

Killer Queen

A mystery adventure novel

by

Jeff Pratt

“Killer Queen” is the sequel to “The SuDoku Inheritance”.

Having helped Jasmine and Sophia Turner solve the puzzle of their father’s hidden fortune, Nathan has been unceremoniously washed out of their lives..

Now, Jasmine is keen to pursue an even bigger fortune starting with a clue in Venice, but without Nathan’s puzzle-solving skills she’s all awash too.

Sophia needs money now that her meal-ticket husband has died, and she isn’t going to let any sisterly love get in the way of her comfortable retirement plans.

Guillame, their unpredictable brother, also needs cash desperately having blown his last windfall at the casino.

Insurance fraud investigators, Richard and Bridget, are hot on everyone’s heels, asking many awkward questions, with a habit of appearing whenever one of Turner’s many old mates is found dead.

With so much at stake, it’s a brave (or foolhardy) soul who places himself between the siblings and the treasure.

Who can you believe?

Who can you trust?

Sit back and enjoy the ride as the puzzle unfolds,

or follow the clues and race them to a fortune.

GOVERNMENT HEALTH WARNING

SuDoku Kills !

Author's Note

“Killer Queen” is the sequel to “The SuDoku Inheritance”. In that first book, Nathan, Jasmine and Sophia completed a cryptic SuDoku puzzle in order to track down a small fortune left by the girls’ deceased father. Of course, miscellaneous obstacles had to be overcome, including family feuds, determined opponents and the odd dead body.

Their story continues in this book wherein another puzzle stands in the way of further treasures. Of course, there are further obstacles, further feuds, further opponents and further dead bodies!

Although this book is self-contained and could be read as a great yarn right now, I strongly recommend that you read “The SuDoku Inheritance” before you start this book.

The opening chapters of this book paint the essential scene from the earlier book for new readers, and will remind loyal readers of what’s happened so far.

Do not be tempted to jump to the end to see what happens!

Prologue

Andrew Conran held the next clue, the clue to perhaps five million pounds or more.

When William Turner discovered he was dying of cancer, he devised a cryptic SuDoku puzzle whose solution led to his fortune, hidden from the tax man. His hope was for his bickering daughters, Jasmine and Sophia, to solve the puzzle together and locate the money after he had died... and for them to live happily side-by-side ever after.

Jasmine was the *do-goody* charity worker.

Sophia was the spoilt *rich-bitch* wife.

Unfortunately, things didn't turn out quite as Turner had anticipated.

Following Turner's premature death in a car accident, along with Sophia's husband, Hugo, the girls engaged the help of playboy Nathan Spitz who uncovered the mysteries of the puzzle, and also uncovered a whole heap of family mysteries, whilst tasting the mysteries of both sisters.

Unbeknown to Jasmine, Sophia showed her devious avaricious side, and with the help of her black sheep brother, Guillame, she conspired to grab whatever she could with no regard for her *do-goody* sister. Other interested parties also vied for a share of the spoils.

The bounteous inheritance was duly divvied up by Turner's lifelong friend, Patrick O'Flanagan, although nobody was too happy about the result.

Surely, there was more money? Somewhere?

Nathan had found the answer yet again and fingered Andrew Conran, another of Turner's old buddies, as holding the clue to further fortunes. Blindly in love with Jasmine, he had determined that the puzzle led to Venice, where hopefully he could also pursue the puzzle that was Jasmine.

But Jasmine had other ideas. Ideas that she had concealed from Nathan and Sophia. Ideas that would give Jasmine all of the remaining hidden inheritance.

As she despatched Nathan's drowning body – *c/o* Davy Jones – she confessed to causing her father's death and that of Sophia's husband by inducing a heart attack causing them to crash in the mountains; and that afterwards she set fire to O'Flanagan's hotel room. All to avenge for uncertain past crimes they'd committed.

And then, Jasmine set sail for Venice, and for Andrew Conran.

Do-goody Jasmine turned out to be truly the *Killer Queen*.

Part I – Legacy

A few weeks after Nathan's untimely despatch...

Legacy:

- A gift of property, especially personal property, as money, by will; a bequest.
- Anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor.
- A body of persons sent on a mission.
- No longer fit for purpose; struggling to keep up; as in 'legacy computer systems'.

