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Passion

Written by Louise Bagshawe

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Prologue

Dimitri slid the photograph across the desk.

They were on the fourth floor of a nondescript office building. Outside, rush-hour traffic was just starting to build up on the Königstrasse. He had already been at work for four hours.

The hunt had started.

‘The first.’

His operative took the picture, studied it for a second. The subject smiled, glossily handsome. He wore an expensive white-tie suit. The woman by his side was a brunette, rail-thin, in red satin. Several other dinner guests were glancing their way. He was the centre of attention, pleased with himself.

He had a lot of money, a lot of power.

He’d be dead soon.

‘Not a problem.’

‘Another.’ He passed a second over. ‘You probably

don't recognise this one. She's not as important.'

'You have a name and a location?'

'Of course.'

Then that target was dead too. The operative shrugged. No need to state the obvious. Dimitri looked across his desk, taking the measure of her reaction.

Her name was Lola Montoya, and God, she was a cold bitch. It would be only the third time he had ever hired a female. The first two had not ended well, and most bosses in his world didn't make a habit of it. This girl was different. Dimitri had had to search around for nearly a month just to make contact with her. Her price was excessive, because she was one of the best killers in the world. Easily the best female. His gaze trickled across her impressive body. Large breasts, a tight, curvy ass, narrow hips. But her pretty face was marred by her eyes; ice-blue, and as cold as a snake's.

She was efficient. She was merciless.

He turned his attention back to the targets.

'The third one is a politician. American, so there will be major protection.'

That was slightly more interesting to her. Dimitri tapped the latest photo. 'A US senator, connected in our field. Rumours of a Mossad contingent assigned to her security detail.'

A slight smile. 'Mossad are overrated.'

'You think so?' he asked.

'I've taken out several. And various of their protectees.'

He shook his head. 'You think everyone is over-rated.'

'These targets are not a problem.' The girl was getting bored. 'They will fall as easily as the professor did. One week for all of them, ten days at the most. You wire the money to my accounts. I can be on a plane in an hour.'

Dimitri nodded. There was no point in arguing that payment was on completion. The world's best worked on their reputations. And once he had solved this little problem for his group of global clients, he would become too big to cross. The price was nothing, really. He nodded. 'It will be done, right away.'

'Then you'll get a call. We're done here?'

He almost nodded again, then on second thoughts pulled one last photograph from his drawer. He studied it. A young girl, long brown hair, pale skin, very pretty. She was about eighteen, playing hockey in a school uniform. Regulation navy blue skirt, dark socks, studded boots, a pale blue T-shirt that suited her complexion. No make-up. She was so full of life.

To him, suddenly, the picture seemed strangely erotic.

‘She knows about all this?’ Lola asked.

‘Not at all,’ Dimitri said confidently. He shrugged. ‘But kill her anyway. Just to make sure. She’s older now, teaches at Oxford.’

‘Sure. Who is she?’

‘The daughter,’ he said.

Chapter One

The Past

She was his passion. The first time he laid eyes on her, he knew it.

‘Will.’ Jock Campbell tugged at his elbow. ‘Pay attention, for fuck’s sake! Get in the lineout!’

He nodded, reluctantly. ‘Right.’ Wrenched his eyes back from the slight figure on the touchline. Hard to do.

She was standing there, watching the rugby with a light frown of concentration, like many girls did who didn’t have a clue about the game. She wore a pair of tight jeans and a fisherman’s sweater that looked like it was borrowed from a boyfriend. Whoever he was, Will already hated him.

The girl had candied chestnut hair, long and glossy, whipping around her face. Full lips. Her skin

glowed. Her cheeks were pink from the cold. She smiled at someone. It was Mark Crosby, from Hertford, and he had the ball. He lifted it and threw it towards his team.

Will propelled himself up from the ground and caught the ball, easily. There were murmurs of 'Fucking hell,' all around him. That was one hell of a jump. Now he was supposed to pass it to one of the backs. Instead he tucked it under his arm and headed towards the line.

There were shouts and screams from the touch-line. He imagined the girl watching him. Hertford's finest flung themselves at him. He brushed them off, like flies. Crosby came up behind him and grabbed at his legs. He knew it was Crosby from the way his feet fell on the muddy grass, Will registered details like that. He turned his leg, pushing backwards. On a pitch full of muscular students, Will Hyde had the measure of them all. He was the strongest. He was the most determined.

