

Murder, She Wrote: Killer On Board

Richard Baxendale took Jessica's hand and cupped it between his massive, sweating paws. Even though she found this highly unnerving she decided to keep her thoughts to herself. As luck would have it he released her almost immediately.

'I loved your last book...' he peered over Jessica's shoulder to Veronica Riley who was holding up a copy of the book *Dead to Rights*.

'Thank you, Mr Baxendale. It's always nice to meet a fan.' Jessica had seen through his shoddy attempt to cover the fact that he had never read *one* of her books let alone her most recent, which wasn't even the book he had mentioned.

'Where do you get your marvelous ideas from?'

'Many things can catch a writer's eye. Newspaper stories, overheard conversations...even people they meet.' She smiled innocently.

'And what got you into writing in the first place, Mrs Fletcher?'

Jessica paused. It had been her husband's death that brought about her current career. After Frank Fletcher had passed away Jessica found she had too much time on her hands and too many thoughts of her late husband and so needed an outlet. One day she decided to dust off her old typewriter and just started to type. The idea was to keep her mind active on a task that didn't allow her to brood over her recent loss. She didn't want to forget her husband, which is something she would never do, it was a matter of getting through one day to the next and it worked. It wasn't the answer she wanted to give so gave the general answer to that question: 'I was trying to find a way to fill my time after I retired from teaching. I must be doing something right.' She laughed.

Richard waved Veronica over to them. 'This is Veronica Riley, Mrs Fletcher. Anything you need while your on my ship she will be happy to get you. I must mingle with my other guests, but I would like you to sign a few of your books later, if you don't mind.'

'I would be happy to, Mr Baxendale.'

'Call me Richard.'

'Thank you, Richard. Please call me Jessica.'

Richard Baxendale walked over to a couple who were admiring his assortment of ancient treasures and curios. He was never one to pass up a chance of displaying the vastness of his wealth and personal taste when it came to his little collection of valuables. He would be the type of person who would catch a thief and then take great care in presenting a lecture to them on each and every piece, including individual prices and entire history from creation to his purchase, just to prove his superior knowledge on that subject.

'Now all the introductions are out of the way is there anything you require, Mrs Fletcher?' asked Veronica.

Jessica motioned to the glass of white wine in her hand. 'I'm fine, thank you.'

'I've got some chores to do, but if you need anything don't hesitate to call on me.'

'Thank you, Veronica.'

'It would be best if you called me Miss Riley. Mr Baxendale doesn't like it much when his guests and I are on first name terms.'

'He did introduce you as Veronica, but of course, I wouldn't want to get you into any trouble, Miss Riley.'

'Don't forget, if you need anything at all...'

'You will be the first to know.'

Veronica stopped at Richard Baxendale's little group and whispered something to him. He waved her away and continued his discussion with the two guests. Jessica had noticed a short, round man

hovering beside her while she exchanged words with Veronica. It seemed as if he was trying to make up his mind whether to approach her and make conversation. Jessica decided to make the decision for him.

'Hello,' she said pleasantly. 'I'm Jessica Fletcher.'

'Oh, I know who you are, Mrs Fletcher,' he said in polished English. 'May I say that your last book *The Kew Garden Affair* was most fascinating; using an exotic plant house as a death box...simply thrilling.'

'Thank you, Mr...?'

'Downley, Peter Downley. I have been a fan of yours since *The Corpse Danced at Midnight*; making a pregnant ballerina your killer...sheer perfection.'

'I'm glad you enjoy my books, Mr Downley. Are you from the Scallini fashion house?'

'Most assuredly, I am Mrs Scallini's head designer. I see you are wearing a Scallini original jacket; admittedly last years summer range, but Scallini all the same.'

Jessica twitched her lapel, 'It was a gift from Rosetta. She used to spend her summers in my hometown and we got to be close friends.'

'Ah yes, Cabot Cove, Maine. Whenever she returned all she could talk about was lobster salad and the forthcoming J. B. Fletcher publication. That was one subject we would always agree on. Ah, speak of the devil.'

Rosetta Scallini swooped into the cocktail lounge with such a dramatic air that everyone present would have been forgiven if they expected her to start quoting a monologue from some Shakespearean tragedy. Her long black hair (obviously from a bottle) was tied back with a turquoise chiffon scarf.

'I'm the last to arrive.' It sounded like a question but most people knew Rosetta of old and concluded that it was a statement made to follow her purposeful late entrance. Rosetta made a beeline for Jessica.

'It's so wonderful to see you, Jessica. I'm so happy you could make it to this little soiree of ours.'

'It's a pleasure to be here, Rosetta. I was surprised that you invited me to come along on the company voyage though.'

'I have a surprise for you, Jessica. I hope you will like it.'

'A surprise for me? You shouldn't have gone to any trouble...'

'Hush, dear Jessica, you will see tonight at the unveiling.'

'Thank you, Rosetta, but...'

'I need to have a little chat with Richard so I will see you at the unveiling, seven-thirty in the forward lounge.'

'Rosetta,' started Peter Downley.

