THE ROTTWEILER

A Novel

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CHAPTER 1

THE JAGUAR STOOD IN A CORNER OF THE SHOP BETWEEN a statue of some minor Greek deity and a jardiniere. Inez thought it said a lot about the world we lived in that to most people when you said "jaguar" they took it to mean a car and not an animal. This one, black and about the size of a very large dog, had once been a jungle creature someone's grandfather, a big game hunter, had shot and had stuffed. The someone had brought it into the shop the day before and offered it to Inez at first for ten pounds, then for nothing. It was an embarrassment having it in the house, he said, worse than being seen in a fur coat.

Inez only took it to get rid of him. The jaguar's yellow glass eyes had seemed to look reproachfully at her. Sentimental nonsense, she said to herself. Who would buy it? She had thought it might seem more attractive at eight forty-five in the morning but it was just the same, its fur harsh to the touch, its limbs stiff and its expression baleful. She turned her back on it and in the little kitchen behind the shop put the kettle on for the tea she always made herself and always shared these days with Jeremy Quick from the top floor.

Punctual as ever, he tapped on the inside door, and came in as she carried the tray back into the shop. "How are you today, Inez?"

He, and he alone, pronounced her name in the Spanish way, Eeneth, and he had told her the Spanish in Spain, but not in South America, pronounced it like that because one of their kings had had a lisp and they copied him out of deference. That sounded like an apocryphal story to her but she was too polite to say so. She handed him his teacup with a sweetener tablet in the spoon. He always walked about, carrying it.

"What on earth is that?"

She had known he would ask. "A jaguar."

"Will anyone buy it?"

"I expect it will join the ranks of the gray armchair and the Chelsea china clock that I'll be left with until I die."

He patted the animal's head. "Zeinab not in yet?"

"Please. She says she has no concept of time. In that case, I said, if you've no concept of time, why aren't you ever early?"

He laughed. Inez thought, and not for the first time, that he was rather attractive. Too young for her, of course, or was he? Not perhaps in these days when opinions about that sort of thing were changing. He seemed no more than seven or eight years her junior. "I'd better be off. Sometimes I think I'm too aware of time." Carefully, he replaced his cup and saucer on the tray. "Apparently, there's been another murder."

"Oh, no."

"It was on the news at eight. And not far from here. I must go."

Instead of expecting her to unlock the shop door and let him out, he went back the way he had come and out into Star Street by way of the tenants' entrance. Inez didn't know where he worked, somewhere on the northern outskirts of London, she thought, and what he did had something to do with computers. So many people did these days. He had a mother of whom he was fond and a girlfriend, his feelings for whom he never mentioned. Just once Inez had been invited up to his top-floor flat and admired the minimalist decor and his roof garden.

At nine she opened the shop door and carried the bookstand out onto the pavement. The books that went in it were ancient paperbacks

by forgotten authors but occasionally one would sell for 50p. Someone had parked a very dirty white van at the curb. Inez read a notice stuck in the van's window: "Do not wash. Vehicle undergoing scientific dirt analysis." That made her laugh.

It was going to be a fine day. The sky was a soft pale blue and the sun was coming up behind the terraces of little houses and the tall corner shops with three floors above. It would have been nicer if the air had been fresh instead of reeking of diesel and emissions and green curry and the consequences of men relieving themselves against the hoardings in the small hours, but that was modern life. She said good morning to Mr. Khoury who was (rather optimistically) lowering the canopy at the front of the jeweler's next door.

"Good morning, madam." His tone was gloomy and dour as ever.

"I've got an earring that's lost its what-d'you-call-it, its post," she said. "Can you get it repaired if I bring it in later?"

"I shall see." He always said that, as if he was doing you a favor. On the other hand, he always did repair things.

Zeinab, breathless, came running down Star Street. "Hi, Mr. Khoury. Hi, Inez. Sorry I'm late. You know I've no concept of time."

Inez sighed. "So you always tell me."

Zeinab kept her job because, if Inez were honest with herself and she nearly always was, her assistant was a better saleswoman than she was. She could have sold an elephant gun to a conservationist, as Jeremy once said. Some of it was due to her looks, of course. Zeinab's beauty was the reason so many men came in. Inez didn't flatter herself—she'd plenty of confidence but she knew she'd seen better days—and though she'd been as good-looking as Zeinab once upon a time, it was inevitable that at fifty-five she couldn't compete. She was far from the woman she had been when Martin first saw her twenty years before. No chap was going to cross the street to buy a ceramic egg or a Victorian candlestick from her.