Lyrics from the song 'The Legacy' by Iron Maiden:

*Tell you a thing
That you ought to know
Two minutes of your time
Then on you go*

*Tell tale of the man
All dressed in black
That most of them
Not coming back*

*Sent off to war
To play little games
And on their return
Can't name no names*

*And strange as it sounds
Death knows no bounds
How many get well
Only time will tell.*

Chapter 1.

Fancy a swift one at the Guinness bar then some leisurely shots at St Mark's bar?

That was the enigmatic message on Mr Turner's mobile phone that had led to Patrick O'Flannagan, a.k.a. Mr Guinness on account of his black skin and white hair, at the conclusion of the first puzzle a few weeks ago. It seemed probable that a clue to a second puzzle, and a second fortune, lay at St Mark's bar. Which was where exactly? A thousand churches around the world were named St Marks, the Italo-Byzantine cathedral in Venice being unquestionably the most famous.

But it was doubtful that any church ran a pub or wine bar alongside its ecumenical activities.

I wish to be cremated and my ashes made into three boxes of snuff...

...one for Mr Fat who is certainly AC/DC...

Turner had added this postscript to his last will and testament and O'Flannagan had alluded to *the fat man* as the next link in the treasure trail. A photo album had confirmed that Mr Fat didn't actually swing both ways but was in fact corpulent Andrew Conran, previously of the Diplomatic Corps: AC/DC. His Facebook page confirmed that he was now running several businesses in central Venice and also on the Venice Lido. The Lido forms part of a long spit of sand (or bar) that protects the Venice lagoon (also known as St Mark's basin) from the voracious appetite of the Adriatic Sea.

St Mark's sand bar was where we were hoping to enjoy *some leisurely shots*.

"Are you sure this is the place, Rick?"

I peered through the security gates at the imposing facade. *Conran Villa* it announced in an appropriately flourishing italic font on a large stainless steel plaque. Situated a little way off the *Strasse della Droma* it was unlike any villa that I knew. It looked like something Carlo Scarpa, the contemporary Italian architect, had rejected; instead of a sensuous blend of sympathetic materials sensitive to time and place, it was a severe screaming conflict of sea-blue glass and cream-painted concrete, arguing with itself and with its environment. In the hands of that genius it might have worked, unfortunately the tyro employed here had created a bloated, schizophrenic, techno-office masquerading as a residence. Its only saving grace was a beautifully landscaped park-like garden which borrowed views from both the adjacent marina and the golf course. Perhaps it simply reflected its owner's personality, in which case we were in for an interesting meeting.

The pretty *bambolina* in the nearby *negozio* was certain that the rather large Englishman who bought five bottles of gin each and every week from her humble corner shop did indeed live in this ridiculous building.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead. Summer had barely started but the heat was irrepressible. I smoothed down the three short ginger legs of my designer beard – the only hair on my bleached head not to have received a number one cut; I fiddled with my single large square diamond ear stud – I would never get used to it: then I brushed off some imaginary dirt from my rather crumpled white linen jacket; and finally, I adjusted my pink-tinted shades. I pushed heavily on my walking stick to stand as erect as I could, my gammy knee making six-foot difficult to reach these days. I stared confidently into the security camera, hoping that the lacerations on my face that were still healing did not frighten the occupants. "Stick to the story, Bee. Let me do the talking." My voice sounded like a strangled frog and I wondered if it would last the evening, and whether my throat would ever recover from its recent trauma.

Bridget nodded, "Yes, boss," then screwed up her face, her cute dimples laughing at me. "Spies must have been paid well in those days. Either that or he's already cashed in Turner's missing millions." She too tidied herself up; not that short spiky mousey hair streaked with bright pink highlights, a face full of miscellaneous ironmongery, complimented by not-so-subtle tattoos on her

neck depicting god-knows-what, passed as particularly smart. But her busy-bee laughing green eyes captivated anyone who fell under their spell, including me.

“Here goes nothing.” I pressed the intercom on the stone pillar to the left of the name plaque. Nothing. I shrugged and tried again.

“*Si?*” the speaker squawked.

“Mr Conran?”

“*Non qui. Al lavoro.*”

“At work?” Bridget suggested.

“*Prego.* And where would that be?” I enquired.