'Yes, yes, hello, Peter.'

Without another word Rosetta Scallini took Richard by the arm and led him from the room. His two guests, who both seemed very happy to have escaped his diatribe of self-worth, walked over. The woman couldn't have been more than twenty five with dark brown, shoulder length hair and a body that would appeal to any man blessed with the sense of sight. Her companion, an older man of around fifty, stood just over six feet and had broad shoulders. It wouldn't have been hard to imagine him as a quarterback in the NFL.

'Aren't you Jessica Fletcher? I had heard you might be joining us.'

'Guilty as charged,' said Jessica shaking the girls hand.

'I'm Lindsay Strutt, a model for the Scallini fashion house.'

'Not just a model though,' said the older man. 'Lindsay here is the face of Scallini fashions. If you look at any billboard, magazine advert or television commercial, this is the face staring back at you. Pleased to meet you, Mrs Fletcher, I am Mark Levine, head of advertising for Scallini fashions. It doesn't take much to sell this face, I can tell you.'

'Stop it, Mark,' said Lindsay playfully patting him on the shoulder. 'Anyone would think I was miss world.'

'You could be if you played your cards right.'

They all laughed.

'What brings you here, Mrs Fletcher?' asked Lindsay.

'I was invited by Rosetta. She says she has a surprise for me and I admit to feeling a little trepidation.'

'Yes, I remember Rosetta saying something about...'

'It's a surprise, Lindsay,' said Peter Downley with a shake of the head indicating she shouldn't say anymore.

'You'll have to wait and see. I'm sure you'll adore it.'

'Enough, now,' said Mark Levine. 'I think dinner is about to be served.'

'May I?' asked Peter holding out his arm to Jessica.

'It would be a pleasure.'

Lindsay took Mark's arm and the foursome left to seek out the dining room. As the climate off the Mexican coast remained warm it turned out that they were being treated to a feast up on deck. Jessica was shocked to see the starter was an old favorite of Rosetta and herself; lobster salad.

'Real Maine lobsters, Jessica,' said Rosetta.

'Is this my surprise?'

'It's not seven-thirty, yet.' Rosetta took a playful glance at her watch then tapped it as if it had stopped.

'Point taken,' replied Jessica with good grace.

'Is Stuart not joining us?' asked Lindsay.

'You know what Stuart's like,' replied Rosetta. 'He wants Jessica's surprise to be extra special and he insists on playing about with lighting to make everything perfect.'

'Stuart is the head photographer for the company; he's very good with a camera,' said Lindsay

'And without one,' Mike winked knowingly at Lindsay.

'Michael, there is no need for that kind of talk at the dinner table,' scolded Rosetta.

'Terribly sorry, Mrs Fletcher, I never know when to keep my wayward humor in check.'

'It's not a problem, Mr Levine; you should hear some of the colorful expressions our local fishermen utter down at the Cabot Cove docks.'

'Stuart is Lindsay's current squeeze,' continued Mike mischievously.

'Stuart is my longtime partner and friend.'

'Do you have any future plans set, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Not at all, Mrs Fletcher, I have a suspicion that the question may not be far away. We have been together for some years now.'

'He's probably waiting for a pension plan,' quipped Mike sending a ripple of laughter around the table.

The rest of the meal was spent in idle chitchat with Mike Levine adding the comic relief to almost every conversation. It wasn't a situation where everyone laughed because they thought they had too, Mike was a genius when it came to comical timing. He knew when to strike and when to reel his comments in so as not to cross that invisible line. When the desserts had been polished off Rosetta announced that it was time to retire to the forward lounge and present Jessica with her surprise. It was only a slight flicker in the eyes, but Jessica caught the look that Richard had cast over at Rosetta. He obviously didn't like having his authority undermined by a guest on his own yacht. Yet he said nothing and the moment passed.

*

'I don't know what to say,' said Jessica admiring the bottle green jacket and purple plaid skirt on the mannequin.

‘That is a one of a kind design made just for you,’ said Rosetta giving Jessica a hug. ‘Peter designed it to my specifications. You can look anywhere from Milan to Paris and beyond, that is yours and yours alone.’

‘Thank you, Mr Downley.’

‘Peter, please, and you are most welcome, Mrs Fletcher. The chance to design an outfit for someone as renowned as you was a pure delight, and I have designed garments for some of the crowned heads of Europe.’

‘That’s very kind, Peter.’

‘Would you mind trying it on, Mrs Fletcher?’ asked the young man with designer stubble and a camera hanging around his neck.

‘You must be Stuart?’

‘Heard of me already?’ he replied. ‘I would like to take a couple of snaps if that is alright with you.’

‘By all means, I’ll just go to my cabin and change then you can snap away.’