Zeinab looked like the female lead in one of those Bollywood movies. Her black hair came not just to her waist but to the tops of her slender thighs. In nothing but her hair to cover her, she could have rid-

den a horse down Star Street with perfect propriety. Her face was as if someone had taken the best feature from the faces of half a dozen currently famous film stars and put them all together. When she smiled, if you were a man, your heart melted and your legs threatened to buckle. Her hands were like pale flowers on some tropical tree and her skin had the texture of a lily petal touched by the setting sun. She always wore very short skirts and very high-heeled shoes, pure white T-shirts in summer and pure white fluffy sweaters in winter and a single diamond (or sparkling stone) in one perfect nostril.

Her voice was less attractive, her accent not the endearing musical tones of upper-class Karachi but nearer Eliza Doolittle's Lisson Grove cockney, which was odd considering her parents lived in Hampstead and, according to her, she was practically a princess. Today she was wearing a black leather skirt, opaque black tights, and a sweater that looked like the pelt of an Angora rabbit, white as snow and downy as a swan's breast. She walked daintily about the shop, carrying her teacup in one hand and in the other a rainbow-colored feather duster, flicking dust off silver cruets, ancient musical instruments, cigarette cases, thirties fruit brooches, Clarice Cliffe plates, and the four-masted schooner in a bottle. Customers didn't realize what a task it was keeping a place like this clean. Dust soon gave it a shabby look as if the shop was seldom patronized. She paused in front of the jaguar. "Where did that come from?"

"A customer gave it to me. After you'd gone yesterday."

"*Gave* it to you?"

"I imagine he knew the poor thing wasn't worth anything."

"There's been another girl murdered," said Zeinab. "Down Boston." Anyone not in the know might have thought she was talking about Boston, Massachusetts, or even Boston, Lincs, but what she meant was Boston Street, NW1, which ran alongside Marylebone Station.

"How many does that make?"

"Three. I'll get us an evening paper the minute they come in."

Inez, at the shop window, watched a car which was pulling into the curb behind the white van. The bright turquoise Jaguar belonged to

Morton Phibling, who dropped in most mornings for the purpose of seeing Zeinab. No vacant meter was required as his driver sat in the car waiting for him and, if a traffic warden appeared, was off circling round the block. Mr. Khoury shook his head, holding on to his luxuriant beard with his right hand, and went back indoors.

Morton Phibling got out of the Jaguar, read the notice in the back of the dirty van without a smile, and swept into the shop, leaving the door ajar, his open camel hair coat billowing. He had never been known to utter any sort of greeting. "I see there's another young lady been slaughtered."

"If you like to put it that way."

"I came in to feast my eyes on the moon of my delight."

"You always do," said Inez.

Morton was something over sixty, short and squat with a head that must always have looked too big for his body, unless he had shrunk a lot. He wore glasses that were not quite shades but deeply tinted with a purple glaze. No beauty and not, as far as Inez could tell, particularly nice or amusing, he was very rich, had three homes and five more cars, all of them resprayed some bright color, banana yellow, orange, scarlet, and Caribbean lime. He was in love with Zeinab; there was no other word for it.

Engaged in sticking a price label to the underside of a Wedgwood jug, Zeinab looked up and gave him one of her smiles.

"How are you today, my darling?" he asked.

"I'm okay, and don't call me 'darling.'"

"That's how I think of you. I think of you day and night, you know, Zeinab, at twilight and break of dawn."

"Don't mind me," said Inez.

"I'm not ashamed of my love. I trumpet it from the housetops. By night in my bed I sought her whom my soul loveth. Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." He always went on like this, though neither woman took any notice. "How splendid in the morning is the lily!"

"D'you want a cup of tea?" said Inez. She felt the need for a second cup; she wouldn't have made it specially.

"I don't mind if I do. I'm taking you to dinner at Le Caprice tonight, darling. I hope you haven't forgotten."

"Of course I haven't forgotten, and don't call me 'darling.'"

"I'll call for you at home, shall I? Seven-thirty do you?"

"No, it won't do me. How many times do I have to tell you that if you call for me at home my dad'll go bonkers? You know what he did to my sister. D'you want him sticking a knife in me?"

"But my attentions are honorable, my sweetheart. I am no longer married, I want to marry you, I respect you deeply."

"It don't make no—I mean, it doesn't make no difference," said Zeinab. "I'm not supposed to be alone with a bloke. Not ever. If my dad knew I was going to be alone with you in a restaurant he'd flip his lid."

"I should have liked to see your lovely home," said Morton Phibling wistfully. "It would be such a pleasure to see you in your proper setting." He lowered his voice, though Inez was out of earshot. "Instead of in this dump, like a gorgeous butterfly on a dungheap."