“*Non capisco.*”

“He doesn’t understand.” Bridget took out her phone, tapped a few icons and spoke slowly into it, “Where... does... he... work?” She placed it near the intercom and tapped the screen. *Opla! Hey, presto!* Instant electronic Italian! “*Dove lavora?*” The phone obediently waited and translated the reply - into gibberish. She tried again, breaking the conversation down into bite-size chunks.

“He runs a bar just off *Piazza San Marco*,” she eventually informed me smugly, “The Conran Cafe.”

“*Grazie. Prego. Ciao.*” I said to the intercom, using my full range of the language. A buzz and a click confirmed the conversation was over.

The *vaporetto* across the lagoon to old Venice proper offered a choppy ride across the shallow waters but it was the only practical alternative to a lengthy taxi ride around the periphery of the lagoon which we’d already endured after landing at Marco Polo airport. We only had carry-on luggage so we easily found a corner to sit in. It was rammed full of tourists snapping selfies against any available backdrop, desperate not to miss any unmissable monument, even if they had no idea what it was. I’ve always hated boats and this didn’t help.

“Cheer up. I thought you said this should be fun,” chided Bridget. “Look, you can see the *campanile* now.”

She was right, the water-bus loudspeaker announced that we were approaching our stop for *Piazza San Marco*. My nauseous stomach anticipated a quiet period although it didn’t relish the renown Venetian stink from its canals of sewage, fermenting nicely as the long hot days took their grip. “I don’t recall saying this trip would be fun,” I protested quietly.

“You sure as hell don’t laugh much, Rick, do you?”

And I didn’t recall promising to be an engaging companion either. “Nothing to laugh at anymore really,” I mumbled.

“Jeez, someone must have really hurt you.” She turned her back on me pointedly and obligingly took a photo for a pair of oversized Japanese girls whose bulk threatened to eclipse the bright afternoon sun.

I did once laugh and sing, always had a merry tune in my head, with a devilish sense of humour. But things happen. People turn out to be different. Unexpected. Friendships die and with them a little piece of the heart dies too. The tunes become dirges. And the humour slowly dies. As mine had.

We located the cafe in a side street off the *piazza* near the Hard Rock cafe, where prices were parasitically as high as the legendary *Caffe Florian* in the main square. Conran had *just popped out* so we ordered two lattes and sat down to wait. It was an expensive wait at twelve euros a cup but provided cheap entertainment as we sat and people-watched. Bridget’s indomitable spirit perked me up a bit as always, her pretty eyes jumping from one dumbstruck tourist to another.

“That’s him!” I shouted, as I jumped up, spilling the remnants of my expensive coffee. “Stay here and guard the bags.”

It had to be Conran. Well over a hundred kilos of perspiring fat squeezed into a white suit with a pale bald head stuck on top of a Danny DeVito sized body, rather like a melting snowman. He was issuing a fistful of orders to his staff. He was used to being obeyed.

I pushed my way through the other customers as politely as possible and people obliging moved away on seeing my walking stick. I saw him talk briefly with the barista before briefly looking my way. I waved to attract his attention. He turned away and disappeared behind the serving counter into the rear of the cafe. The barista barred my way, arms folded, saying nothing. His two-by-one metre frame meant he didn't need to say anything.

Conran had definitely seen me. Why was he playing hard to get?

As I considered my options, Bridget waved frantically at me, pointing out of the cafe window.

There was Conran, hurrying down a side alley across the way.

I signalled Bridget to stay put and I headed off in pursuit. Conran was large but not slow and my own pace hindered by my gammy leg was barely sufficient to keep up. As I rounded each corner I caught a momentary glimpse of his portly rear before it disappeared around another corner. Occasionally he looked over his shoulder but I don't think he saw me.

I had no idea where he was going except to say that he was heading roughly north-east according to the sun. My geography of Venice was poor. I thought I knew the rough whereabouts of the main causeway in from the north-west with its car park on the *Tronchetto*, the railway station, the cruise ship port, the Grand Canal and the *Arsenale*, but as the buildings closed in on me and stole the light I realised I'd surely struggle to find my way out of this labyrinth. After ten minutes or more I saw signposts for *Cannaregio*, the Jewish quarter, suggesting we were now heading north into an area that I considered to be reasonably gentile. As I continued to follow Conran the passages were getting narrower and the buildings seemed to be getting higher. I had no idea where I was now but it certainly wasn't in the most salubrious of the six *sestieri* that have defined the districts of Venice since the days of the Medici dynasty.

