FRANCES PAIGE

KINDRED SPIRITS

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE GLASGOW GIRLS

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BOOK 1

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One

'You must miss Van like hell, Hal,' Mish said. 'God, what a cryptic collection of abbreviations, Van for Vanessa, Hal for . . . ?'

'Harold. Bluff King Hal.' Hal Purvis, his brother-in-law, grinned. 'Mish for . . . ?'

'Hamish. Can't you hear the skirl of the bagpipes? I anglicized my name when we moved to Bucks. I was afraid my schoolmates would laugh at me.'

'As long as you didn't wear a kilt. Yes, I do miss Van like hell. We've only had that Easter weekend together since we got married, when I flew back to Glasgow. I miss Sam too. He's like a real son to me, not a stepson.'

'Shall you have any of your own?'

'Not until Van gets her Diploma. She's a real wee Scots lassie. First things first, she says.'

'She's an odd one, my sister. Living with black Ebenezer, having his child. It was pity, you know, not love.'

'She's a fount of pity.' Hal's heart swelled, he felt his eyes grow moist. He thought of her while Mish talked, her quiet exterior, her capacity for compassion. And especially just now, compassion and love for Bessie, that redoubtable woman who had looked after the family for so long and was dying of cancer.

The coming of spring made him miss her more. Even in New York you could feel it. Lovers sat or lay in

Central Park, skateboarders weaved between joggers, children clutched silver balloons bought at the gates, licked ice-cream cones. He found evenings in his apartment unbearably poignant without her. He hoped he wasn't making a nuisance of himself to her brother by dropping in.

Karin, Mish's wife, came into the room, beautiful in her early pregnancy, her skin dusky with health, her eyes full, luminous.

'Sit down, my love,' Mish said, patting the sofa beside him.

She smiled at Hal. 'What concern! It's for the content, not the container.' She sat, kissing Mish lightly on the cheek. 'Fusspot!'

'Do you know what you two remind me of?' Hal said. 'That painting in the Rijksmuseum, the Rembrandt. Have you noticed the tender way her hand rests on her tum?'

'"The Jewish Bride".' Mish knew. 'Better than the "Night Watch", even. Particularly apt in our case.'

'Are your family reconciled now to this Gentile you've married?' Hal asked Karin.

'Yes, at last. It's the prospect of a grandchild that's gentled them.' The look which passed between her and Mish drove Hal to his feet.

'Well, I'd better get back. I'm going to ring Van tonight. If I hear of any Rembrandts going cheap for your gallery, Mish, I'll let you know.'

Mish was on his feet too. 'Do that thing. Sometimes I get fed up with modern painting. It's so derivative, although they'd be the last to admit it. I'd give a lot for the old master's chiaroscuro, that warmth.'

'We could have given you supper,' Karin said. Hal shook his head smilingly.

'Drop in any time, old chap.' Mish saw him to the

door. 'But not next week, remember. We'll be busy getting settled down in Westchester, our Happy Valley.'

'You're not going to get rid of me, sad to say. I'll be scouting about that area for my project.' He was producing an art book on the Hudson Valley painters.

'That's why we chose the place,' Mish laughed. 'Hey, do you remember me saying to you the first time you came to New York that I'd be miserable living in the country? Famous last words!'

'But you can't beat it.'

'Living in the country?'

'No, the nesting instinct.' They laughed together.

Going down Madison towards his apartment on Forty-sixth Street, Hal felt obscurely envious, an unhealthy emotion, he told himself. And bereft. The Laidlaws' ungrudging hospitality in New York had been a great support to him. At least, he still had an excuse for dropping in on them when they moved out of the city. He smiled. It was comical to see the change in Mish, that hard-headed dealer in paintings, with the prospect of fatherhood. Karin wouldn't put such emphasis on her surroundings. Nor was she quite so starry-eyed as Mish. Being a mother would have to run in tandem with her career.

And yet, that exchanged glance ... Hal had a surge of desire for Van, a basic desire which must have been reflected in his eyes, because a smart, mini-skirted girl passing him smiled faintly, seemed to hesitate. Couples were strolling arm-in-arm, stopping to read menus, it would have been so easy ... he quickened his step, looking straight ahead. His philandering days were over, he told himself, the tally-ho, the chase, he was a respectable married man with an enigmatic girl in Glasgow who was his wife, whose shy exterior

concealed such passion, for love, for the deprived and unfortunate, for her son, Sam, and luckily, for himself.

