

Lost Soul

Excerpt

Marnie Walker and Ralph Lombard stepped out arm-in-arm from the ancient central building of All Saints College, Oxford, into the quadrangle known simply as Front Quad. They had just taken their leave of the Master at the end of a lunch-gathering to mark the retirement of a senior fellow, Dr Seymour Younghusband, a specialist in Roman Law. The former Master of All Saints, Dr Jeremy Walters, had been brought out of retirement to give an appreciation of Dr Younghusband's life and work and to wish him well in the future.

The late afternoon sun was shining on the honey-coloured limestone façade opposite; the whole square glowed in the spring warmth. Some of the surfaces were covered in Virginia creeper and were already decked in fresh green foliage. Marnie was feeling slightly drowsy after three glasses of wine over lunch. She leaned into her husband and said in as steady a voice as she could manage, 'I've always thought the Oxford colleges owed much of their style to Cotswold vernacular architecture. It's probably due to the colour of the stone. Why is this called Front Quad, Ralph? It's surely ...' Her voice tailed away.

Ralph turned his head to look at her. 'What is it?' he asked.

Marnie was staring at a shape on the striped lawn that was trimmed to almost velvet perfection. Ralph followed her gaze and saw a figure standing on the grass, bent forward with head in hands.

'Do you recognise who that is, Ralph?' Marnie said.

'I can't be certain, though I think it could be Byron.'

Marnie was surprised. 'I'm sure you don't mean the poet?'

'No. It's definitely not a statue. Anyway, Byron the poet wasn't an Oxford man ... Cambridge, I believe. No, Marnie, I'm pretty sure that is Byron Kirk.' Ralph pronounced the name slowly and reverentially.

Marnie looked puzzled. 'It's odd. I don't normally recognise the names of your colleagues, but I do believe that name sounds familiar. Where have I heard it before?'

'Hardly surprising. Byron is well-known as one of the most controversial men in the country.'

'Do you think he's all right, Ralph? I'm wondering if he might be unwell. Let's go and see.'

Unlinking their arms, they hurried across the grass. As they approached the man, it became increasingly obvious that he was deeply distressed. They could hear him sobbing, rocking gently back and forth. He seemed unaware of their presence until they stood beside him. Ralph put a hand on Byron's shoulder.

'Can we do anything for you, my friend, or would you prefer to be left alone? We don't want to impose –'

Byron turned his head sharply, and they could see that his face was streaked damp with tears. 'Left alone,' he repeated. 'That's rather the point, isn't it?'

Marnie saw Ralph's expression change; concern gave way to a frown. Ralph bit his lower lip as if realising he had committed a *faux pas*.

Byron stumbled awkwardly. Marnie took his elbow to steady him and put a business card in his hand. Without looking at it, he thrust it into the top pocket of his jacket and set off across the lawn. Over his shoulder he said, 'Forgive me. I ... I have to go.'

Marnie made as if to follow him, but Ralph restrained her, placing a hand on her arm, shaking his head. They made their way to where Ralph had parked the car. He had been abstemious at lunch, only drinking a small spritzer, and felt able to drive them home. Marnie said nothing until she settled in the front passenger seat and fastened her safety belt.

'What did he mean by *that's rather the point*, Ralph, and why did it embarrass you?'

Ralph looked contrite. 'I said something stupid. I just wasn't thinking. His wife died a few weeks ago. They'd been together for over thirty years and were devoted to

each other. It was when I said *left alone* that I suddenly realised that I'd touched a raw nerve.'

'I'm sure you didn't mean to be taken literally,' Marnie said. 'Can we come back to my question? How is it that I know his name, and why did you say he was controversial?'

'He's been in the papers numerous times. That's how you know him. He's a committed atheist, written several books and presented a number of TV programmes on the subject. He even had a famous – some would say *infamous* – debate on television with a former Archbishop of Canterbury ... virtually accused the old boy of being delusional.'

'And his wife?'

'Oh, they both shared the same views as far as religion's concerned. She'd been famous as a young woman ... quite a well-known fashion model: Nadia Grey. She gave up her career when they married and tried to start a family.'

'Tried?'

'I gather she had a series of miscarriages and eventually gave up.'

'I know about that sort of thing,' Marnie said quietly.

Ralph reached across and gently squeezed her hand. 'Sorry, darling. I just seem to be putting my foot in it today.'

'No, it's okay. I try not to think about it, but, you know, sometimes ...'

'Of course you do. It's natural.' Ralph started the engine. 'Anyway, I don't suppose you'll encounter Byron Kirk again.'

But in that judgment Ralph would soon prove to be entirely wrong.