"Can't be helped. I'll meet you at Le whatsit."

In the little back kitchen, pouring boiling water on three tea bags, Inez shivered at the thought of Zeinab's terrible father. A year before Zeinab came to work at Star Antiques, he had nearly murdered her sister, Nasreen, for dishonoring his house by staying overnight in her boyfriend's flat. "And they didn't even do anything," said Zeinab. Nasreen hadn't died, though he'd stabbed her five times in the chest. She'd been months recovering in hospital. Inez more or less believed it was true, though no doubt exaggerated, that her assistant risked death if she got herself any suitor except one approved of, and chaperoned by, her parents. She took the tea back into the shop. Morton Phibling, said Zeinab, had gone off down the road to buy them a *Standard.*

"So we can read about the murder. Look what he's given me this time."

Zeinab showed her a large lapel pin of two roses and a rosebud on a stem, nestling in a bed of blue satin.

"Are those real diamonds?"

"He always gives me real diamonds. Must be worth thousands. I promised to wear it tonight."

"That won't be a hardship," said Inez. "But you mind how you go. Having that on show puts you in danger of being mugged. And you want to remember there's a killer at large who's well known for stealing something off every girl he kills. Here he is, back."

But instead of Morton Phibling it was a middle-aged woman in search of a piece of Crown Derby for a birthday present. She had picked up a paperback on her way in, a Peter Cheyney with a picture of a strangled girl on its jacket. Appropriate, thought Inez, charging her 50p for it, and wrapping up a red, blue, and gold porcelain plate. Morton came back and courteously held the door open for her. Zeinab was still gloating over her diamond roses, looking like an angel contemplating some beatific vision, thought Morton.

"I'm so glad you like it, darling."

"It still don't—doesn't—give you the right to call me 'darling.' Let's have a look at the paper, then."

She and Inez shared it. "It says it happened quite early last night, about nine," read Zeinab. "Somebody heard her scream, but he didn't do nothing, not for five minutes, when he saw this figure running away down past the station, a shadowy figure, it says, man or woman, he don't know, only it was wearing trousers. Then he found her—they haven't identified her yet—lying dead on the pavement, murdered. They don't say how it was done only that her face was all blue. It would have been another of them garrotes. Nothing about a bite."

"That bite business is all nonsense," said Inez. "The first girl had a bite mark on her neck but they traced the DNA to her boyfriend. The things people do in the name of love! Of course they called him the Rottweiler and the name has stuck."

"Did he take anything of hers this time? Let me see." Zeinab scanned the story to its foot. "Wouldn't know, I suppose, seeing they don't know who she was. What was it he took the other times?"

"A silver cigarette lighter with her initials in garnets from the first

one," said Morton, showing his considerable knowledge of jewelry, "and a gold fob watch from the second."

"Nicole Nimms and Rebecca Milsom, they was called. I wonder what it'll be off this one. Won't never be a mobile, I reckon. All the bastards on the street nick mobiles, wouldn't be like his trademark, would it?"

"Now you be careful coming down to Le Caprice tonight, darling," said Morton, who seemed not to have noticed the jaguar. "I've a good mind to send a limo for you."

"If you do I won't come," said Zeinab, "and you've called me 'darling' *again.*"

"Are you going to marry him?" said Inez when he had gone. "He's a bit old for you, but he's got a lot of money and he's not so bad."

"A bit old! I'd have to run away from home, you know, and that'd be a wrench. I wouldn't like to leave my poor mum."

The bell on the street door rang and a man came in, looking for a plant stand. Preferably wrought iron. Zeinab gave him one of her smiles. "We've got a lovely jardiniere I'd like to show you. It came over from France only yesterday."

In fact, it had come from a junk shop having a clearance sale in Church Street. The customer gazed at Zeinab who, squatting down beside the jaguar to pull this three-legged object out from under a pile of Indian bedspreads, turned her face up to him and lifted from it the two wings of black hair like someone unveiling a beautiful picture.

"Very nice," he mumbled. "How much is it?" He didn't demur, though Zeinab had added twenty pounds onto the agreed price. Men seldom tried bargaining when she was selling them something. "Don't bother to wrap it up."

The street door was held open for him as he struggled out with his purchase. A shy man, almost bowled over, he took courage once on the pavement and said, "Good-bye. It was very nice to meet you."

