

## Chapter Nine

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Kevin poured two glasses of red wine, a rather powerful Chilean Merlot he had acquired earlier that afternoon from a local supermarket, and handed one to Tanji.

“This one’s a cooking wine,” he said, grinning, “That means I drink it while I’m cooking.”

Tanji, who was sitting at the counter in the tiny kitchen of Kevin’s flat, accepted the wine glass and laughed happily. Kevin raised his own glass in a toast, sipped the wine and murmured reflectively. He then put the glass down at the back of the work surface and returned to the task of preparing tonight’s dinner.

Kevin had lived alone for several years, quietly occupying the four-room flat in a southern suburb of Manchester which had until recently been rather run-down but now, thanks to the ongoing programme of inner-city refurbishment, was well on the road to gentrification. He had regarded the flat more as somewhere to keep his collection of books and to sleep when he happened to be in the area, rather than anywhere he really thought of as “home”.

Over the last few months, since he had met Tanji, Kevin had taken up his old hobby of cooking with considerable enthusiasm. He found it a real pleasure to be able to cook for Tanji when they stayed over in England, and he was delighted that she had already developed firm favourites from his repertoire of dishes.

Tonight, he was preparing her most oft-requested recipe, a kind of thick soup in two parts. He had thought to stop briefly at the supermarket on their way back from the crossing to Lyndesfarne. Now, shopping unpacked, he donned his apron, a traditional butcher’s style with blue and white stripes, and started dragging various cooking implements from the kitchen cupboards.

As Tanji watched, he scooped out a cup of chicken stock from a plastic box he had just extracted from the back of the fridge and poured it into a small saucepan, setting the pan on the gas cooker.

He then set about peeling the tough skin from a butternut squash, which Kevin always likened to trying to scrape the plastic surface from a melamine work top. Having finally managed to remove the last of the hard outer surface, he rapidly de-pipped and diced the softer inner flesh using the largest of the kitchen knives.

“That looked like hard work,” Tanji remarked, having watching him struggle with the vegetable with an amused expression on her face.

“These things always seem to put up a good fight,” he suggested wryly.

He carefully slipped the diced squash into a larger pan with a little butter, and then set it on the gas stove to cook gently, delving into the cupboard to find a suitable lid. He then turned the oven to a low setting, and laid out a few slices of pancetta on a baking tray.

“What do you think of the man on the bridge?” Tanji asked, still watching him potter about the kitchen.

“Frankly, I don’t know what to make of it,” Kevin replied, placing a second baking tray over the thin bacon to keep it flat and slipping it into the oven. He picked up his wine glass again and moved to sit next to Tanji.

“Don’t you think the circumstances are rather odd?” she persisted.

“I do,” he replied, “But there are so many unanswered questions. Is there anything special about the date?”

“Not that I know of,” Tanji said, “Other than the opening of the New Bridge itself.”

Kevin shook his head.

“I also don’t understand why Bret asked me to get involved,” he continued contemplatively, sipping at his wine glass, “It’s not as if I’m a detective or anything. I don’t see what I’ve got to contribute.”

“Well, I’m sure he got good reasons,” she responded, “If only because you’re really superb at asking difficult questions.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Kevin said, modestly shaking his head again, “Although I’ll admit I’m very curious about the fact that the scientist was found in the very centre of the bridge. Someone seems to be trying very hard to hide something, but I can’t imagine what that might be. Or even who he’s trying to hide it from. Although I’m sure we weren’t supposed to catch a glimpse of the killer in the cameras.”

Kevin stood up again and moved around the kitchen, rummaging in a cupboard for the food processor and then turning on the gas under the smaller saucepan containing the chicken stock. By now, the squash had softened nicely, and Kevin slipped the vegetable chunks into the food processor, pureeing them with a little cream and added some freshly-ground black pepper from an electrically-powered grinder.

Tanji winced at the din from the noisy machinery.

“Sorry about that,” Kevin said, smiling apologetically.

He scraped the resulting bright orange goop from the processor into a couple of large soup dishes, forming a dip in the centre with the back of a spoon. He checked the boiling stock, thickening it with some strongly-flavoured grated cheese and a splash more of the cream. He then poured the pale yellow liquid into the bowls, neatly filling the depressions in the mashed squash.

The sole remaining steps were to decorate the soup with slices of pancetta Kevin had previously cooked in the oven, and to slice the crusty brown loaf he had bought from the supermarket along with the cheese and vegetables. Since their dinner was so close to completion, it was inevitable that, just at that moment, there was a ring from the doorbell.

“Someone at the door,” Tanji said, rather superfluously.

Kevin was still engaged with finishing the cooking and looked up at Tanji, very slightly aggravated by the interruption.

