

## Chapter 1

Norfolk, April 1991

As if weary from a long day and too many visitors, the manor house had fallen silent, dozing in the fading light of an early spring evening. The paying public had left and the staff had long since finished for the day. Even the Gyllam-Spences had retreated into their private sanctuary. Carrie was alone, working late.

She left the dining room and walked into the exhibition room, flicked the light switch on and paused, savouring the peace. She liked being here after everyone else had gone. From the moment Ranling Manor opened to the public at ten each morning, a constant procession of people wandered through the rooms, pointing and commenting, asking questions and jostling for position. But Carrie preferred it like this: silent and still. The extensive art collection which the old manor housed – and which she had been employed to curate – was hers alone. She could pause and consider and simply think without interruption or distraction.

She twitched the protective fabric cloth back over one of the glazed cases housing watercolours and drawings, then headed for the far wall. Earlier that afternoon, she had replaced a painting with a fresh one from the storeroom. Now she checked the new hanging looked right and that the alarm cord was securely attached to it, then consulted her watch. It was after six-thirty already and she was tired. She'd had an argument with another member of staff that afternoon and still it lingered in her mind, leaving her restless and uncomfortable. And it had been such a petty thing. She glanced round the room once more and left, switching off the lights.

The oak-panelled hallway was empty. All day long a guide stationed by the big front door welcomed visitors, offering plans of the house and advice on the route used to view it. But now there was no-one. Carrie made for the door beside the old staircase which gave access to the private rear vestibule, then a soft groan had her stopping to look round and up the stairs. Nothing.

'Don't worry about the noises you'll hear,' Mortimer had said conspiratorially to her when she first arrived. 'The house talks to you sometimes. Just listen. Think what stories a house like this has seen, what secrets it could tell you. There's a lot of wisdom in an old house.'

Mortimer had a way of coming out with these strange remarks. He was the current Gyllam-Spence who owned and managed the estate, a seemingly pleasant but definitely odd man. Carrie listened anyway, but if the house had some wisdom or a secret to impart, it wasn't doing it tonight. At least not to her.

She put her key in the partition door but found it unlocked again and sighed with frustration. In the short time she'd worked at the manor, she'd been astonished at the lax security and no matter how often she mentioned it, Mortimer just laughed it off.

Letting herself into the workroom off the rear vestibule, she gathered her things together, picked up her notebook and bag and had just found her car keys when she heard another noise. But this one had definitely come from the huge storeroom next door where all the art works not currently on display were kept, and sounded like a book falling to the floor with a slap. But nobody should be in there at this time of night. Or at all: the storeroom was her responsibility.

She stood transfixed, straining to hear. Suppose it was a burglar who'd come in through the back door? That was often left unlocked too. Suppose he realised she was there? Barely

able to breathe and scared to move, a threatening sneeze had her raising a desperate hand to her nose and her car keys dropped, falling with an ear-splitting clatter onto the stone floor. The echo hung in the room and she froze again. A few minutes later she heard the distinctive creak of the back door opening.

She cautiously opened the door onto the vestibule and peeked out. The back door to the outside was closed and the only light came through a long slit of window each side of it which offered a dull, insipid glow, enough to show that there was no-one there. Edging further out she found the storeroom door ajar and the room in darkness. She'd have sworn she'd closed and locked the door; she always did.

She sidled up to it, hooked a hand round the frame and flicked the light on. There was no-one inside but the old inventory book with the details of the collection had been moved. That was probably what had fallen. It should have been on the shelves and had now been put on top of the plan chest.

She glanced through its pages but there was no way of knowing what the intruder had been looking for and she pointlessly scanned the room. Did they find it, whatever it was? Some of the collection was tawdry and uninspired but there were real gems too, worth a lot of money. The only way to know if anything was missing would be to painstakingly check through every art work, piece by piece.

For a couple of weeks now she'd suspected that something was wrong but she had doubted herself. She'd blamed the uneasiness of starting a new job, the unfamiliar location, the breakdown of her marriage and its emotional fallout. But there was no doubting what had happened here tonight, nor was she imagining the air in this room: it had been disturbed. The usually stuffy, stagnant space still held the indefinable energy of whoever had been there.