*

It took Jessica less than a minute to change into her new outfit, which was far too heavy to be of any use out here on the Mexican coast, but would no doubt come in useful braving a bitter Maine winter. As she was about to leave her cabin she heard voices coming from outside, a man and woman, as far as she could tell. It was never her intention to eavesdrop on private conversations, although through the years she had overheard a number of useful tidbits of important information that usually helped in the arrest of a murder suspect. Before she could open her door and announce herself the male voice turned from a hushed whisper to an unpleasant snarl. It was only a couple of words she caught but it was enough for Jessica to know when to present herself. Throwing open the door she found Richard Baxendale with a hand around Veronica Riley’s throat.

‘You don’t get to tell me what I can and cannot do, Veronica. Once Rosetta makes the announcement you do as I ask...’

‘Mr Baxendale!’ cried Jessica. ‘Take your hands off Veronica, at once.’

With all the charm of a rattlesnake Richard withdrew his hand and turned to Jessica, flashing his gleaming white teeth. If he was unhappy at being caught being anything other than his flawless self his face showed no sign. He continued as if nothing had happened between himself and Veronica.

‘You look stunning, Mrs Fletcher,’ he cooed. ‘Are you ready for your close-up?’

‘Mr Baxendale, I just witnessed you assaulting this poor woman, and what’s more...’

‘Assaulting?’ he looked deeply hurt. ‘There was no assault here, was there, *Veronica?*’

The way he said her name indicated that any answer other than no would be hazardous to her continued health. With a slow shake of the head Veronica gave her answer.

‘I can clearly see the marks your hand has left on her neck, Mr Baxendale. There can never be an excuse to lay your hands on anyone like that.’

‘Marks on her neck? In this climate some people have been known to suffer mild heat rashes, it must be that.’

‘It’s a heat rash, Mrs Fletcher,’ mumbled Veronica, staring at the floor. ‘I always break out when travelling in hotter climates.’

‘If you say so, but I know what I saw. Come back to the lounge with me, Veronica, I don’t want you staying here alone.’

As Jessica walked Veronica away Richard called out: ‘don’t forget what I said, Veronica.’

‘What was that all about?’ asked Jessica trying to hasten their pace to get back with the rest of the group.

‘It’s best if you forget what you *think* you saw, it’s not worth fretting over, Mrs Fletcher.’

‘You mustn’t let Mr Baxendale get away with something like that.’

‘Please...’

They almost collided with Rosetta as she rounded the corner, her face full of concern.

'We were worried about you, Jessica. What took you so long?'

'Well, I...'

Veronica gave Jessica a pleading glance, as if asking her to keep the whole situation between them quiet. As much as Jessica hated to lie, especially to an old friend, she continued: 'I was talking to Veronica about one of my books and we seem to have lost track of the time.'

'Stuart will be spitting feathers if we don't hurry and let him photograph you. It's all he's been talking about all day.'

'We'd better not let him down then,' said Jessica easing Veronica along with them.

*

Stuart Graves had completed his 'shoot' of the Jessica Fletcher collection; it was surprising just how many photos one garment should require. It had been suggested that one of these should be sent to her publisher for her new book, but Jessica had insisted on keeping her current authors portrait.

Rosetta insisted on giving a short speech to dedicate the recent design of the 'Fletcher Collection' and then moved on to an element of the evening known only to Richard and her. Presentation Files had been created for Peter Downley, Veronica Riley, Lindsay Strutt, Stuart Graves and Mike Levine. As she gave them out Rosetta explained: 'You have all been with me since the founding of the company and it has been through your hard work and determination that we are a success today. Peter, you have designed some of the most sought after attire the fashion world has ever known. Veronica, you have always been my faithful assistant and friend without whom I would have packed it all in years ago. Lindsay, what can I say? You are Scallini Fashions. Your face, and Peter's designs, sold our first seasons line beyond imagination. Stuart, without your eye for lighting and detail when it comes to photography, we would never have got out of the starting gate in all the major advertising campaigns in this hostile business. Lastly, I have to thank Mike for his tireless effort in setting up the advertising for our little venture. Without a window for people to look in they would never see our wares; Mike not only gave us a window he literally lifted the lid on Scallini Fashions for all to appreciate. I have always considered ours a family business and because of this I personally present each of you with a five percent share of Scallini Fashions, with my compliments and thanks.'

The news took time to sink in then the real party started. Champagne had been arranged for the occasion. Rosetta lifted her glass, 'Here's to another illustrious year with many more to come and I now not only call you friends, but partners.'

That look Jessica had seen on Richards face at dinner was back, this time with more venom. It was obvious that he was not in a celebrating mood. Rosetta's decision to reward her most trusted staff obviously didn't sit well with him. By the time two bottles of champagne had been consumed the party had wound down. Everyone had either retired to bed or slipped back to the cocktail lounge for a nightcap. Rosetta asked Jessica if she would like a nighttime stroll around the deck before retreating to the confines of their cabins, being a recreational runner Jessica decided that a walk before bed would be a pleasant way to end such a delightful evening, Richard Baxendale's treatment of Veronica Riley aside.

'You probably think I'm being a fool, Jess,' said Rosetta.

'Not at all, I think it's very generous of you to recompense the people who work for you in such a tangible way. It certainly beats a pat on the back.'