His lungs screamed for air. He ran on. It was a close game. The line loomed into his vision, but now four of the bastards were on him, hanging on to him like human limpets, forcibly trying to drag him back, away from the white-chalked grass. Will squared his shoulders and grunted from the effort. His quadriceps

muscles tightened like iron cords under the skin. They couldn't hold him. He reached out, the ball firm in his grip. His hand put it down, two perfect inches on the other side of the line.

Oriel were all around him, cheering. The ref blew the whistle. Reluctantly the Hertford guys let go. Mark Crosby spat on the grass, expressively. Fuck him, Will thought, that rich bastard.

Crosby was the heir to a brewery in Oxfordshire. His parents lived in a Queen Anne rectory. He drove an MG around the town and was considered quite a catch.

Will was not considered a catch. He had no parents. He'd been raised in a Barnardo's orphanage. The staff were great, but they changed frequently. Will had been bullied as a young kid, and had learned fast to fend for himself. He'd got into sport, then proper running, lifting weights. And he had studied; maths was his speciality. It was such a pure discipline, no emotion to it at all. Will tried to dampen his emotions. They did nobody any good.

His life, as a child, had been a mixture of longing and hope. Wanting to be adopted, fantasising that his real mother would come back for him. But the parents that visited the orphanage were usually looking for babies. The older he got, the more hopeless it became.

Will tried to keep steady. He was a survivor, like most of the kids there. They weren't mistreated. Everybody was kind. And he had friends; some of them came and went, in and out of the foster system. Will was a boy, naturally strong; he looked older than his age. Nobody wanted him. He came to prefer the stability of the orphanage and of school. He was good at school, and the teachers piled encouragement on him. He might go to university. The LSE, Oxford or Cambridge, even. He could become a big success. Other Barnardo's kids had done it before him.

Will heard it all, the kind words and sympathy. It wasn't that he didn't value it. He just knew the difference between kindness and love. Maybe he could be a success. He wasn't sure. But what he really wanted was love.

Mathematics was an escape from the loneliness. In English classes, in languages and history, you had to deal with humanity in all its rawness. Will much preferred science. Specifically, he liked the impersonal poetry, the pure logic, of maths.

He was gifted and strong. He worked out, spent time with his friends at the orphanage, and studied. By the time he was sixteen, the friendships were fading, because he was so far ahead of everyone else. But he kept going anyway. He needed to get out into

the world. He went up to Oxford for interviews and aced them; and received three grade As and two grade 1 S levels. There was a tremendous sense of escape. His life, Will's own life, could finally begin.

So there was a social gulf between him and Mark Crosby. So what? At uni they were all equals. Crosby had money. But Will Hyde was stronger.

He fell back into position as the fly half settled in for his kick. The ball soared through the posts, and as Oriol's supporters cheered, Will looked at the touchline again.

There she was. She shrugged expressively at Mark, who cursed. Will's eyes lingered. She was amazing. Beautiful, vibrant, the sympathy on that pretty face. So feminine in her chunky sweater.

As the referee blew the final whistle, Crosby jostled him.

'Hands off,' he said, following Will's eyes. 'That one's my girl.'

'Yeah? Then how come I saw you with Lisa Smith in the Union bar last week?' Mark had had her half under the table, his tongue down her throat.

Crosby grinned. 'What she don't know won't hurt her. She's not even at Oxford. She goes to St Mary's.'

Now Will was surprised. He looked again. A schoolgirl?

‘Don’t worry, she’s seventeen. Perfectly legal.’

‘Are you sleeping with her?’

He was surprised how much the idea bothered him.

‘What do you think?’ Crosby sneered. Will could tell he was lying. He relaxed.

‘Back off her, Mark. I’m going to ask her out.’

‘I said she’s dating me,’ Crosby replied, with bravado.

Will turned towards him. Crosby was a prop forward like Will, but Will had twenty pounds of pure muscle on him. And everybody knew Will’s background. Nobody wanted to mess with a man like that.

‘Not any more,’ Will said.

He walked over, without waiting for a reply. The girl was hovering, waiting for Mark, who had started to talk to one of his mates. Coward, Will thought. She had looked his way, seen him defeat her boyfriend. There was that unmistakable spark of interest in her eyes.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘I’m Will Hyde.’