Inez couldn't help laughing. She had to admit business had taken a turn for the better since Zeinab had worked for her. She watched him go off in the direction of Paddington Station. He wasn't going to take

it on a train, was he? It was nearly as tall as he. She noticed that the sky had clouded over. Why was it you never seemed to get a fine day anymore, only days that started off fine? The dirty white van had gone and another, cleaner one was being parked in its place. Will Cobbett got out of it and then the driver got out. Inez and Zeinab watched from the window. They saw everything that went on in Star Street and one of then usually provided a running commentary.

"That one that's got out, that's the one called Keith what Will works for," said Zeinab. "He'll be going down the Edgware Road to the building materials place. He always comes over here on account of it's cheaper. What's Will doing home at this hour? He's coming in."

"I expect he's forgotten his tools. He often does."

Will Cobbett was the only tenant who hardly ever came through the shop. He went in by the tenants' door at the side. The two women heard his footsteps going up the stairs.

"What's with him?" said Zeinab. "You know what Freddy says about him? He says he's a couple of dips short of a limbo."

Inez was shocked. "That's nasty. I'm surprised at Freddy. Will's what used to be called ESN, educationally sub-normal, but now it's 'learning difficulties.' He's good-looking enough, I must say, learning difficulties or not."

"Looks aren't everything," said Zeinab, for whom they were. "I like a man to be intelligent. Sophisticated and intelligent. You won't mind if I go out for an hour, will you? I'm supposed to be having lunch with Rowley Woodhouse."

Inez looked at her watch. It was just gone half past twelve. "You'll be back around half past two then," she said.

"Who's being nasty now? I can't help it if I've no concept of time. I wonder if you can go to a class in time management. I've been thinking of an elocution course. My dad says I ought to learn to speak right, though him and Mum have got accents straight out of downtown Islamabad. I'd better go or Rowley'll create."

Inez recalled how Martin had taught elocution for a while. That was before *Forsyth* and the big time, of course. He'd been teaching and

taking bit parts when she first met him. His voice had been beautiful, too patrician for a detective inspector on the television now but not in the eighties. She listened to Will's footsteps drumming down the stairs. He ran out to the van, his tool bag in his hand, just as the traffic warden arrived. Then Keith appeared from the other direction. Inez watched the ensuing argument. Bystanders always do watch confrontations between traffic wardens and hapless drivers, wistfully hoping for a punch-up. Inez wouldn't go as far as that. But she thought Keith ought to pay up, he ought to know a double yellow line when he saw one.

She waited while two blond women with thickly painted faces wandered round the shop, picking up glass fruit and figures that might or might not have been netsuke. They were "just looking," they said. Once they had gone, checking that the doorbell was in working order, she went into the kitchen at the back and switched on the television for the one o'clock news. The newscaster had put on that expression presenters such as he are (presumably) trained to assume when the first item is grim or depressing, as in the case of the girl murdered in Boston Place the night before. She had been identified as Caroline Dansk of Park Road, NW1. She must have come down Park Road, thought Inez, crossed over Rossmore and gone down into Boston Place on her way to somewhere, perhaps to the station. Poor little thing, only twenty-one.

The picture switched to the train line out of Marylebone and the street running alongside it, with its high brick wall. Quite upmarket, the houses smartened up and trees planted in the pavement. Police were about and police vans and crime tape everywhere, the usual small crowd gathered behind, seeking what it could devour. No photograph of Caroline Dansk yet and no TV appearance of her distraught parents. That would come in due time. As, no doubt, would a description of the object her killer had taken from her after he had stifled her life out with that garrote thing.

If it was the same man. They could only tell, now the biting had proved a nonsense and therefore the sobriquet inappropriate, by the stealing of one small object. These young people had so much, thought

Inez, all of them with computers and digital cameras and mobile phones, unlike in her day. A sinister expression that, as if everyone had her day and when it was over started on the long decline into night, twilight first, then dusk, and finally the darkness. Her day had come quite late in life, only really begun when she met Martin, and it was after he died that the daylight began to dim. Come on, Inez, she said to herself, that won't do. Get yourself some lunch, as you've no Rowley Woodhouse or Morton Phibling to get it for you, and switch onto something more cheerful. She made herself a ham sandwich and got out the Branston pickle, but she didn't want any more tea. A Diet Coke would be all right, and the caffeine would wake her up for the afternoon.

I wonder what he's taken off this girl? I wonder who he is and where he lives, if he has a wife, children, friends. Why does he do it and when and where will he do it again? There was something degrading in speculating about such things but almost inescapable. She couldn't help being curious, though Martin could have helped it, risen above such relish for ugly details. Perhaps it was because he was obliged to involve himself in fictitious crime each time he acted in a *Forsyth* production, that he wanted nothing to do with the reality.

The doorbell rang. Inez wiped her lips and went back into the shop.