'They have all been so good to me over the years. The only time we ever needed outside help was when Richard bought a share to keep our cash flow from drying up. Ever since then it's been plain sailing. I couldn't ask for a better team to work with.'

'They all seem to be very proficient in their appointed roles. Speaking of the team, I thought Veronica worked for Richard Baxendale.'

‘Oh, no, Veronica is a kind of go between for Richard and myself. With both of us being so busy with business commitments we sometimes need someone to keep the lines of communication open for us, in steps Veronica. I couldn’t ask for a better assistant.’

Jessica fought the urge to address the dispute she had witnessed between Richard and Veronica. Not wishing to make waves in the Scallini Fashion pool meant that she kept her word and let the circumstances of the quarrel lie. Rosetta stifled a yawn.

‘Do you mind if I go on to bed, Jess? It’s been such a long day.’

‘Not at all, I’ll stay out here for a few more minutes and then I’ll be off to the land of nod too.’

‘Goodnight, Jessica.’

‘Goodnight, Rosetta.’

Now alone Jessica leaned on the railing to look down into the dark waters. She had always felt at home on the water, probably thanks to her late husband’s insistence on taking her fishing and subsequent size difference between her catches and his; the scales firmly tipped in her favor. As she took a deep, salty breath she heard a voice from the stern of the boat. Again, not one to listen in to private conversations, but it sounded heated.

‘Those designs were mine to do with as I saw fit.’

It was Richard Baxendale’s voice

‘They were meant to be stored for the next season’s line. I told you that when you asked for them.’

The second voice was so hushed that it was almost impossible to place.

‘If I were to tell Rosetta all about those missing designs, I’m sure your years of hard work would mean nothing. After all, who wants dishonest, backstabber’s working for them; selling off original Scallini designs to competitors?’

‘You asked for those designs and sold them yourself, besides; Rosetta would never believe that of me.’

‘You’ve heard the term, ‘all’s fair in love and war?’ what about, ‘there are no friends in business?’ Do you really want to take the chance?’

‘Why would you do that? What have I done to you?’

‘You have something I want, the question is: are you going to give it to me?’

Jessica didn’t want to be caught listening in so retreated back to the forward lounge. As she closed the door, the sound of heavy footsteps thudded past. Opening it a crack she saw the back of Peter Downley as he entered his cabin.

*

‘I know you’re broke,’ said Richard pleased with the reaction this got.

‘It’s only a short term problem; I’ll soon be back on my feet.’

‘Why don’t you ask Rosetta for a loan? I’m sure being a member of her blue-eyed brigade, she wouldn’t refuse.’

Mike buried his head in his hands. He was never comfortable talking about money, especially to those who had fifty times what he was worth.

‘I don’t want to involve her. How did you know, anyway?’ he said looking up in surprise.

‘I had a talk with my old friend Leon; there is a guy who’s got his finger on the pulse of black market gambling. How did you get yourself into such a mess?’

‘Why do you care?’

‘Because I paid off your debts, Mike. Its one thing being in debt to some loan shark or shady bookmaker, but that’s nothing compared with being in debt to me. I don’t play games with my money; I’m too well heeled and seasoned to let it all slip away so easily. You could say I’ve just become your worst nightmare.’

‘How am I supposed to pay you back?’

‘I can think of a way and its pain free.’

Jessica reprimanded herself again for listening in outside the dining room, but again this whole situation was getting a little out of control. The yacht was impressive, yet still in truth they were all encased in a house on the water and, as any large family would know, it's very hard to get any privacy with so many people in such a small space. Richard Baxendale was making himself a perfect target for someone to aim at and, even though she would never condone murder, it sounded like he had it coming.

*

'I don't see what one thing has to do with the other,' said Lindsay fighting back the tears. 'It's not as if we were really close. He had a history of mental illness so it wasn't a big surprise when he killed himself.'

'He was your boyfriend for some time though, wasn't he?'

The tear filled eyes looked sullenly at Richard, an imploring glance urging him to stop his questioning of her past. He was on a mission and nothing would shift his line of enquiry. Richard had been waiting for his opportunity to catch Lindsay alone and he wasn't about to waste it.

'We were only together for a couple of months,' she wept. 'Why are you bringing all this up now?'

'I could never forgive myself if someone got away with murder, even if they are a close friend.'

'It was suicide...everyone knows that.'

Richard shook his head. 'Everyone *thinks* it was suicide. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not, but think of what it could do to your career if even a sniff of this got out.'

'What do you want, Richard?'

'That's my girl,' he said patting her on the back.

*

Jessica sat on one of the many sun loungers on the deck writing on a large lined pad. It was that time again; a time to start thinking up a new mystery for her next book. Despite cruising along the Mexican coast, she never quite felt relaxed enough to concentrate on writing. Even her brainstorm scribbling resulted in nothing more than a few character names and a Mexican setting. Maybe she would take another wander around the expansive yacht and that would jumpstart her creative juices into flowing. As she was about to get up a wailing Lindsay Strutt came billowing past almost knocking Jessica back down onto the lounge. For a brief moment Lindsay stopped as if she was going to apologize but then turned and continued hurriedly along to her cabin. It was one of those instances of whether to intrude or leave well enough alone. Jessica Fletcher was never one to let someone in distress go without a shoulder to cry on, and so walked along to Lindsay's cabin. She could hear soft sobbing from within.