‘Nice try,’ she replied. Her eyes were full of laughter at the ambiguity. He liked her. He smiled.

‘Melissa Elmet,’ she said. ‘I’m here with Mark Crosby. I don’t know if you’re his favourite person right now.’

Will grinned. 'Don't take this the wrong way . . .'

'Uh-oh,' she said, grinning back. He felt a surge of pleasure. There was an instant connection. Emboldened, he pressed on.

'Mark's not a bad bloke, but he isn't for you. He cats around with loads of girls in the university. I saw him kissing one last week in a bar myself. And she was nothing like as gorgeous as you are.'

Melissa digested this. She looked mildly annoyed, nothing more.

'Really?'

'Yes,' he said earnestly. 'Would you let me take you out for lunch or something?'

'I don't know. Have *you* got any girlfriends?'

'None.' He shook his head. It was true. Like most rugby players he'd had a few one-night stands, but that was all.

'Then lunch would be nice,' she said. He saw her gaze trickle over his dirt-stained body, and she blushed. He was charmed. How many girls blushed these days?

'Great. Just let me get changed. Can I pick you up somewhere?'

'I'd rather meet you at the restaurant. Less explaining with the parents.'

'I get that.'

‘Where?’

Will’s turn for embarrassment, but he had to get it out of the way. She had been going out with Mark, and Mark had money.

‘It’ll have to be somewhere cheap. I’m on a student loan. Got a job at night at a pub, but it doesn’t pay much.’

She didn’t flinch. ‘How about the Blue Boar, then? Right next to your college. And mine.’

‘Perfect.’ He paused. ‘Your college?’

‘Well, Dad’s. My father’s Richard Elmet . . .’

‘I know him.’ For the first time, Will had a slight frisson of foreboding. He had taken a few extra lectures with Professor Elmet. How could this stunning girl be his daughter? She was so happy, full of laughter. Elmet, a brilliant physicist, was a pinched, sour man, harsh on his students, demanding perfection. Will hadn’t liked him. The man was obsessed with climate change. He thought the idea of man-made global warming was scaremongering nonsense and stated in his lectures that he was going to disprove it. Halfway between a genius and a nutter. ‘Were you adopted?’

She hit him. ‘Dad’s not that bad.’

He didn’t argue. ‘Meet you at one thirty?’

‘OK.’ Another of those dazzling smiles. ‘Will.’

*

In the changing room the lads crowded around him, teasing and shouting.

‘The Professor’s daughter,’ Jock said. ‘Better watch out there, Hyde.’

‘Shut up,’ Will grunted. He laced up his shoes, smiled to himself. She was a fantastic girl, a great wash of sunshine appearing out of a cloud-bank. He’d have to take this slowly.

‘I think he’s in love,’ Peter Little, the hooker, announced.

Will didn’t say anything, mostly because he thought so too.

Melissa was waiting for him at one thirty. She ordered cheap fish and chips and half a cider. She was taking her A levels next year, English, History and French. She’d read history at Oxford if it all worked out. After that? Who knows, she told him. She wanted to have adventures.

All Will wanted was to settle down. Get a good job and a good house somewhere. A home. He didn’t want to talk about himself. She was far more interesting. But she probed, gently enough, and found out the truth. Her sympathy was genuine, but not cloying. She told him she was sorry and then

moved on to his future. He got the feeling she was a girl who lived in the future. Something not quite right in her home. He asked her out to the cinema.

‘Yes. Thanks. That’d be nice.’ She looked him right in the eye, and Will got the sense she had to force herself to do it. Vivacious, but a little shy. ‘Any time. I can get the tickets.’

‘I’m asking you out, so I’m buying.’ He smiled. ‘It just means I can never take you anywhere expensive.’

‘I can chip in.’

He shook his head, firmly enough. And she didn’t argue. She could see he meant it.

‘Can I pick you up at your house?’ Will asked.

Melissa shook her head. ‘Best not. Like I said, things aren’t so great at home with boyfriends.’

He didn’t argue. He could meet her parents later, a lot later. What mattered was that she’d said yes. He was going to see her again.