CHAPTER 2

SATURDAYS WERE TO BE TREASURED. SUNDAYS WEREN'T the same at all because Monday loomed dangerously near and hung over the day, reminding you that only one night lay ahead before the grind began again. Not that Becky Cobbett disliked her job. Far from it. Hadn't it raised her up the class ladder and given her all this? By "all this," vaguely waving one hand, she meant the large, comfortable flat in Gloucester Avenue, the Shaker furniture, the rings on her fingers, and the small Mercedes parked at the curb. All of it achieved without the intervention of a man. Men there had been but all of them less successful than she, none of them remarkable earners and not a serious present giver among them.

Realizing it was Saturday within seconds of waking was one of the high spots of her week. If she wasn't going away somewhere or her nephew wasn't coming over, the morning always followed the same course—well, and half the afternoon too because she'd have lunch out. It wasn't always the West End she went to, Knightsbridge sometimes and Covent Garden at other times. Today was an Oxford Street and Bond Street day. She might not buy anything big but she would buy something, little items, small toys really, a lipstick, a CD, a scarf, a bot-

tle of bath oil, or a best seller from the top ten. The window shopping was extensive, and the inside-the-store-gazing shopping and the exploration of departments she had never visited before, and the slow considered purchase of some cosmetic in order to get the free gift. Her bathroom cabinet was stuffed full of toilet bags in every shape and color because they were what had contained the free gifts. Large items of clothing were a different matter, choosing them a serious business and one to which she devoted much prior thought.

"I'm not rich," she was in the habit of saying, "but I think I can say I'm well-off."

Clothes she bought rarely and when she did they were very good and very expensive, but selecting them and paying for them was not to be undertaken on these Saturday jaunts. Those were entirely frivolous and had nothing to do with finding a new black suit for the office or a clingy dress for the firm's annual dinner. Everything about Saturdays was to be enjoyed lightheartedly from the moment she left the house to get the tube from Camden Town Station, to her return home five or six hours later in a taxi.

She never wasted time having coffee, but pursued her chosen itinerary until just before one. Then it was time to find a restaurant or a cafeteria or oyster bar inside a store and have her lunch. Afterward there were a few more shops to be visited, perhaps even to turn her thoughts toward those serious clothes purchases but only in cautious anticipation. It was out of the question for her actually to buy anything or even make up her mind to buy it at some future date. Garments in that price range would also be bought on a Saturday but a Saturday set aside for that purpose, the frivolity and the enjoyment absent.

She knew all the best spots for picking up a cab. Unlike those who barked out a command to the driver, she always spoke politely.

"Would you take me to Gloucester Avenue, please?"

They didn't always know where it was but confused it with Gloucester Terrace or Gloucester Place or Gloucester Road.

"North of Regent's Park," she usually said. "You go toward Camden Town and turn left at the lights."

She asked him to stop while she bought a *Daily Mail*. At home again she made tea, spent ten minutes with the paper. That poor young girl who had been strangled in Boston Place the night before had her picture all over the front page. "Caroline Dansk, 21," the caption said, latest victim of the Rottweiler.

"Police have no new information as to the identity of the shadowy figure seen running away from the crime scene," Becky read. "'It is impossible to say,' said a spokesperson, 'whether this was a man or a woman.' The garroter is distinguished by his habit of taking some small artifact from the victim's body and by a more macabre detail, a bite. This time the stolen object seems to have been a key ring, from which Ms. Dansk's keys had been removed and left in her bag. However, sources close to the family say there was no sign of a bite.

"'Caroline had her keys on a gold key ring with a Scottie dog fob,' said her stepfather, Mr. Colin Ponti, 47. 'It was a Christmas present from a friend. She never went out without it.'

"Noreen Ponti, Caroline's mother, was too distraught to speak to the media . . ."

Becky shook her head, folded up the paper, and examined what she had bought. If it was music she played it, leaning back in an armchair. The bag which held the free gifts had to be opened and each sachet or small bottle examined. This time it was a CD and she put it into her Discman, resting her head against a cushion and closing her eyes. This evening she would devote to watching television or the video from the cassette she had also bought while she was out.

All in all it was continuous hedonistic pleasure, innocently luxurious and self-indulgent. But it wasn't unalloyed. There was always, as she had overheard someone say in Oxford Street, a bone in the kebab. The bone in her kebab was her outsized sense of guilt and this was particularly active on a Saturday, especially this Saturday when she knew quite well she hadn't seen Will for over a week and instead of strolling down South Molton Street she should have been on the phone inviting him to lunch. Lunch, not dinner. They had had their main meal at