'Lindsay,' she said tapping on the door. 'It's Jessica, can I come in?'

The response was almost inaudible. 'Come in, Jessica.'

'What on Earth's the matter?'

said Jessica sitting on the bed beside the crying girl. 'Does it have something to do with Richard Baxendale?'

Lindsay's sobbing ebbed as she turned to look at Jessica. The saddened face was enveloped in a veil of alarm. Could it be that this mystery writer from Maine knew all about her past lover and his death?

'How much do you know?'

'I don't know anything, Lindsay. I have witnessed a couple of occasions when Richard has been on the giving end of some unpleasant exchanges and thought that he might have done or said something to distress you too.'

Lindsay was weighing up whether to tell Jessica about her past. The mystery writer did seem like a good sort, always ready with a smile and word of encouragement. What could it hurt?

'I had a boyfriend some years ago that died. Things weren't working out between us and so I ended the relationship. He was so distraught over the whole thing that he killed himself. He had a history of erratic behavior and mental illness so there was no question about how he died.'

'What does that have to do with Richard Baxendale?'

'He says that if I don't give him my share of Scallini Fashions he'll tell the police it was murder.'

'Surely that wouldn't stand up to any investigation,' said Jessica shocked at what she heard.

'It would easily be proved a suicide, but how long do you think my career would last with something like that hanging over me? Richard has some influential friends and he would stop at nothing to get his own way.'

'You mean you're just going to give up the fight?'

Lindsay rested her head on Jessica's shoulder and the tears started to flow again. 'I have no other choice,' she cried.

*

'A picture is worth a thousand words, Stuart. Some of your early work could be worth a lot more...to me.'

Stuart sat looking through the photographs Richard had tossed across the table to him. He remembered taking them even all those years ago. He threw them back at Richard, 'They're my work, yes. Not that it's anything to do with you.'

'That's where you're wrong, Stuart. These pictures could lead you into a lot of trouble. Did you even explore the backgrounds of these women, or, should I say *girls*?'

'All of the models we used were eighteen and over. It's not as if they contain full frontal nudity; they are all tastefully covered.'

'Depends of the taste you're going for. I could have a cop friend of mine look into this little artistic sideline of yours. I wouldn't like your chances if it's discovered that any of these models were minors at the time these pictures were taken.'

'We had all the paperwork sorted before any pictures were taken. If you think you'll hold these over me you're barking up the wrong tree.'

Richards smile broadened as he continued, 'I know all these woman were of legal age to appear in your little photo-shoot. I know that each and every one of them willingly posed for you and that they all signed contracts for you to use the pictures, but what do you think Lindsay would say if I told her about them?'

'Still the wrong tree, Richard. Lindsay knows all about my having done some modeling photo work before joining Scallini Fashions so you'll have to try harder than that.'

'What if I said my friend the cop could "find" some evidence to corroborate what I would choose tell her? Lindsay would probably want nothing to do with you and as for your job with Rosetta...'

'You wouldn't dare.'

Richard leaned in closer, 'Try me!'

*

Richard Baxendale pushed the compass, telescope and other nautical items aside to make room on the wheelhouse table for his map. He uncurled it and used a pen to mark a small island some miles from the Mexican coast.

'That is my latest acquisition,' he said proudly.

'You bought an island?' asked Rosetta.

'Indeed. We're going to stop off there this afternoon for a little champagne lunch so you can all see it's natural beauty before I begin building.'

'Building? Building what?' asked Peter Downley.

'I am going to turn this whole island into the world's most luxurious holiday spa and hotel resort. There will be all manner of attractions including an eighteen hole golf course, a full size motor rally for those speedy thrill seekers, a full spa with every amenity you could think of; not to mention the hiking trails and scenic boating tours.'

'Sounds lovely,' said Rosetta. 'And very expensive, I'll bet!'

'What money is spent on the design and building of the resort will be a mere fraction of what will be coming in once we open the doors to the wealthy and weary.'

'I hope you won't be wanting us to 'invest' in this scheme of yours?' asked Rosetta, making it quite plain that she would be doing nothing of the sort.

'I just thought it would break up our last day on the high seas by stretching our legs and enjoying some sunshine on the island.'

They all had to admit that it sounded like a good idea, even if they did have to return to Richard afterwards. With the way he had been treating his guests it might have been easier if they just stayed on the island.

*

'I'm ready when you are, Jessica,' said Rosetta clutching one of Jessica's books in her hand. 'I'll find a quiet little nook to catch up on my reading.'

'I thought you would have already read *Murder on the Amazon*.'

'If there is one thing your books have its re-readability. I've read all of your books at least twice.'

'You're too kind, Rosetta.'