He had felt a crying need for her goodness when he had first met her, as well as for her body. And it had been two for the price of one, he had told her, because of the love-child she'd had to that 'black Ebenezer', that poor cripple who had died without ever having seen his son, or wanting to see him.

Now he was in midtown, and the roar of the traffic was in his ears, that peculiar New York sound so different from London's, which seemed more muted, more constant, and not punctuated to the same degree with the high yelps of sirens, of honking horns, over-excited sounds as if the city could not contain its exuberance.

Where Hal lived satisfied his love of urban life, with the Rockefeller Center nearby, the Central Station for any quick exoduses he wanted to make, the Algonquin Hotel bar for the occasional nostalgic drink, and most of all the New York Public Library which was private, not public, and where he went most days walking between Patience and Fortitude, the pink marble lions which flanked its steps.

He knew he was not a patient man, which was why New York pleased him with its febrile excitement, but the two lions gave him a feeling of subdued rectitude every time he went past them in search of information about the Hudson Valley painters.

He pushed through the crowds, reflecting that he wasn't ready for sitting back in some suburban heaven. When he finished this assignment they would live in London. He still had his Bayswater flat. Van would get a job as an almoner in a hospital nearby and they would find a school for Sam. He remembered passing one in Bishopstone Road. Van would like it. There would be visits to Hyde Park, to the Zoo, to Kew Gardens. It

would be a good threesome. He liked being appealed to as a father by Sam. Those huge brown eyes with the faintly yellow whites, a beautiful child, like quicksilver, Puck, sometimes sly . . .

Painless fatherhood, preparation for children of his own, a childhood for them which he had never known with his own parents, who had shuffled him off throughout his younger days then shuffled themselves off fairly quickly, a few years after they had retired to Bournemouth.

He remembered the misery on their faces when he had visited them in the big hotel on Canford Cliffs. 'There's no one to know,' his mother had said, still with her yellow hair, her pale tended hands which had never known housework . . . Now his feet had taken him round the corner of his street, he had reached his apartment block, he went into the foyer and strode towards the elevator. His heart sank. Miss Kaplan, one of the occupants, was waiting there, and she turned to greet him, her face glowing with pleasure.

Ellie, she had insisted he should call her. She was a woman of indeterminate age, possibly over sixty, with the full-lipped downward-sloping mouth of a Bardot which gave her a clown look of sadness. It was a physiognomic fault. She was eternally, pitifully sprightly.

'Been out on the town, Hal?' she greeted him. She shook her hair backwards, like a film star, it was heavy, bobbed, and coloured dark red. He could see its black roots as it swung from her face.

'Yeah.' He had learned to say 'Yeah' pretty quickly. 'Visiting with friends on Upper East Side.'

'Upper East Side?' She nodded knowingly. 'I have friends there too. Never get round to seeing them.'

The elevator came and he bowed her into it. She skipped in girlishly. Her heels were high, her ankles

bulged over the tops of the shoes as if they were too tight. The backs of her knees, showing beneath a too-short skirt, looked unattractively knobbly.

'I'm glad I met you, Hal.' Her teeth were falsely white, emphasizing the yellow tint of her skin. 'I'm organizing a little drinks party on the roof on Sunday for the other residents. I feel since I've been longest here I ought to have a get-together. You and I, of course, are old buddies.' Her smile was flirtatious. Their acquaintance had begun when she had been tending her window-box and water had dripped on Hal's head as he'd been looking out. 'Since I baptized you.' She was arch.

'Blame that cat for its caterwauling.'

'Caterwauling! That's good. It's Mrs Keyser's. She puts it out when she has her gentleman friend. Perhaps he doesn't like it in the bed.' She giggled. 'Naughty Ellie! Casting aspersions. You'll meet her on Sunday, if you'll grace our humble gathering with your presence. Mrs Keyser asked me if you were an English lord.'

Hal laughed. 'Some hope!' He tried to look enthusiastic. 'I'll be glad to come, thanks.' Sometimes he wished he had gone back to the hotel nearby where he had stayed before, but he needed space for the books and papers he was accumulating on his present project.

'That's dandy. Twelve o'clock? There will be a collection to buy pots and tubs and plants. Bring your cheque book? I'm planning a garden up there. Maybe you can give me some advice. You English are great gardeners.'

'Not me. Sorry, Miss Kaplan.' He'd slipped up. She pouted.

