

CLAY

This story sits between *After the Fire* and *Let the Dead Speak* in the chronology of the series.

I walked into the office and scanned the room, looking for someone in particular, and found him exactly where I'd expected he would be. It was after six and the place had emptied out, by and large: people had places to go unless they were on fast-time enquiries or tied up in the last agonising stages of a case, and for once neither of those applied to me.

I had somewhere else to be myself, but I wanted back-up, and there was only one person who would do. DI Josh Derwent was sitting with his feet propped on the corner of his desk, reading a printout, scowling in a way that would have warned anyone sensible not to interrupt him.

‘Are you busy?’

He glanced up for a nano-second. ‘Do I look like I’m busy?’

‘You look like you’re reading.’

‘Ten out of ten for insight, Kerrigan.’ He flicked over a page. ‘What is it?’

‘What I really meant was are you busy this evening?’

‘Then you should have asked me that.’ Another look, this time for slightly longer. ‘No, I’m not busy.’

‘Not got a date?’ I knew he had been seeing someone regularly, a woman he had met when her flat was incinerated in a fire. Early days, he said, whenever I asked him about it, but I thought it was serious and that made me feel better about what I was going to ask him. Otherwise there was the slight chance he might have misinterpreted what I was going to say.

‘As I said, no date. Nothing to do but get through this and go home, at which point I plan to watch the football and eat steak.’

‘Very manly.’

‘Sexist, aren’t you? There’s no reason women can’t eat steak and watch football.’ Josh Derwent, the great feminist.

I sighed. ‘You have me there. Look, I need a favour.’

His expression was the opposite of encouraging. ‘What is it?’

I pulled a chair out from the nearest desk and sat in it, scooting over so I was next to him. The room was nearly empty but it was used exclusively by detectives and guarding my privacy was a full-time preoccupation. I leaned towards him, wide-eyed, and whispered, ‘I need you.’

His expression didn’t change but if you knew him as well as I did, you could tell he was paying the kind of close attention he reserved for life-or-death situations. He had stopped blinking, for one thing. ‘Continue.’

‘Will you please come with me to my pottery exhibition,’ I said, quickly, so the words were out before I could change my mind.

His eyebrows slid up and it wasn’t often that I managed to make him look surprised, so I enjoyed the moment even if I had just given him a completely unwanted insight into my private life. ‘Your *what?*’

‘Pottery. Exhibition.’ I enunciated it clearly. ‘I’ve been doing pottery classes.’

‘Since when?’

‘I started in March. I needed something to do in my spare time. I found an eight-week course at a college of further education in Hackney and I made it to all the sessions, which is amazing when you think about how often I end up staying late at work otherwise. There’s a special exhibition tonight to mark the end of the course and I’d like you to come with me.’

He frowned. ‘Firstly, why pottery?’

‘I don’t know. It seemed like fun.’ I tried to remember what had motivated me: a whim, a flyer I’d seen in a café, a slightly desperate awareness that I was spending every evening alone when I wasn’t at work, that I had nothing to talk about if I didn’t want to discuss the boyfriend who had walked out on me or the latest dead body in my life. ‘I wanted to make something. Be creative.’ His unswerving attention was making me want to fidget. ‘It’s not a big deal. I needed a hobby.’

‘A hobby,’ he repeated.

‘I don’t just work,’ I said, defensive. ‘I’m allowed to have a life outside of the job.’

‘Yes, but you usually don’t.’

‘Well, I decided to give it a go.’ This was mortifying, obviously, but it would be worth it. ‘And now I’d like you to come with me to see what I made, and I don’t want you to make it into a big deal because it’s not.’

He put down the pages he’d been reading and folded his arms, eyeing me. ‘What’s really going on?’

I shook my head. ‘Pottery.’

‘Maeve.’

The big guns: when he used my name he really meant it. I sighed. ‘Look, everyone else will have their friends and family there. I want to go because I need to pick up the bowl I made. I want to give it to my mum for her birthday.’

A slow smile started with his eyes before it nudged his mouth into a curve. ‘This is very wholesome for you. Very primary school.’

