A writer with huge talent but who had never written for radio before and was in need of a strong guiding hand. And maybe a female lead.

Glancing up, she caught sight of herself in the mirror and frowned. Fantastic voice. Good face. Golden hair. Well, greyish with expert highlights! Just the right height – five foot five – well, perhaps five foot four if she forgot to stand up straight. Excellent cheekbones. Unconsciously she tilted her head slightly. She used reading glasses now, she had to admit, but that didn't matter for in her head she had ceased to see herself as an actress. Now she was an academic. A mentor. The calm, skilled hand on the rudder which would bring a play first to the radio, then, who knows, to the TV. Big Screen? Stage? Maddie had hinted at an inexperienced and vulnerable author and a background of academic rancour. War behind the scenes. Perfect publicity. In the mirror the face she was scanning smiled. Ever optimistic, the defeat was forgotten. Ahead was a new scheme. A scheme she could get her teeth into. And one that involved a trip to Edinburgh.

Outside it was a glorious summer day, though you wouldn't guess it from here. The cherry trees which lined the narrow road were in full leaf and the air had a faint trace of freshness in it; a strong breeze from Battersea Park and the river beyond it, cutting through traffic fumes and the blankets of diesel which spewed down from the low-flying aircraft shaking the house every couple of minutes on their way to Heathrow. She glanced round the small narrow rectangular room which comprised virtually the whole of the ground floor area of her tiny house. Light seeped fitfully through the heavy lace curtains she kept constantly drawn across the front window to keep prying eyes out. The room looked tired

and dusty. She ran a finger over the table ruefully and examined the ensuing faint line with a sigh. She was between cleaning ladies at the moment. She was always between cleaning ladies. She had caught the last one shooting up in her kitchen. Shame. She had been a nice, bright girl. Trustworthy, or so she had thought. On the slippery slope, so it turned out, from the third year of a degree course in modern languages to, no doubt, a horrible death under a bridge somewhere. Two days after the girl had gone the house had been done over. Pat sighed. She knew it was Sarah because of the things taken. Not the treasures which would have hurt so much. Not even her grandmother's gold bracelet which she had left so carelessly on the table in her bedroom. Just the electronic stuff which could be replaced. The cash from the kitchen cupboard and the silver candlesticks which she and Sarah had agreed were really rather vulgar.

She had changed the locks now, finally made up her mind to install security bars over the front windows, and acknowledged a huge reluctance to become involved with yet another personality who would bring their problems to her door while vaguely pushing her vacuum up and down and flicking the dust from one surface to watch it settle on another. What she really wanted was to leave London for a bit.

'Maddie?' She had picked up the phone, almost without being aware of the fact. 'I've given your suggestion some thought and I'd love to come and discuss it.'