My leg was aching and my lungs were protesting over the unscheduled exercise. Even my hand joined in the protest as it gripped my walking stick desperately trying to keep a grip on reality. I felt like a novice beagle hound chasing the old fox knowing full well that I was out of breath and out of my depth, and all the time the sly old fox was watching me, smiling to itself. Conran had apparently lost none of his street-craft spy kills.

The ornate doorways of San Marco were now replaced by nailed-up boards, elegant windows were replaced by corrugated iron and plastic sheeting, clean street cobbles were replaced by dog-crapped potholes, graffiti took the place of Renaissance artwork, grand stone bridges were replaced by rickety wooden crossings, wide canal paths were replaced by narrow tracks, grand piazzas were replaced by sordid yards, and hordes of well-dressed tourists were replaced by sparse examples of scruffy low-life. The whole area smelt foul, of vomit and excrement.

I'd lost him. I was lost. I was in trouble.

I took out my phone to consult Google. No signal. The narrow lanes and tall buildings saw to that.

That was my mistake. A big mistake.

"Nice phone, mister." He appeared from nowhere and spoke in reasonable English with an East European accent. Dressed in torn shorts and a worn-out green hoodie, his albino skin and sunken eyes looked like piss holes in the snow. Too many drugs and not enough salad.

I considered my options: hit him hard with my cane and hobble off as fast I could; or, give him the phone, and presumably my wallet, and hope he went away. Either way, I had lost Conran for sure.

Before I could decide, Hoodie made up my mind for me, he whistled loudly and three more hoodies emerged from the shadows.

Chapter 2.

They started on the cane, presumably looking for a secreted sword like that used by the classic Edwardian adventurer, Adam Adamant. I remembered watching the sixties TV series on Netflix or Amazon or somewhere; there was suave and dashing Gerald Harper frozen in ice for fifty years or more, and the definitely unfrozen - nay, hot - Juliet Harmer, his sidekick. Once my assailants were satisfied the cane had no secret weapon they propped it against the wall and stamped on it hard, they appeared to have the process off to a fine art. A resounding crack gave them two pieces with jagged ends, one of which Hoodie used to push my throat to the wall whilst the others rifled my pockets and patted me down expertly for hidden weapons. A phone and my wallet were all they found. No watch. Hoodie put the phone in his pocket and another hoodie examined the contents of the wallet. He handed the cash to Hoodie. "Cards?" he said.

I shook my head as best as I was able with a spike in my throat. "Never use them," I croaked. There were none in the wallet.

"Liar!" He smiled and pushed the stick deeper into my throat.

I gestured for them to search me further. I tried to show a brave face although my legs were jellifying, and not solely because of their recent exertions. "Cash only. It's safer," I said. That is, safer until you're mugged.

Hoodie seemed to believe me. "Name?"

"Rick Leigh," I croaked.

"Again?"

"Rick Leigh. Richard Leigh," I shouted clearly, refusing to portray the fear that I felt.

"Prove it."

"What?" Why did he care who I was? He'd got my cash, nearly two hundred euros, and my phone, to be sold for another two hundred euros probably. I carried nothing. I shrugged, fearing the consequences.

Hoodie nodded. He seemed satisfied. He released the broken cane from my throat and took a pace backwards, looking around him presumably to check no one was watching.

Now what? I'd seen their faces. Was this it? They'd kill me for a few hundred euros?

"He's clean, Mr Conran, sir," shouted Hoodie, and Conran emerged from an adjacent doorway looking as smug as a slug could.

"Thanks, boys," he said, and gave Hoodie a fistful of banknotes. "Drop by this evening and I'll see you right. I've some good stuff coming in."

"Want us to hang around, Mr Conran, sir?" Hoodie gestured to me, no doubt waiting for the word to kick the shit out of me.

He waved them away. "I think I can take it from here."

Hoodie and his gang hopped and skipped down the alleyway and were soon out of sight.

"So... Mr Richard Leigh... why have you been following me for the last three days?"

I nursed my neck trying to massage some blood into it. Hoodie's handiwork was going to leave a nice bruise, and my voice wasn't working too well either. "Three days? You're not much of a spy, Conran, I only arrived yesterday." I saw no reason to kow-tow to this man. Without his goons, I thought I could take him if needed.