Mike Levine appeared from his cabin dressed in a pair of slacks and a yellow golf shirt. 'Are we still waiting for the others?' he asked.

'Looks like it,' said Rosetta looking around her as if to say "Do you see anyone else here."

'Hey, leave the wisecracks to me, please. I was wondering if I could have a quick word with you, Rosetta.'

'Of course, Mike, what can I do for you?'

'Alone, if I may.'

Jessica took the hint. 'I'll go and wait by the launch,' she said walking in the direction of the inflatable dinghy that was poised over the side of the yacht. While waiting Veronica arrived with a large leather file, she looked a lot happier than she had the previous night. Her grey business suit didn't exactly say *island getaway, here I come*.

'Are you taking work onto the island with you,' asked Jessica indicating the file.

'Some people's work is never done, I'm afraid that goes double for me.'

'Wouldn't you enjoy a few hours downtime?'

'Enjoy it? I'd welcome it with open arms and not let go. Mr Baxendale says I need to file some paperwork when we get back and he wants it ready by then so I get to go to a beautiful island and do the exact same thing I do everyday. Neat, huh?'

'As you said, Miss Riley, some peoples work is never done.'

Peter Downley appeared struggling with a large beach umbrella that didn't want to stay closed. Under his arm was a copy of Jessica's latest hardback.

'Not a sun worshipper, Peter?' asked Jessica.

'Not really, Jessica. The sun has never really agreed with me so I'll find a quiet nook...'

'And catch up your reading?'

'Your books have re-readability, Jessica.'

'Thank you, Peter. No one has even told me that before.'

Lindsay and Stuart came around the corner having some kind of heated argument but stopped as soon as they saw people were gathered there. They didn't want to air their dirty laundry in public.

'Are we ready to go?' asked Richard pulling on a white captain's hat. Mike Levine took labored steps behind him with the picnic hamper Richard had handed to him. It was obviously very heavy.

'We're still waiting for Rosetta,' said Jessica worried that her friend was taking her time to come back.

'I'm here,' said Rosetta rushing forward. 'I wanted to change before we left.'

Before she had been wearing a pair of leggings and loose cotton shirt, now she had changed into a flowing silk robe with matching sunhat, her long black hair reaching down to her lower back. It was something she was proud of and would explain to some people in great detail how many years it had taken her to grow it to that length.

'All aboard,' called Richard as he began to lower the dinghy into the water.

*

Only when he had deposited his guests onto the beach did he reveal the fact that he would be going back to his yacht to catch up on some work while they enjoyed themselves on *his* island. He said he would return in a couple of hours to take them back to the yacht. With Richard off the island it would allow some of the guests to relax for a few hours without having to deal with the rigors that Richard Baxendale seemed to enjoy putting them through. Once he had left people made up their minds what they wanted to do. No one was remotely interested in the champagne lunch so the hamper was left lying on the beach where they had been dropped off.

Stuart wanted to go with Lindsay, but she said she wanted to be alone and stormed off up the beach to one of the paths that led up into the hills. Stuart then decided that he would take some pictures of the island and walked off in the opposite direction of Lindsay.

Mike said he would go for a hike up into the hills and probably try to scale a rocky cove he had seen on the way over in the dinghy.

Peter Downley trudged up the beach a few hundred yards and decided that that was far enough for him. He stabbed the umbrella into the sand and flopped down onto a towel ready to start reading his latest JB Fletcher novel.

'Will you be alright if I go and find a quiet spot, Jessica? It would be nice to just have five minutes to myself.'

'Of course it's alright, Rosetta. We've all been cooped up together on the boat so I think a little alone time would be beneficial for all of us.'

'Meet you back here in a couple hours then,' said Rosetta setting off up the beach away from Peter.

Jessica wanted to find her own quiet spot to see if this peaceful setting would help her unleash her next bestseller. It wasn't long before the gentle lapping sound of the water and the warm breeze sent her into a light sleep. Luckily she had been sitting in the shade under an over hanging rock or she might have been burned to a crisp. Looking bleary eyed at her watch she realized that there was no rush, she had only been asleep for half an hour. Back up the beach she could see Peter's umbrella had toppled slightly; maybe he was asleep too. Feeling a need to stretch her legs, Jessica thought it might be an idea to take a wander up into the hills. She set off stiffly.

*

When she returned to the beach the other guests were already there waiting for their hosts return. The dingy was still sitting in the water beside the yacht, but there was no sign of Richard on deck.

'Maybe he's fallen asleep,' said Mike.

'If he has then we're stuck here until he wakes up,' said Jessica a little concerned.

'Richard!' shouted Mike at the top of his voice.

'He won't hear you from here,' scolded Rosetta. 'Don't waste your breath.'

'We can't stay out here all afternoon. We're supposed to be sailing back home today,' said Peter sounding slightly inebriated. Jessica had the notion that he had been dipping into the hamper while everyone else was gone.

'I'm sure, Mr Baxendale will come and get us shortly,' said Jessica.

‘What if he doesn’t?’ replied Mike. ‘I’ll swim over and get the dinghy and come and rescue you fine ladies.’