And what disturbed her most was that the only people who knew about the position and mechanics of this obscure internal room – and who had access to a key – were the people she now worked closely with every day: the Gyllam-Spences and Alan Foxhall, that slippery, two-faced man. It couldn't have been an outsider; that didn't make sense. Her worst suspicions had been correct.

Someone here was tampering with the collection and stealing from it. But who would believe her? She was the newcomer and she wasn't family, they had made that clear. If something went missing, she would be blamed.

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Mortimer sat behind the desk in the manor office, his gaze resting on Alan who was telling them about a school visit planned for later in the week. Alan Foxhall was responsible for 'events' at the Manor, anything that could give them good publicity or, more importantly, some valuable extra income. He had been with them a couple of years and seemed to be good at his job, although Mortimer couldn't honestly say he liked the man, though in truth he hardly knew him. Alan didn't make idle conversation and, for all that he was the only member of the administration team who wasn't family, he exuded an irritatingly condescending manner.

'...And I've received several enquiries about wedding receptions this last week,' he was saying. 'Most of the couples were asking about this summer, but two were planning ahead for next year.'

'Good, good,' said Mortimer. 'They need to come up with firm dates if it's for this year. I mean, we're in March already. Tell them we're booking up quickly. Are we?'

Alan produced a pained smile. 'It's April now, Mortimer. The third. And we're not really booking up yet but yes, I told them we were.'

It was their weekly Wednesday morning meeting, a chance to catch up and coordinate.

‘Shouldn’t we be putting our fees up this year?’ said Toby. Toby was Mortimer’s younger brother and seemed to think that their visitors could be endlessly squeezed for money. Probably because he spent so much of it himself.

Mortimer didn’t reply. He’d noticed that he’d fastened his cardigan buttons in the wrong holes again and he started to unfasten them, one by one, and change them over.

‘Mortimer, are you listening?’ Toby’s voice had gone up a notch, cross and impatient.

‘Shouldn’t we be putting our fees up,’ said Mortimer distantly. ‘Yes, I heard.’

‘And what about ticket prices? Inflation is running high. We mustn’t get left behind.’

‘We haven’t.’ Mortimer managed to fasten the last button in the appropriate hole and looked up at his brother. ‘I do keep a check on these things, Toby. We can’t afford to price ourselves out of the market. They’ll go elsewhere.’

‘Well I keep a check on it too and I know of a couple of places that charge more than we do.’

Mortimer ignored him. Toby was all mouth. He supposedly managed the ticket office and did the publicity but seemed to do precious little of either. The estate worked in spite of him, not because of him.

‘Remember I’ve got a couple of conservators arriving tomorrow to work on some pieces from the collection,’ Mortimer said.

‘What pieces?’ demanded Toby. ‘You never said.’

‘I think I did,’ said Mortimer mildly. ‘They’ve been booked for a while. Anyway, you wouldn’t know if I told you, Toby. You never have anything to do with the collection.’ He looked over at Carrie, their new curator, a rather diffident young woman. She had arrived late to the meeting, looking flustered and ill at ease. There again, she often did. ‘I’ll meet them first and sort a few things out but perhaps you’ll go through the necessary work with them, Carrie? Explain the ins and outs of what needs doing?’

Carrie appeared distracted. She kept glancing round the room, studying people’s faces. He frowned.

‘Is that all right, Carrie?’

‘What, oh yes, the conservators. Sorry. Of course, I’ll see them. Yes.’

‘But why are they coming here?’ complained Toby. ‘It must be more expensive than sending the artworks away.’

‘I’ve told you before: I’m not doing that again. The last time I sent a painting away, I never saw it again. And the insurance money doesn’t compensate: they never give you what it’s worth. Anyway I negotiated a deal with the man who runs the restoration business, Timothy Blandish. They’re staying at The Boatman in the village and he promised they’d be discreet. And quick. Can’t remember their names off hand but I’ve got them here somewhere...’

He ferreted through a teetering pile of papers on the desk in front of him, sending several fluttering to the floor, grabbed one of the remaining sheets, peered at it, then looked round for his reading glasses.

‘They’re on top of your head,’ remarked Sid.

Sidony Pettiver was Toby’s ex-wife. She was in charge of the house guides, training them and organising their rotas. She was calm and efficient. Someone needed to be.

He offered her a grateful smile, disentangled them from his hair which he wore long and tied in a ponytail, and perched them on his nose.