After the cinema, she let him walk her home. At their next date, he kissed her. She was awkward, unpractised. Light as a dandelion seed in his arms. Will burned with desire for her, but forced himself to push away. She wasn’t ready yet, nothing like. Most girls couldn’t wait to hit the hay with him; skint

student or not, he was muscular and handsome, a rugby player, had a reputation as a brain. The orphanage background was a turn-on for a lot of them too, although most weren't crass enough to say so. Will Hyde was street tough. A risk. A little bit dangerous.

Melissa Elmet never put him into a box. She was a schoolgirl, but in the sixth form. Extremely clever, a little starved for love. Her parents were obviously uptight. She was not. She was kind and adventurous. If they went out for a picnic – romantic and cheap, so he did that a lot – she always wanted to climb trees, or strip off her tights and paddle in the stream.

She was sexy, clever. And fun. Lots of fun. The more he saw her, the more he wanted to see her.

Will fell in love. He tried not to – he was only nineteen, she was seventeen. He knew it was young. But he could not help himself. He watched her reservation, watched her struggling not to fall too hard for him. None of that mattered. Melissa couldn't fight it either. When he arrived at their rendezvous, she'd be early, waiting, and her eyes would gleam, her face would brighten, like a child at Christmas. She was interested in anything he liked. Her fingers would trail across his chest, toy with his

biceps, and he felt her heart-rate accelerate as she leaned against him, her breath quicken, her pupils dilate. Forcing himself to wait for her was the hardest thing he had ever done. But he managed it, because he was in love.

A week after her eighteenth birthday, his two house-mates flew to Dublin to go to a Five Nations match at Lansdowne Road. Will couldn't afford the tickets or the flight, cheap or otherwise. But that was fine with him. He had their slummy little house all to himself. He invited Melissa round for dinner.

She came. It was a spring night, balmy enough, and twilight over Walton Street, with the students cycling past and swallows swooping low towards the grounds of Worcester College. Will's last paper had received an Alpha and his tutors were convinced he'd get a starred first. Even though he was overtired from working two jobs, they told him his future was truly bright. He had saved up, splashed out on a bottle of champagne, on discount at Victoria Wine, some fillet steak and strawberries. The curtains of the tiny Victorian parlour were drawn against the dark, and Will had cleaned the house and lit a fire in the grate. He was full of happiness, full of optimism. Every day he was with her, he realised, felt like this. Because she loved him. He loved her. The darkness

of his childhood fell away when he was with her. Melissa filled that longing. It was no mere infatuation, he was certain. It had been months, already. The girl was his life.

When she knocked on the door, his heart leapt. He opened it, and there she was, exquisite in a cotton dress, white with pink roses, and a silk jersey wheat-coloured sweater. Her long hair tumbled loose around her shoulders. She wore a little make-up, and there was a sexy gloss on her lips that Will immediately wanted to kiss off.

‘So where are Matt and James?’ She glanced around as he closed the door.

‘In Ireland till Sunday.’

‘No wonder it’s so tidy.’ She looked at him, laughed. ‘Am I safe with you?’

‘You’ll always be safe with me.’ Will smiled, kissed her. Those lips were so soft and yielding. ‘I’m glad to see you,’ he said, and he realised he was. That was the perfect word for it. He was deeply, profoundly glad to see her. His entire body suffused with joy. ‘Come in, Missy, have some champagne.’

She followed him into the living room and purred with pleasure. The pine logs crackled in the grate. ‘What are we celebrating?’

Will handed her a glass, chilled and full to the

brim with the golden, bubbling wine. 'Your birthday. Us. The future.'

Melissa tipped her champagne flute against his and they drank. Her head tilted back slightly, and her long hair gleamed against the firelight as it flickered. Will was caught with a stab of desire so intense it hurt him.

Gently he took her glass from her hand and set it on the table, with his. His hand went under her chin, tilting her face up to him. His left arm went around her waist. He pulled her close in to him, close enough that he could feel the heat of her blood pooling in her belly, see her lips part. His right hand moved to the gentle swell of her breast. He caressed it, very slightly, through her dress, and felt her respond.

'Will . . .' she whispered. 'I've never . . . I don't know . . .'

'I love you, Missy.' His breath was hot in her ear. 'I really love you. It's OK. You can trust me.'

She thrust herself against him, and he felt her legs trembling with need, her skin hot and flushing. She gasped with longing, letting herself go, letting herself arch against his touch . . .