He stepped closer. He was breathing quite heavily. His breath smelt of stale coffee and there was a bucket of sweat on his face from his little jaunt through the city. "What exactly do you know about me?" He tried to sound menacing. And failed.

I told him all that I knew of him, which wasn't much: friend of Mr William Turner (deceased father of daughters, Jasmine and Sophia); colleague of said Turner in the diplomatic corps, i.e. a spy; owner of a coffee bar in the piazza and a restaurant and house on the lido; and from what I had heard, also a dealer on the side. "Have I missed anything?" I goaded, my courage returning.

He nodded, satisfied. "One thing. What do you want with me?"

"You're the next clue."

"Clue?" He raised his eyebrows to emphasise his confusion.

"Don't play dumb, Conran. The clue to Turner's next puzzle. His last puzzle led to Patrick O'Flannagan and this one leads to you."

He nodded. It seemed I had established my credentials, but I was premature. "I expected Jasmine or Sophia, not a messenger boy."

"They're still grieving," I said, a little too facetiously.

"Over Turner? Don't make me laugh." He pondered a while. "So they sent you, did they, Mr Rick Leigh?"

I nodded. This was it. He either believed me and would hand over the next clue, or he'd walk away and I guess I'd have to beat it out of him later, when his goons weren't close by.

He breathed close again. Thinking. Pondering.

Then he stood upright, shrugged and said, "What the hell, it's not my money. Turner never said who'd be coming." He brushed the lapels of my jacket carefully with the back of his hand, as if making everything all right again. "Sorry about your cane." Then he mopped his brow with an immaculately pressed white handkerchief from his top pocket. "By the way, what happened to your face? Hopefully my friends weren't too rough on you."

I was getting used to seeing my scarred face in the mirror. It was healing quickly but took some people by surprise. "Nah, it must have been his cousins," I joked. No point in trying to explain.

"OK then. Be at my villa tonight, one a.m. after I finish at the restaurant. Bring some ID this time. You know where it is I take it?"

I nodded.

I wasn't relishing another ferry trip to that gaudy monument to his ego.

Chapter 3.

Conran had the next clue and he was ready to hand it over to me. It seemed that this was going to be a whole lot easier than I'd dared imagine. Jasmine clearly hadn't arrived here before us even though she'd had a few weeks head start. Perhaps it was her who had been tailing him for three days, assuming Conran wasn't imagining that; but given the ease with which he snared me, I'd say his spying skills were still pretty hot.

There was also the matter of a new phone and several hundred missing euros to discuss, not to mention the cost of my new walking stick. I'd learnt from Adam Adamant when choosing my new stick and also from Boris Palatnik, a renowned American cane maker, recommended to me by a dubious dealer in a dingy backstreet on my way back to Bridget. The next mugger might be in for a little shock.

Bridget and I dumped our bags in the hotel and I retrieved my passport for our meeting with Conran, as requested. It might present a problem later but hopefully he really held no opinion about who collected the clue so long as they sounded credible. We enjoyed a pleasant but quiet dinner in the hotel, biding our time. I was in no mood to do the tourist bit so Bridget sulked playfully and went off exploring by herself, peevishly refusing to further rehearse our forthcoming evening performance.

Eventually it was time.

The trip across the lagoon was surprisingly pleasant. The wind had dropped and the boat glided like an ice-skater across the mirror-smooth waters. The clear sequined sky had a strange calming effect on me as if infinite possibilities were waiting to unfold.

I checked the time on my phone. One o'clock exactly. "OK, Bee, let's hope the hired help lets us in this time. I can already smell that five million bucks." I rang the intercom buzzer.

No answer.

And again.

Bridget rattled the security gate in frustration only to find it yielded. She looked at me and smiled. "It just keeps on getting easier, doesn't it?"

We walked quickly along the polished concrete path, my new cane aiding my progress in the gloom. There was no exterior illumination, the copious foliage cutting off any external intrusion, and only a hint of light came from inside. Conran was probably ensconced in an armchair with a brandy – or a line of coke – and wouldn't want to get up to answer the bell. The hired help had retired to bed or gone home, we assumed. The front façade of the building appeared to be a continuous wall of seamless shiny glass panels, there was no sign of a door. A small glow on the paving revealed a foot-switch which I pressed tentatively with the ferule on my cane and a glass panel slid open silently and eerily. I looked at Bridget and made an appropriate *I'm impressed* face and we entered.

"Conran?" I shouted.