‘Hannah Dechansay and Nathan Bright. So there we are. Hopefully they should get here by lunch-time.’

Mortimer glanced round the room over his glasses. Rosamund, his niece who worked in the office fielding phone calls and answering general queries, had got up and was picking up the errant papers one by one and replacing them on the pile.

‘Thank you, Rose,’ he muttered.

‘Where are the conservators going to work?’ Sid enquired with her familiar challenging glare. ‘We aren’t closing any rooms off are we? I hate having to do that.’

‘No, no. In the workroom, I thought.’

‘The workroom?’ queried Carrie. ‘My workroom? But...’

‘I didn’t know it was your workroom,’ said Rose waspishly.

‘No, I know. I meant...’

‘I realise it’s where you base yourself Carrie,’ interposed Mortimer, ‘but I don’t know where else would be suitable. You’ve got work tables in there and some natural light. They asked for both of those things. It won’t be for long.’ He shrugged, not remembering too clearly now how long that Blandish chap had said it might take, only the price tag. ‘You can squeeze in here for the duration, can’t you, when you’re not sorting through the collection? Plenty of room to go round, isn’t there?’

He looked expectantly at Rose and Alan who both had a desk in here and generally seemed to tolerate each other. Neither voiced any support however.

‘Is there any other business?’ he asked loudly. ‘Problems?’

He wished he hadn’t asked that. He didn’t want to know about any problems, not this morning.

‘Are these conservators only working on those pieces you mentioned to me last week?’ asked Sid. ‘Nothing’s coming out of the show rooms, is it?’

‘No,’ said Carrie, ‘but I did change that painting we discussed from the exhibition room yesterday: the Watteau for the Ingres. And I wrote out some information about the replacement for the guides. Rose was going to type it out for them.’ Carrie pointedly looked across at Rose.

‘Yes, yes, I’ll do it this morning,’ Rose said impatiently.

‘Good. Right. Time to get on then.’ Mortimer rose to his feet and gathered up his sheaf of papers, ready to take them back into his study next door. There was a general scraping of wood on the stone floor as chairs were moved and put back in position.

Rose joined him before he could reach the door and put a hand on his arm, making the bangles on her wrist jangle.

‘What are these people like, Uncle Mortimer?’ she asked breathily.

‘I’ve no idea, Rose. Why?’

‘I just wondered, you know, since they’re going to be among us for, what, days on end.’

‘Weeks, dear.’

‘Really? That long. So didn’t you ask?’ She shrugged. ‘I mean. Are they old or young, you know, that kind of thing? They don’t sound married.’

He offered an indulgent smile. Rose was always on the lookout for eligible men. Any man really. He blamed her father. When Toby wasn’t ignoring her, he was heavy-handed and critical. It had made her prickly and insecure.

‘I don’t know. We’ll find out soon enough, I imagine.’

‘Oh Uncle Mortimer, you are hopeless.’

‘Yes, my dear, so you’ve said.’

Rose turned away as Carrie came up.

‘I’m sorry about the workroom, Carrie,’ he offered. ‘Can’t be helped, I’m afraid.’

‘No, no, it’s fine. I’ll manage. Mr Gyllam-Spence...’

‘Do call me Mortimer. You make me feel so old.’

Carrie produced a weak smile.

‘In fact, you look rather tired yourself,’ he remarked. ‘Something bothering you?’

‘I didn’t sleep well last night. In fact, I wondered if I could...’ She broke off and glanced sideways towards Alan who was watching them a little too closely. ‘Actually no, it’s fine. I’ll make sure I’m around when the conservators arrive tomorrow.’

Mortimer regarded her pensively as she left the office. She was very diligent. Perhaps too diligent for her own good, he thought.

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Late that afternoon, in the reception area of the Blandish Fine Art Conservation studios in Oxford, Hannah Dechansay and her colleague Nathan Bright were sorting out the final arrangements for their visit to Norfolk. Their huge 'Blandish' trunks, carefully packed with all the equipment they expected to need, had long since been picked up by the carrier and were already on their way.

Although Timothy Blandish had set up his base and workshops in Oxford, his business specialised in offering a more personal service. If someone was nervous of parting with a piece of art or preferred a discreet, private service – and could afford it – then a member of the team would be dispatched to work on site. Timothy sent his restorers to all parts of the UK and across western Europe, wherever the client was. Indeed he went to some trouble to seek out and cultivate exactly the right clients.