“Could you see who’s there?” He asked, “It’s probably just the milkman, wanting to be paid. There’s some cash on the side.”

“OK, no problem,” she replied.

She put down her wine glass and left the room. Kevin could not hear what was happening very well, because of the noise from the extractor fan over the cooker. Even so, he could perceive the front door being opened and a murmur of enquiry. This was followed by a couple of muffled thuds and what sounded like a squeak of surprise from Tanji.

“What’s up, Darling?” Kevin called from the kitchen.

There was no response. Kevin wiped his hands, turned off the cooker and the extractor, and went into the hallway in search of Tanji.

“Tanji? Are you OK?” He called again.

It was suddenly very quiet in the flat. He looked around, then realised to his rising horror that the front door was slightly ajar. He rushed to the door and opened it just in time to see a dark vehicle, a large off-roader of some kind, screech off from outside his door and squeal around the corner at the end of the street.

“Tanji!” he screamed.

He had just enough presence of mind to note the number-plate of the vehicle as it disappeared.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur he had no wish to recall. He returned to the flat, realising almost immediately that there was no point in giving chase, either on foot or in the car. He carefully checked every room in the flat, calling out her name repeatedly, in

the forlorn hope that Tanji was playing some kind of trick or game with him.

Finally, he returned to the living room, sank into the sofa and sat with his head in his hands trying to think what to do. He felt completely helpless in this situation. He knew of no direct way to contact anyone in Lyndesfarne at short notice, and he was reluctant to get in touch with anyone at NISSA after certain recent experiences. It would take many hours for him to make his way to the Lyndesfarne crossing in the car, then walk to Bret's house, which was the only place he could think of to go for help.

Kevin remembered that he had been given some instructions on how to get a communication to people in Lyndesfarne. Apparently, there was a certain telephone number he could call to leave a message. He fumbled in his wallet to locate a slip of paper from one of those little yellow sticky pads, then reached over to the coffee table for his mobile. The number, he noted as he keyed the digits into the phone, seemed to be associated with NISSA or at least Newcastle University, judging by the area code.

The call went through first time and, after a couple of rings, he heard a very terse voice instructing him to speak after the tone, with no notification or indication as to whom or what a message might be directed.

Kevin gave his name and said he wanted to leave a message for Bret, cursing silently that he did not know any more of Bret's name. After a moment's hesitation, he stated that he wanted Bret to contact him urgently, that Tanji had been kidnapped, and then left his telephone numbers.

After hanging up, Kevin wondered if there was anything else he could do. He felt he had to call the local police, but there was not very much he felt he could tell them, other than the circumstances of the abduction and his own personal details. He strongly suspected that trying to explain anything about the curious world of Lyndesfarne would likely get him arrested for wasting police time, if not incarcerated in the funny farm.

After what seemed like an incredibly long wait, two policemen arrived at his door. He invited them in, and tried to explain what had happened as clearly as he could. The constable leading the questioning appeared determined to confuse him by asking questions which seemed to have no bearing on what he was trying to explain. Both coppers looked very strangely at him when he explained that he did not know her surname for sure. Thinking quickly, he recalled

Tanji's patronymic and invented a plausible spelling on-the-fly, which give the impression of satisfying the copper's enquiry.

After making laborious notes and poking around the flat for a while, the policemen left. Kevin made sure that they had transcribed the registration number. He got the distinct impression that the constables thought that he was over-reacting, that Tanji had just left after an emotional argument, a tiff, a "domestic" as he had heard it categorised. He strongly suspected that there would be no serious attempt to investigate the disappearance, and the case would languish in some file or database forever.

After the police had gone, he returned to the kitchen and looked at the butternut squash soup he had so carefully prepared earlier, now sitting congealed and inedible on the kitchen counter. He burst into tears.

Much later, Kevin was woken by a ring on the doorbell. He had fallen asleep on the sofa, having felt too upset and wound up to go to bed. He glanced at his watch – it was nearly three in the morning.

He opened the door cautiously. Bret was at the door, accompanied by a uniformed chauffeur. A Range Rover with blacked-out windows stood at the curb behind them.

Bret looked immensely relieved to see Kevin.

"I want you to come with me, now," he said without preamble.

"Why?" Kevin exclaimed groggily, as he ushered Bret into the house.

"Well, I'm not sure it's safe here," the other man replied urgently, "You do realise that they might not have intended to snatch Tanji, that they might have been after you instead?"

It had not occurred to Kevin that he himself might be in danger, although he was barely able to think at all just at the moment. He went to the bathroom to splash some water on his face and to clean his teeth, then gathered up a few things and stuffed them into his rucksack. It did not take very long, as he had been living a very peripatetic lifestyle recently.

"OK," he said finally, looking forlornly around the little flat, "Let's go."