‘I’m aware of that. But I can’t bring her or Dad, obviously, because I want the bowl to be a surprise, and Liv is busy tonight, and as you know I don’t have a boyfriend anymore, and I would like someone to come with me and say, “wow, well done” and look at the other things people have made and just . . . be there for me. And I know it’s a bit strange but I thought of you. It’s not the worst thing I’ve ever asked you to do, let’s face it.’ I had gone slightly further than I’d meant to, I discovered. You couldn’t fake honesty and it rang through what I’d said. I swallowed, folding my arms, holding back any hint of emotion because I might have wanted him to come with me but I didn’t want to *cry* about it.

Derwent looked, for a moment, as if he was going to say something nice. The moment passed and he shrugged.

‘All right. If you like.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. How long do I have until we need to leave?’

‘Half an hour.’ I jumped up and pushed the chair back to its desk, humming under my breath, triumphant. ‘I’m going to go and get changed.’

‘Why do I feel I’ve been played?’ he called after me, and I put on an extra turn of speed to get to the safety of the ladies’ room before he could change his mind.

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Derwent, who commented on literally everything, said not one word about my appearance when I was finished getting changed, though I was aware of him glancing at me when we were on the Underground. I was wearing jeans, Converse, a fitted navy shirt covered in tiny white polka dots, a navy jacket, a cross-body bag and giant hoop earrings, and my hair was down, blowing around my face in the strange weather of the tunnels as the train carried us across London.

There was enough noise of wheels on rails that we didn't need to talk, but the fifth or sixth time I noticed him looking at me, I gave in.

'What?' I yelled in his ear, and he turned to reply, close enough for us to have kissed if we'd wanted to.

'You look different.'

'Deliberate,' I said, keeping it brief because a) noise b) I really didn't need to spend too much time snuggling up to Josh Derwent, even if we were in public and it was all entirely platonic.

He nodded as if that was all he'd wanted to know, and we were silent again until we arrived at Highbury and Islington station where we switched to the overground. The train was busy and we got separated, to my slight relief. I made no effort to wriggle back to his side and he seemed happy enough with that. Now and then I caught him watching me, still brooding: standard Derwent behaviour. We came out through the ticket barriers to the surprising bustle of the spring evening. Hackney was humming.

'Where are we going?'

'It's about five minutes' walk. The place is called Enlightenment College but don't let that put you off.' I checked the time. 'Come on. We've only got half an hour before the open evening is over.'

I started down the street and realised I was alone. I returned. 'Problem?'

'I don't know yet. Do *you* think there's a problem?'

'I think we're going to be late if we don't get a move on.'

We walked down the street together, Derwent scanning his surroundings out of habit more than anything else, glowering at car drivers and cyclists and anyone who looked remotely suspicious. I felt smaller than usual in my trainers, not quite matching his stride so I had to jog every now and then to catch up. I let him walk on the roadside of the pavement so I was shielded

from the traffic, and hung back when we had to cross the road so he took the lead, even though he had to wait for me to tell him where we were going.

‘It’s just up here.’ I pointed to the college which was housed in a red brick building that had been a Victorian hospital. Students were grouped on the steps, talking and vaping. A steady stream of families and chatty friends came and went, dodging through the big doors. The open evening, in full swing.

‘Don’t think I haven’t noticed.’ His jaw was tight.

‘Nothing to notice.’ I blinked at him, all innocence. ‘Did I thank you for coming with me?’

‘Not yet.’

‘I’ll buy you a drink when we’re finished.’

He stopped with one foot on the steps leading up to the front door. ‘Why might I need a drink, Kerrigan?’

‘It’s a nice evening for a drink. Come on. It’ll be fine.’ I looped my arm through his and tugged. ‘Up we go.’

The pottery studio was on the top floor of the building along with the art studios – light, airy spaces with skylights and huge windows. It was a big room, with space for twenty students at a time. Benches ran along either side of the room, with a double row of wheels in the centre. At the back there was a shelved drying room where the work rested before being fired in the kiln. Everything was coated in fine dust and it smelled slightly dank, like the clay we used. Usually the atmosphere was halfway between creative muddle and manufacturing as the students toiled over their work. Now, with the equipment tidied away for the open evening, it felt serene, as it had the first time I saw it. I had come there in March for the first lesson expecting tranquillity, which I’d discovered almost immediately was my mistake.