Usually only one member of the team went on an assignment however and Hannah wasn't happy that Nathan was going to tag along on this one. He had worked for Timothy for more than seven years and Hannah for only one which Nathan seemed to think gave him seniority. But they were both the same age – thirty-nine – and her CV was as good as his. Better, well, more varied anyway; she had moved around a lot. The point was: she liked working alone. She didn't welcome interference.

Daphne, company receptionist and Timothy's long-suffering secretary, was now in the process of recounting what she knew about the manor. Hannah liked Daphne: she was kind, straightforward and efficient, with a store of useful information, especially about the wealthy and well-to-do whose lives she followed in the pages of the glossy magazines.

'Interesting family,' she was saying. 'There have been Gyllam-Spences at Ranling Manor since the late eighteenth century. Their wealth was built on a thriving trade in wool, then the family diversified into shipping and started collecting art and fine things. It went from there, each successive generation adding to the collection. Apparently it's quite varied: paintings and drawings, plus a few bronzes – some well-known artists, others more obscure. And of course it's open to the public – the half of the house that houses the collection and a chunk of the grounds. Six days a week.' Daphne's tone became wistful. 'Sounds like a lovely old place and a wonderful setting, right at the heart of the Broads with beautiful gardens and a stream meandering around the boundary. You do get to visit the most amazing places.'

'We do,' agreed Hannah. 'I'm sorry we can't take you with us.'

'So am I. You're booked into the inn in the village of East Ranling. It's called The Boatman and it's about two miles from the manor.' Daphne dropped her voice. 'I'm afraid they're the cheapest rooms. Timothy didn't want too much expense. He was hoping they'd put you up at the house but no joy there, I'm afraid.' She shrugged and affected a brighter tone. 'And here's a map of the layout of the place and where you should park. I made two copies.'

'Ah, thought I heard you.'

Timothy's shrill voice assaulted them as he emerged from his office.

'All set for Norfolk? Mr Gyllam-Spence has agreed to my costing but wants to be informed if there's any unforeseen expense. He's a man after my own heart: believes in economy. Do some quick assessments when you get there and let me know what you find. He's keen to get the work done quickly and I don't want to give him any reason to complain. Nathan has experience with drawings and you can concentrate on the oils, Hannah. That'll keep it snappy.' He looked from one to the other. 'Keep me informed of progress, won't you? Lots more jobs waiting when this one's over.'

'Yes Timothy,' said Nathan.

Hannah simply nodded.

Timothy returned to his office and closed the door. There was silence.

‘Says the same things every time,’ remarked Hannah, softly aggrieved.

‘We’d be disappointed if he didn’t,’ murmured Nathan.

Hannah flicked him a long-suffering look then turned back to Daphne.

‘What do you know about this Gyllam-Spence man?’ said Hannah.

‘His name’s Mortimer. He’s fifty-eight and single and widely considered to be eccentric. No wife but there are other Gyllam-Spences living and working with him there. Oh, and he has a thing about trains.’

‘Trains?’ queried Nathan.

‘Model ones, you know.’

‘Ah.’

Hannah grinned. ‘Sounds like fun.’

‘Well, don’t have the kind of fun you had in Provence last year.’ She looked at them both severely. ‘Behave yourselves and don’t get involved in any trouble.’

‘Where’s the pleasure in that?’ Nathan raised one quizzical eyebrow and left, making his way back up to the workshops on the first floor.

Hannah met Daphne’s gaze and rolled her eyes.

‘I can’t believe Timothy’s put us to work together again,’ she muttered.

‘He did say he would.’

‘Yes but Nathan. And stuck in Norfolk with him.’

‘Oh he’s all right. It’s just, you know, he’s got...’

‘Issues,’ finished Hannah. ‘Yeah, I know. His brother, Sam.’ She leaned forward on to the reception desk and dropped her voice. ‘Does he ever talk to you about it?’

Daphne shook her head. ‘Not really. He’s a man. What do you expect? If you want my opinion, you’d be better off not poking that particular wasp’s nest.’ She raised a warning finger. ‘And just make sure you keep out of trouble.’

‘A manor house in the depths of Norfolk. Come on, Daphne, what kind of trouble could there be?’