'Now, we agreed on Ellie and Hal, didn't we? At one of our little coffee mornings?' He regretted having accepted those invitations. One had led to the other, had led him to tell her about Van because she was usually uppermost in his mind.

'No, I've always lived in flats – apartments – since I left university. Except when I was a schoolboy.' He thought of his parents' garden in Singapore, and how when he came home from school the Malaysian gardener had let him help, pushing a barrow, making a bonfire.

'Ah, but when you get back to England and set up house, your lovely wife, Van, is bound to insist on a garden. Englishwomen always . . .'

'She's Scottish.' He thought of Clevedon Crescent in Glasgow's West End, where Van lived with her parents, Anna and Ritchie, and how of all the subjects he had heard discussed round their table, gardens had never been one of them.

Ellie looked disappointed. 'I saw her in a big straw hat with a trug over her arm. Oh, dear!' But, brightening, 'She bakes oatcakes? A tartan shawl round her shoulders, in a big farm kitchen, stone-flagged . . .'

'Sorry, no. But she's very good at the Highland Fling.' The downward curves of the sad mouth turned upwards, clown-like. She giggled.

'You're pulling my leg again! I can see that gleam in your eyes. Well, all I can say is she's a lucky girl to have such a handsome guy as you for her own.'

'I'll tell her when I call her tonight. This is me,' he said thankfully as the elevator stopped at his floor. He got out.

'Midday on the roof, don't forget, Hal honey.' She waved her painted finger-nails as she was borne upwards. He laughed ruefully as he opened his door and went into the lounge to pour himself a drink.

Two

'I'm worried about Bessie today, Mum. She's weaker.' Van and Anna, her mother, were drinking their coffee in the kitchen. 'I don't think I'll go to College today.'

'I don't like you missing it.' Anna looked drawn. They had been sharing sitting up with Bessie at nights because she seemed when they had washed her and combed her hair as if she would hardly last till morning. But her cocky half-smile was still there as she watched their ministration. 'Now, whit has a puir old soul like me done to deserve this attention?'

'Do you know what she said to me?'

'Tell me.'

'"It's me for the high jump."' Van's voice wavered. 'She hadn't the strength to smile. Her eyes were pitiful.'

Anna put down her half-finished cup of coffee. 'We'll go in and have a look at her and then you'll decide.'

'All right.' Van got up and emptied her coffee into the sink. Neither of them had the taste for it.

Bessie looked very small in her bed in the room off the kitchen. Smaller, younger-looking, as if her seventy-nine years had fallen away from her and she had reverted to the spry young girl who had tended Rose Mackintosh, Anna's mother, and Rose's own mother also, over six decades of service.

They both stood silently looking down on her. The

hands at her sides on the counterpane were purple-stained with bruises, mystery bruises. She hadn't been out of her bed for the past month. And there was a bruise under one eye. Who was the hidden enemy, Van wondered, afraid to think. The rest of her skin was parchment white, but smooth now, like marble. She lay, narrow and still, as if in a sarcophagus.

Van bent down and kissed her cheek. 'Are you awake, Bessie?' The old woman stirred. Her eyes remained closed.

'Aye, I'm wakened,' she said. 'There's nae point in sleepin' noo.' Her chest rose, fell. 'I'll get plenty o' that soon enough.'

'I thought you looked much better, Bessie.' Anna's voice shook. She was afraid of death. Van had seen plenty of it in hospitals.

'Did ye, noo?' There was a note of sarcasm in the faint voice. 'If ye want to know, Anna, I'm lyin' here wondrin' hoo ye'll manage.'

'Don't bother your head about us . . .' and then, quickly, 'What's this rubbish you're saying?' Bessie turned her head away as if tired of the subterfuge.

Van and Anna exchanged glances, Van's eyes holding the question. Anna said, casually, 'Van has her classes today, Bessie. I'm trying to persuade her to go.' She won't face up to it, Van thought.

Bessie turned. Her eyes for a moment had an unnatural brightness. 'You go to they classes. You don't want to become like yin o' these pouffes in the drawing-room upstairs, saft. I've worked aw ma life and never depended on any man. They're good at lovin' you and leavin' you, although you always think it would never happen to you.' Had there been a brief affair, Van wondered, maybe one of the tradesmen who came about the place? She didn't think it likely. Invitations to take

a cup of tea in Bessie's kitchen were not given lightly, whatever the blandishments.