‘You were always a good swimmer, Rosetta,’ said Jessica. ‘You used to swim out to the buoys back in Cabot Cove.’

‘Not in silk, I didn’t,’ said Rosetta pulling on the hem of her robe. A light breeze nearly blew her hat off into the water, but she managed to get her hands up to stop it. It didn’t help that she had scrunched her hair up into her hat. No wonder she had trouble keeping it on.

Without another word Mike slipped off his shirt and shoes and waded out into the water. It took a full twenty-five minutes for him to reach the dinghy. He didn’t bother calling out to Richard he just unhooked the rope from the yacht and started the engine. Within twenty minutes they were all back on the yacht and Richard still hadn’t appeared to greet them.

‘I’ll bet he’s in his cabin tucked up like a newborn babe,’ said Mike. ‘I’m going to change out of these wet things.’

He stopped short when a shrill scream rang out. All eyes turned to Lindsay who was standing in the doorway to the wheelhouse, her hands up to her mouth stifling another scream.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Rosetta putting her arm around Lindsay.

Jessica didn’t need to ask what had caused Lindsay’s outburst. Lying facedown on the floor, a patch of crimson covering the side of his head, was Richard Baxendale. There was no doubt that he was dead.

*

Jessica Fletcher had attended many crime scenes and knew the first order of business would be to get everyone out of the wheelhouse before they could contaminate any vital evidence. Her first problem was the fact that in order to contact the authorities someone needed to radio the mainland, someone who knew how to operate the radio. Although this was a crime scene Jessica had to let Mike, the only one with the knowhow, in to use it. He pushed aside the compass and other nautical items to unfurl the map as Richard had done earlier, he needed to know their exact position to give the police. When he finished Jessica insisted that they leave the wheelhouse immediately and join the others. As Mike walked around the body Jessica heard a faint crack from beneath his shoe.

‘Mike,’ she said, ‘slowly lift your foot.’

Mike lifted his foot showing a small piece of glass he had fractured. It was obvious that it would be near impossible to try and determine what it had been before Mike casually, yet innocently, stomped it into tiny pieces.

‘That’s why it’s best to keep everyone out of a crime scene,’ said Jessica flatly.

*

The Mexican authorities assured them that they would send someone out as quickly as possible. Jessica didn’t want anyone to wander off alone until the police turned up and suggested that they all gather in the cocktail lounge until then. Mike still insisted that he needed to change out of his wet clothes, but took Jessica’s advice of waiting with the rest of the group. It could be misconstrued if he was the only person alone and something happened to turn suspicion onto him.

‘Are you saying you think one of us killed him?’ asked Mike sounding uncharacteristically irritated. ‘There are no other people around us for miles. Therefore I have to assume that one of us is the killer.’

‘Don’t you mean “one of us”, Mrs Fletcher?’ asked Stuart. ‘It’s no secret that you have a reputation for solving real murders. You suspect one of us having killed Richard, am I right?’

That really put Jessica on the spot. Yes, she believed...no, she knew that one of these people had murdered Richard Baxendale. The question was could she figure out who?

'I'm sure it hasn't escaped your notice that we were all on the island when Richard was killed.' Lindsay folded her arms defiantly.

'That's what I don't understand,' said Jessica. 'Someone must have returned to the yacht when we split up.'

'How?' asked Mike. 'You did stand on the beach and watch me swim back to get the dinghy. Unless you're saying that someone swam to the yacht and back to the island.'

'That's possible,' said Jessica. 'You swam back to pick up the dinghy.'

'But I came back on the dinghy. For someone to swim both ways would take near an hour to complete. I find it hard to believe that it could be done without someone seeing the swimmer.'

'It would be difficult, but not impossible,' replied Jessica.

'How about we give you our movements?' asked Mike. 'Not that we have too, but it could make you see reason.'

'I don't expect any of you to explain yourselves to me. I have no authority to question any of you.'

'You hold sway with the police and could exonerate us if we do explain ourselves.'

'I would be happy to listen.'

Mike took it upon himself to go first. He stated that he had made an attempt to scale the rocky cove, but admitted defeat and returned to the footpath in the hills. He had seen Lindsay and Stuart having a heated discussion and removed himself towards a beach on the other side of the island. While paddling there he saw Rosetta walking along the cliff top path towards where he had left Lindsay and Stuart. When he decided to return to the beach and wait for Richard's return he used the cliff top path back.

Lindsay took the baton and hurriedly told her story. She had walked up into the hills where Stuart had followed her. They had argued and parted ways Lindsay heading to the shade of a cluster of trees and Stuart going further into the hills to take pictures. As she took refuge in the shade she saw Rosetta pass on the cliff top path heading in the direction Stuart had taken. An hour later Lindsay returned to the beach to wait for the ride back to the yacht.