There was a light showing from the back of the villa. I called again as we moved through the large open space towards it.

"Asleep," said Bridget, "or on the john."

Despite the minimal lighting we found we could pick our way carefully through the open-plan lounge area. There was minimal furniture: a white sofa with a zebra throw and two white leather hammock chairs that looked inviting and likely impossible to escape from. A steel lamp standard stood obstructively in the middle of the room. It was like moving inside a stainless-steel ball-bearing, everything shone and glimmered featurelessly. And despite the time of year it felt cold. The house had no soul.

An open-tread spiral metal staircase with wire balustrades rose up from our left as we moved past an eating area which would have commanded amazing views over the lagoon were the shutters not tightly shut. The kitchen was equally bereft of life although the kettle was warm, a bottle of white wine was uncorked – a rather nice local Soave – and two glasses poured, both untouched. Was that for me or someone else?

We backtracked and went up the staircase. On our right was a small study housing a simple office desk, a few scruffy box files and a small poorly-populated bookcase. The master bedroom appeared to be next. The Queen-size four-poster steel bed had obviously been made but there were deep furrows and depressions in the silver silk embroidered covers. I noticed leather straps hanging loosely on the bed head and looked up to the ceiling to see myself looking downwards. An interesting boudoir indeed.

Bridget pulled my attention to a pair of ladies knickers discarded on the rug as she turned them over with her foot. "Janet Reger. Someone has class."

Lucky Conran, I thought as I sniffed the scent in the air: Jean Paul Gaultier. Who needed a tracker dog? I shuddered and neglected to tell Bridget that I happened to know that Jasmine Turner had a penchant for that very same perfume. "Only the bathroom left then," I said, as I realised the low hissing sound I'd heard came from behind a door off the corridor.

Things are always in the last place you look, aren't they, and Conran was no exception.

Bizarrely, Conran had instructed us to be here at an exact time to hand over the next clue, and had chosen that moment to take a shower. It appeared he had brought home a lady friend and after satisfying themselves upstairs, they were now refreshing themselves ready for wine. "Conran!" He couldn't possibly hear us above the noise of the water jets. "I guess we wait," I said.

"Sod that. I don't like being messed around." Before I could stop her, Bridget pushed the bathroom door open expecting to be assailed by clouds of steam.

But it was cold. There were no voices to be heard. And there were no signs of movement behind the frosted glass shower door.

I moved forward and opened the shower door. Conran looked at me, surprised. He didn't blink. He didn't say anything.

It was immediately apparent that he wasn't going to hand over the next clue, after all.

Conran looked very dead.

Chapter 4.

I turned off the shower tap, soaking my jacket in the process, and looked over Conran's lifeless form being careful not to touch him. He was sat in the large shower tray, legs akimbo, a large bar of soap cradled in his groin, and a trickle of fresh blood on his temple. I saw blood on my hand too and realised that it had come from the shower tap.

"Must have slipped on the soap, whacked his head on the tap, and bam, no more Conran," Bridget said dejectedly. "Damn it, we were so close."

I nodded. "The clues might still be here."

Bridget brightened. "The study?"

We retraced our footsteps and a quick sweep of the study found nothing of interest: a desk diary with our appointment in it but little else, perhaps two entries a month; a small photo on the desk of a pretty young oriental woman with a hand-drawn kiss on it; an expensive looking gold fountain pen and ink well; a small Tiffany lamp, and a laptop that refused to boot up. On a nearby shelf was a single photo of eight men, taken many years ago when they were in their early forties perhaps. Maybe a college reunion photo. I recognised Turner, O'Flannagan, Conran, and someone else who looked familiar although I couldn't finger him. On the reverse it named them all, the others being James Fleming, Tony Marcello, John Steward, David Cornwell, and the familiar guy, Hugo Buttane, Sophia's dead husband.

I checked the drawers of the desk: miscellaneous business papers for the bar, spare stationery, pens and pencils, household documents, insurances, and his last will and testament which I decided was none of my business. Everything was filed, neat and tidy – not that everything amounted to much. There was no file marked "Turner's next clue".