A woman from my class, Layla, was at the end of the room with her wife, showing off her work. The wife’s soft voice was musical, rising and falling in a constant stream of praise: *This*

is wonderful; you're so clever. Oh, it's beautiful. A man I didn't know was with his family on the other side of the room. The mother was trying to control a boisterous four-year-old and bouncing a baby in a sling while she listened to her husband holding forth about glazes, her forehead creased with the effort of concentrating. He seemed oblivious, fixated on the display of items he'd made.

Beside me, Derwent was silent, not to say grim.

'Here we are,' I said unnecessarily, with a slight frisson of nerves. 'Oh, there's Anton. Hi!'

Anton came across to greet me, with the commanding swagger common to male yoga teachers and choir masters. He wore an ancient set of overalls covered in smudges of various kinds: clay, paint, something that might have been ash on one sleeve. He had fine silver hair cut quite short but it curled up, making a sort of halo above his lean, handsome face. He was striking, with a neat beard and high cheekbones and the remains of a tan from an early spring trip to Crete. I wondered what Derwent was making of him and the very intense eye contact that was his habit, at least with the female students.

'Maeve, *there* you are.' He said it as if he had been waiting for me all evening, in a deep voice that originated in a posh part of London. It was, the class had agreed, only a matter of time before he made it to television in some capacity.

'Oh dear,' I said softly. 'Are we late? I'm so sorry.'

'Just in time.' He tore his eyes away from my face to take in Derwent, who was looking extremely out of place in his suit and extremely cross – close to maximum glower. 'Hello.'

'This is Anton, my teacher,' I said reverently. 'Anton, this is Josh, my . . .' I trailed off with a giggle. 'My whatever! Come and see what I've been working on, Josh. It's only beginner-level, so don't expect too much.'

‘You’ve done very well in the time, Maeve.’ Anton smiled at me with just a hint of superiority. ‘If you come back to the follow-on course I think you’ll see some real improvements. And then next year you can move on to my post-beginners class.’

‘Maybe one day I might make it to intermediate,’ I suggested and he gave a tolerant little laugh.

‘Walk before you can run, remember. Pottery is . . .?’

‘Patience,’ I finished. ‘I know. I just want to do better.’

‘And you will.’ Anton’s eyes slid away from me. ‘Ah, Ben.’

Ben was the father of the small child who was wailing and trying to free himself from the white-knuckled grip his mother had on him. I faded away to let them talk and Derwent followed me to the side of the room where someone had arranged our work on the benches.

‘Give that kid thirty seconds and most of this would be dust,’ I whispered to him. He glanced back at Anton, eyeing him with minimal positivity.

‘Please tell me the teacher is not the reason you didn’t miss a session.’

‘In a way.’ I raised my voice. ‘I know they’re not great but look, I made these.’

Derwent looked at the bench, and the large green bowl that was the highlight of my work. It was slightly lopsided and something had gone wrong with the glaze, which looked muddy where it wasn’t patchy. Only three other items had survived the firing processes: a very small pot with a wobbling, uneven base, a blob of a figure with pinprick eyes, and a cylinder that was supposed to be a vase, but a crack had formed in the clay so it wouldn’t hold water.

‘You made these?’

‘Yep.’ I stared at them. Eight weeks of work.

‘Thank fuck you’re good at the day job.’

‘Excuse me?’ I did my best outraged expression. ‘You should be saying, *what an amazing job, I didn’t know you were capable of this kind of thing.*’

He was looking amused. 'Sorry, I didn't know I had lines.'

'Well, normal politeness.'

'I thought you'd want me to be honest.'

'No. I want you to be nice.'

'Oh, *nice* . . .' He put his arm around me and pressed a kiss against the side of my head.

'What an amazing job,' he said loudly.

'Isn't she talented?' Anton had arrived at my elbow, unnoticed by me.