'Right,' Van said. 'I'll go. I can see you wouldn't like me to be begging in Argyle Street if the worst came to the worst.' She bent and kissed Bessie's cheek. 'You be good while I'm away. And no getting round Mother to let you get up.'

'That stove's no' getting its usual shine. Maybe I'll . . .' her voice tailed away. Anna nodded to Van.

She got the bus in Great Western Road which took her through Charing Cross to Pitt Street where her college was. She was more worried about Anna in one way than Bessie. Her days were numbered. It made her heart ache, but she didn't have the fear of death which Anna had. And yet she knew that when the crisis came her mother would be level-headed, as she had been on that day when she had telephoned from London having to swallow to find her voice, 'Mum, I'm pregnant.' She thought Anna's fear stemmed from her terror at the thought of losing Ritchie.

She enjoyed the morning's lecture. Her mind was receptive. She told herself she must use her time wisely, absorb what she was being taught, even Bessie realized the value of independence.

Nevertheless, at a break in her classes she went to the corridor where the telephone was and rang home. After a time Anna answered. Her voice was shaking.

'How is she, Mum?' she asked.

'I don't think you should have gone. I can't get her to talk to me. The doctor's been, but he said there was nothing he could do. He'll call back tonight. There's no one here. Ritchie had an appointment.' Ritchie would, Van thought. It wasn't because he didn't dearly love

Bessie. His commitments couldn't be broken at a moment's notice. Or could they?

'I'll come home right away, Mother,' she said, and hung up.

Her tutor was sympathetic. 'Is it your mother?' she asked.

'No,' Van said, 'it's our housekeeper. She's been with us for so long that she's more a friend.' The tutor, a young woman who lived in a bed-sit in Carntyne, looked vague.

'Oh . . . well, on you go, Miss Laidlaw. Remember, if you're more than three days off we'll need a doctor's certificate.'

She half-ran up Clevedon Drive when she got off the bus and turned into Clevedon Crescent. How tranquil it looked in the April sunshine, the daffodils blowing in the lawns, the almond blossom already faintly pink. 'West End', the terrace breathed, that combination of respectability, Scottishness, segregation. The Laidlaws, Anna and Ritchie, were like exotic flowers in its primness. Was there a Bohemian quarter in Glasgow where they might have been better suited? Not in their opinion. They needed the solid background, the tradition of the Mackintoshes, and the house had to be maintained in the standard Anna's grandmother had set.

She ran up the steps and opened the front door, ran along the hall and into the kitchen behind the dining-room, through the kitchen to Bessie's bedroom. Her mother was bent over the bed. 'No, Bessie, no,' she was saying, her hands on the woman's shoulders, 'you aren't fit. I told you.'

'It's that stove, Anna.' Bessie's eyes were wild. 'I canny leave it in that state.' The stove in question had once been in the kitchen but had been replaced by an

Aga. Ritchie had known a man who would take it away but he had never materialized. Van went swiftly to the bedside.

'Let me, Mother.' She felt competent. It was one thing she could do well, to minister. 'Bessie,' she said sternly, 'I'm surprised at you making such a fuss over an old stove. I'll do it for you. Where's the . . . don't bother. I know.' She pulled out a drawer in a dresser and found the blacklead tin, the brushes for burnishing, the emery paper for the steel rim. The dresser should have been removed along with the stove, but there was another man Ritchie knew . . . she set to with a will. After some minutes spent brushing and rubbing hard with a duster, she stood up, cheeks flushed with the effort.

'There you are now. Does that please Your Highness?' Her heart lurched.

Bessie was lying where Van had gently laid her, her head askew on the pillow. Her eyes were closed. There was spittle at the corner of her mouth. She was breathing, rasping difficult breaths. 'Phone for the doctor, Mother,' she said in a whisper.

When Anna came back they stood together silently looking down. Van could feel her mother's arm trembling against hers. They scanned Bessie's face, peaceful now. Her lips moved. Once a faint smile, like a shadow, passed over her face. She's thinking of her stove, Van thought. Bessie's religion was founded on practicality. Cleanliness was next to godliness.

A change came slowly over Bessie's features, wavered, changed again, as if frames were being substituted, one for the other. Then there was a cessation, a long fearful stillness when Van felt obliged to put her ear to Bessie's chest. Straightening again, she saw a subtle looseness, a readiness. Her arms lay limp on the