Sensibly Bridget had looked elsewhere. In the bin. "Bingo!" she exclaimed, holding a screwed up foolscap manila envelope addressed to Conran in what I knew was Turner's distinctive handwriting. It had been ripped open. It contained the first SuDoku puzzle and its clues, and clearly something was once stapled to it, presumably the next puzzle. But whatever it had been, it was now gone. A letter in the bin confirmed it. Turner had instructed Conran to await a visit from either of the sisters and hand them the next puzzle. The letter implied there was several million pounds at stake.

"Shit, shit, shit," I muttered. I should have known it wasn't going to be that easy.

Jasmine had been here after all. Two wine glasses and the hint of that perfume.

Was that before or after Conran had his mishap in the shower?

And what about the discarded panties, whose were those?

"Do we call the police?" asked Bridget. We were back in the bathroom.

"Let's leave first, then call them. We don't want to be questioned by them right now." I looked at Conran's sad body. Why have a cold shower – cooling off after a good shag? Where was the shy lover then? Done a runner after he slipped? Someone else who didn't want to be involved with the police?

"Are you sure this was an accident?" said Bridget mischievously. She was always after a story for her newspaper. I'd promised her a great scoop of a story already and a juicy murder would be a great bonus, might even return her to favour with the London editors who had ostracised her last year after her cock-up with the Energy Secretary scandal.

It crossed my mind that someone could have bashed him over the head and then dumped him in the shower. They'd need to be super strong to drag his fat ass in there, certainly not a mere slip like Jasmine.

"What if she was in the shower with him, bashed him with... something, and then got dressed?" postulated Bridget.

There was no likely murder weapon around. Nor was there a trail of water across the floor where a fleeing assailant might have dripped. No discarded wet towel either. I shrugged. Unlucky bugger. Unlucky us.

Bridget knelt beside the body like an experienced crime scene investigator. C.S.I. Venice – it could catch on. She desperately needed that journalistic scoop and I imagined her brain cogs whirring, inventing some exotic demoniacal scenario that might, sort of, fit the facts.

“Come on, Bee, let’s go before someone else comes.”

“No, look. He’s eating something,” she said defiantly.

“Was eating,” I corrected. “So he eats in the shower. Big deal.”

“Paper?”

“Well... perhaps he’s eaten the next puzzle to avoid it falling into the wrong hands,” I joked, “Like a good spy would.”

“No, look,” said Bridget excitedly.

I knelt next to her and between us we gingerly emptied his mouth and pieced together the soggy masticated mess.

But it wasn’t the next puzzle. It wasn’t a SuDoku grid. It wasn’t a cryptic clue.

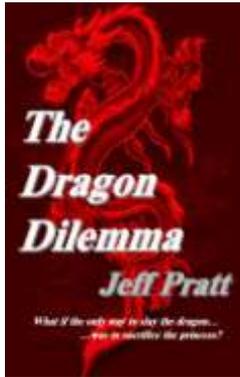
It was a playing card.

The eight of clubs.

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The Dragon Dilemma is an intriguing adventure novel in which a beguiling ancient puzzle leads to political intrigue and the search for dragons, literally and metaphorically, in both private and public lives.

Rob had quit the life-sapping rat-race of the City "to find himself" in the idyllic Cleddau Estuary of rural Pembrokeshire, West Wales. But he found himself broke and lonely, faced by a whole series of dilemmas.

His first dilemma was the girl, Josie, who could be a welcome distraction from his woes. But her passion was reserved for ancient history and the clues in the enigmatic manuscript that had come into Rob's possession.

Rob's second dilemma was the Red Dragon Syndicate that appeared to hold the clue to the manuscript. Who was behind the secretive organisation and what was their goal? Was it simply a rich man's investment club or were its aims much grander? Why were doors to the corridors of power being pushed opened for Rob? And why was Rob's friend being blackmailed to install electronic devices in key locations, such as the new liquid gas plant at Milford Haven.

But Rob's ultimate dilemma was to find a way out of the madness for all of them. As the clues in the manuscript unravelled, a deeper sinister puzzle revealed itself and the clue-hunters became the hunted.

Against a backdrop of an insidious terrorist campaign, Rob and Josie must enter the dragon's lair and confront their foes and fears. From the hedonistic dream world of the Ionian Sea to the nightmare of the crypt at Lake Bala, North Wales, they face the ultimate dilemma: to allow fanatics to change the political landscape of the country, or to sacrifice everything and everyone they hold dear.

How would you face the ultimate Dragon Dilemma?

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checkout the publisher's website (www.mallaktech.co.uk/ebooks)