'Remarkable,' Derwent agreed. 'I didn't know you were capable of this kind of thing, Maeve.' He turned to face Anton, still with his arm around me. 'Mind you, I don't know much about pottery. Most of what I know is from that film.'

Anton raised his eyebrows, looking supercilious. '*Ghost*?'

'That's the one.' Derwent's grip on me tightened a fraction, locking me against his side. 'I think Maeve's found it inspiring, if you know what I mean. I always look forward to Thursdays.'

Anton choked and muttered something unintelligible.

'Come and see the drying room,' I said, blushing, and yanked Derwent through the studio to the enclosed space at the back. I shut the door and we were alone among the trays of damp and dry clay.

'I had a bet with myself that you'd end up embarrassing me.'

Derwent shook his head. 'Why do I feel like I'm being used, Kerrigan?'

'Because you are. My father always says you should use the tools available to you.' And you are some tool, I added silently, not quite daring to say it. I didn't want to go too far, at least until I'd got what I wanted.

'Explain yourself.'

‘Anton.’ I looked out through the window in the door, making sure he was occupied at the far end of the room. ‘He’s a total menace, obviously.’

‘How long did it take you to spot that?’

‘About one second after hello on night one.’ I turned back to Derwent. ‘Right, let me get to the point before someone interrupts us. This is my issue. I told everyone I was a travel agent.’ It wasn’t unusual for us to keep quiet about the job we did. People didn’t always like being around the police, even when we were off duty.

Derwent nodded, understanding. ‘So you don’t want him to know you’re actually a police officer . . .’

‘But I do want to warn him to stop doing what he’s doing.’

‘To which end you got your most terrifying colleague to come along and scare him.’

‘Well, I got the one who was available.’

Derwent glared, but it was perfunctory. ‘At least I understand now why you’re looking and behaving like this.’

‘Like what?’ I was all innocence.

‘Like you’re harmless.’ Derwent shoved his hands in his pockets, looking murderous. ‘All right. Tell me what he’s doing. Did he upset you?’ *Do I need to kill him?* was what he meant.

I shook my head. ‘Not me. There’s a girl in the class who’s all of sixteen. Marie-Claude. She’s very shy, very gentle, very talented.’

‘Very easy to impress?’

‘Got it in one.’ I pulled a face. ‘Maybe I’m overreacting, but he seems determined to get her on her own. He kept suggesting she could stay back after class to see some special techniques.’

Derwent gave a bark of laughter. ‘Special techniques! What a way to put it. Can I guess someone else found a reason to stay late every time?’

‘I’m keen on the *theory* of pottery, despite my lack of talent.’

‘So he’s trying to seduce her.’

‘Maybe. I think he fancies himself as a kind of guru. He likes to throw in unsolicited life advice along with demonstrating how to make things. There are other young women I’ve seen hanging around the studio from time to time. They were in a little group that he took to Crete with him a couple of months ago. All beautiful, all worried about getting his approval for everything they do.’

‘Proper cult shit.’

‘Getting that way.’ I looked through the door again. ‘Here she is now.’

Marie-Claude had a perfectly oval face and the centre-part hairdo popularised by the Mona Lisa. She was young for her age, very slim, all legs and big eyes. She had come with her parents: her mother was a slighter version of the teenager while her father had contributed height, shoulders and high cheekbones.

‘At least the parents are here,’ Derwent commented, pushing my hair out of his way so he could peer over my shoulder.

‘That might stop him from misbehaving.’

Even as I said it, Anton guided the parents to the bench where Marie-Claude’s work was on display. Her pieces were significantly better and more numerous than mine, and her parents bent over to examine them, commenting excitedly. Behind them, Anton stood next to Marie-Claude and ran a hand lightly down her back.

‘No way. That’s not on,’ Derwent snapped.

I bit my lip, uncertain. ‘Isn’t it borderline?’

‘It’s a move.’ He ran his thumb down my spine slowly, then flattened his hand against the small of my back. It was through two layers of clothes and I still gave a completely involuntary shiver of pleasure. ‘See?’