Stuart confirmed that he had quarreled with Lindsay and went into the hills to take pictures. When he had reached the highest point he was able Stuart started taking pictures of the various coves and beaches. While he was sitting in the branches of a tree snapping away Rosetta passed by beneath him. He didn't want to alarm her so he just let her walk by. Then he made his way back to the beach by the cliff top path. Mike arrived at the beach just in front of him. He turned on his camera to show Jessica some of the pictures he had taken. They were beautiful, but one stood out. He had obviously been up in a tree when it was taken. It showed Jessica walking passed on the path beneath him.

Veronica Riley had taken root on the next beach to continue her work. The only person she saw the whole time there was Rosetta as she walked passed the beach coming down the path from the hills.

Peter had to admit that he had dipped his hand into the hamper that no one else seemed to care about and over indulged on the champagne inside. He had spent most of his time reading before having a siesta due to the vast amount of alcohol he had consumed. The only person he had seen was Rosetta as she walked back from the hill path.

Rosetta hesitated and then confirmed that she had walked right around the island. First she had walked up the beach, up into the hills, along the cliff top path, under the overhanging tress, along the hill path by the beach where Veronica was working and back down onto the beach where she waited for everyone else to return to the yacht.

Jessica considered these statements and decided that she had enough to form at least an educated guess as to what happened on the island and who killed Richard Baxendale. It gave her no pleasure to confront these people that she had begun to consider friends, but sadly there was no other way.

'I know who killed Mr Baxendale and I know why he was killed. You all had ample motive to dispose of him. Veronica: only yesterday I saw him with his hands around your throat threatening

you...’ Jessica paused to see what reaction this would get. As she thought no one was surprised. ‘I heard him threaten you too Peter. In fact I heard him threaten all of you...’

‘He never threatened me, Jessica,’ said Rosetta.

‘No he never threatened you directly...’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying that you knew what Mr Baxendale was up to. I’m sure Mike told you just before we left for the island.’

‘Just what did Mike tell me?’

‘That Richard Baxendale was going to take over Scallini fashions and there was no way for you stop him.’

Rosetta snorted, ‘Is this a plot for your next book?’

‘I only wish it were. This was really a simple case of mathematics. You gave each of your employees a five percent share in your company, a very generous gesture, but you hadn’t taken into account Richard Baxendale’s share...his thirty percent. Why else would he suddenly start blackmailing people he had been working with for so long? He wanted their share in the company. With his thirty percent and the twenty five from the rest of you would give him fifty five percent. He would be the boss and you couldn’t stop him...at least not legally.’

‘You think I killed him?’

‘Rosetta, I *know* you killed him.’

‘The fact he would have taken over Scallini fashions doesn’t prove anything. It doesn’t put the proverbial smoking gun in my hand, does it? Did you happen to find a murder weapon?’

‘I know what you used, Rosetta.’

‘Really?’

‘The telescope from the wheelhouse table. I noticed when Mike was using the radio he moved everything out of the way to lay out the map. The telescope was missing and also Mike trod on some glass when we were leaving, I think it was a part of the lens glass that broke when you struck him.’

‘This is why I love your books, Jessica. They are so well plotted, yet still fiction.’

‘I also notice you are still wearing your hat. Why did you get changed before we left for the island?’

‘I simply wanted to wear something more comfortable.’

‘You wanted to wear something to cover up the bathing suit you had put on so you could swim back to the yacht and kill Mr Baxendale. Wearing a silk robe and matching hat meant that you wouldn’t dream of going into the water and ruin them. One last thing is your hair; the hair that you proudly exhibit that took you so long to grow and nurture. I couldn’t understand why you scrunched your hair up into your hat and then I realized that you had to so I didn’t spot that it was wet. It all made sense after the discovery of the body.’

‘Do you realize you are accusing everyone here of lying? They said I never left the island.’

‘That was your main downfall, Rosetta. I would never have thought anymore of it until everyone started lying. You see I went for a walk in the hills and I did see Mike paddling in the sea and Lindsay sitting under the trees. The picture Stuart has of me walking beneath him proves he was up that tree and Veronica was sitting on the beach working because I saw her. Please excuse me saying this Peter, but I can’t see a man of your build swimming out to the yacht and back, at least not in the short time frame you would have had. You see Rosetta, not one of your witnesses actually mentioned seeing me, yet each of them said they saw you. That proves beyond any doubt you murdered Richard Baxendale. All the people who gave you an alibi have their own alibi’s...from me! I saw them all where they said they were, but I never saw you, not once.’

‘Please don’t blame them, Jessica. We have been through so much together, the ups and downs of the company and the malevolence of Richard Baxendale. They were trying to protect me and I thank them for it. I killed him and I’ll admit that to the police when they arrive.’

Almost on cue the sound of a Mexican voice boomed out from a loudspeaker. The police had arrived to take Rosetta Scallini into custody. As Rosetta was led out to the waiting police boat she

asked Jessica one last favor. Jessica agreed to this favor, what would be the point of destroying the lives of so many that had only been trying to help a friend. It was never revealed to the police that the others had lied about Rosetta's whereabouts at the time of the murder and it didn't weigh too heavy on Jessica's mind, after all what would some people give to have friends like these?