‘Yes.’ I took a step away from him, blushing again. ‘Thanks for the demo.’

‘Any time,’ he said, watching me lazily.

‘But you see the problem? I can’t say for sure that it’s flirty. He could pass it off as fatherly fondness. Or say that I’d imagined something. I’ve been waiting to see if he’d do anything I could report him for but he’s too careful.’

‘You could warn her.’

‘I tried. She has no idea. She has no concept that he might be interested in her in any way except as an artist. She thinks he’s just being friendly. He could hump her and she’d still be oblivious.’

‘Women,’ Derwent said. ‘So what’s the plan?’

‘There’s no one scarier than you when you’re being intimidating so . . . go and do what you do.’ I made little shooing gestures to encourage him.

‘Warn him off?’

‘Yes please.’

Derwent smiled. ‘I’d be delighted.’

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We found a pub near the station, one that was neither too rough nor too swanky for Derwent.

‘I don’t want to have to arrest everyone in there and I want to be able to buy crisps with my pint,’ he explained after the fourth one he rejected.

‘You ask for so little.’

‘I’m a reasonable man.’

‘Debatable.’

The pub we eventually settled on was clean, neatly painted and traditional. I carried the drinks over to the table Derwent had chosen and sat opposite him. ‘So what did you say? I thought he’d need a change of overalls once you were finished with him.’

‘I made it clear he needed to behave himself. And I told him I only knew two things about clay: you can use it to make things and you can bury people in it. He took that as a threat, for some reason.’ Derwent drank a third of his pint in a single swallow. ‘You’re going to need to find a new pottery teacher, I’m afraid.’

I hugged myself, blissfully happy. ‘Absolutely not. I hated every second of it. I have no talent for it whatsoever.’

He pointed at the chair next to me, where a bulging bag rested. ‘What about your bowl?’

‘You saw my bowl. Let’s not kid ourselves.’

‘Your mum will love it.’

‘She has to. That’s her job.’ I sipped my wine, thinking about Marie-Claude and whether she would ever realise Anton’s intentions had been dishonourable. I’d taken the chance to speak to her father while she was packing up her pieces to take them home. His face had hardened: if Marie-Claude didn’t understand what Anton had been up to, he certainly did. ‘You know I would have given up after the first week if I hadn’t been keeping an eye on Anton.’

‘It explains the enthusiasm.’ He grinned at me. ‘I knew something was up when you hadn’t missed a single lesson.’

‘I don’t even like the feeling of the clay on my hands.’ I pulled a face. ‘It was a nightmare.’

‘All right. Pottery is out. What are you taking up next?’

‘Nothing, probably. I’m not made for hobbies.’ I hesitated. ‘I was wondering . . .’

He looked wary. ‘What?’

Impulsively I ransacked the bag until I found the small, misshapen pot. I set it on the table, where it wobbled, looking faintly pathetic. ‘This was the last thing I made. Would you like it? As a thank you?’

‘There’s no need.’

‘No. I know.’ I looked at it. ‘I mean, it’s crap.’

‘It’s unique.’ He picked it up and dropped it into his jacket pocket. ‘I’ll treasure it, especially if it’s the last Maeve Kerrigan pottery to be made.’

‘I sincerely promise it is.’

He set down his empty pint glass, veiled with the foam residue from his beer. ‘Another drink?’

‘You don’t have time if you want to get home for the football.’

‘Don’t worry about that.’ He stretched. ‘I was thinking of having something to eat here if you’re hungry.’

I was, and I really wanted to sit there opposite him, relaxing into a second glass of wine and some real pub chips. But . . .

‘You had a plan. The match. Steak. I’ve ruined your evening.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. I think it’s worked out perfectly.’

I stared at him, surprised into *seeing* him: the warmth in his eyes, the curve of his lower lip, the undeniably handsome features that were set in a steady, amused expression as he watched me puzzle it out.

‘There’s a television screen right behind me, isn’t there?’

‘Why do you think I picked this table?’ He leaned back. ‘I’m exactly where I need to be.’

Maeve and Josh will return in 2027 in
The Silent Neighbour...