False Alarm by Veronica Heley

Bea Abbot ran a domestic agency which did not, repeat *not*, deal with murder . . . until, that is, she became involved in the affair of Lady Ossett’s divorce.

Maggie yelled, ‘My mother is a cow!’

Bea didn’t bother to lift her eyes from her computer. ‘What you mean is that she’s a selfish, conniving woman who has done her best to ruin your life.’

‘That’s what I said. I could scream!’

Bea Abbot blinked. She’d never met Lady Ossett, but understood from Maggie that her mother was a shallow, pretty, fashionable woman who demanded lots of attention.

Bea said, ‘Well; scream, then.’

Maggie was a tall, well-built girl. She opened her mouth and yelled. Her lungs were healthy, her range impressive. She made, as they say, the welkin ring.

Bea didn’t cover her ears, but she was thankful that the agency had closed for the day and her staff long since departed, or she might have had people banging on her office door, demanding to know who was being murdered.

‘Want to tell me about it?’

‘No,’ said Maggie. ‘I’m going to scream and scream till I make myself sick!’

‘How about breaking a plate or two? That’s supposed to do the trick equally well.’

‘Why not? The mood I’m in . . .’ Dressed in jeans, low boots and a violently patterned sweat-shirt, Maggie set off for the stairs.

Bea was over thirty years older and she was wearing a slim pencil skirt and high heels. Nevertheless, she reached the first-floor kitchen just in time to see Maggie pulling the dishwasher open. ‘Not those plates, Maggie. We’ve still got a complete set. What about the ones we keep for the cat? Top cupboard by the back door.’

Maggie screeched, but abandoned the dishwasher. She found a couple of mismatched plates in the cupboard and lifted one high above her head. ‘I would like to—’

‘Not that one, Maggie,’ said Bea. ‘You know Winston prefers it. Isn’t there something more suitable in the saucepan cupboard?’

‘What?’ Maggie hesitated, then put the plate down. ‘You’re trying to get me to be reasonable. Well, it won’t work. And don’t tell me I should talk it over with my beloved boy-friend because he is an idiot. He thinks I should love and obey my mother—’

‘That’s because he’s never met her,’ said Bea.

‘True,’ said Maggie, and broke into a harsh laugh. She repeated the word, ‘True.’ Still laughing, she pounded the work-top with her fists. Closed her eyes. Put her head down on her arms, still laughing. Crying.

Bea pushed Maggie onto a high stool and put her arms about her. ‘There, there. There, there.’

Maggie reached blindly for a box of tissues and blew her nose. Bea put the kettle on. Quiet descended; except that this new kettle was rather noisy. Bea didn’t like noise and wondered if she should offer the kettle to Maggie to throw down the stairs into the courtyard below. Its destruction would be spectacular.

Only, it was now five o’clock on a dark winter’s afternoon, and if you did drop anything from the balcony you probably wouldn’t see the result. Also, they didn’t have a spare kettle, so perhaps she’d better just make them some tea. Strong, with sugar. And see if there were any biscuits in the tin. Bea pushed a mug of tea at Maggie and sat down beside her.

Maggie had coloured her short-cropped hair purple to match her eyeshadow this week, but tears had smudged her mascara so that she looked like a panda. ‘I could emigrate. There are still countries in the world where extradition treaties don’t work, aren’t there?’

 ‘Mm. Would you want to live in one of those places?’

 Maggie shook her head. ‘There’s no help for it. I’m doomed.’

 ‘Tell me about it.’

 Maggie reached for the box of tissues again and blew her nose. Thoroughly. ‘There’s nothing anyone can do. I’ve got to go back home to look after my mother.’

Bad news. Years of being denigrated by her mother, followed by a disastrous marriage and divorce, had left Maggie without any sense of self-worth.

Bea remembered how shy and socially inept the girl had been when she’d first drifted into the agency. ‘I seem to remember that didn’t work too well before.’

‘You think I don’t know it? Listen; I had an appointment at number twenty seven this morning, right? The client wasn’t happy with the toilet the plumber had installed, said it wasn’t the one she’d chosen. The plumber said the client needed an optician not a plumber, so I arranged to meet them both at eleven to thrash it out.’

Maggie was making a name for herself as a project manager for building alterations. She could juggle half a dozen workmen on two sites and never let a tile fall to the ground . . . but she couldn’t cope with Lady Ossett.

 ‘Just as I reached the client’s house, there was a phone call from my mother. She was crying. She wanted me to go round there straight away, that very minute. She said it was desperately important.’ She blew her nose again. ‘I should have known better.’

 Bea pushed the tin of biscuits closer. ‘Feed your face.’

 Maggie took a biscuit. ‘I hailed a taxi. I rang the client and the plumber to explain that there was an emergency. I suggested we meet later. They were both furious. The client had been going to give me another, bigger job if I’d managed to solve the problem with the plumber, but as it is . . . Anyway, I got up to my mother’s and, wouldn’t you know, she was on the phone to a friend, complaining about the noise from somebody’s decorator or builder below, and could only spare the time to ask me to make her some tea and a sandwich. When I did, she said I’d used the wrong tea, and why wasn’t there any lemon in it, and couldn’t I cut the bread thinner?

 ‘She went from one phone call to the other, re-arranging a bridge party or a drinks party or something. She had me dashing around the flat, picking things up for her, and when I said I had to leave, she said she’d been putting a brave front on for my benefit, but I must realise she was in pieces and it would be too, too selfish of me not to help her when she was in such distress.’ Maggie took another biscuit. ‘It turns out my step-father has left her.’

 Bea counted on her fingers. ‘Is he her third?’

 ‘Fourth. Lucas. I liked him well enough, though I thought he was a fool to tie himself up with her, but . . . men see what they want to see, don’t they? A pretty face, blonde hair, a good figure, lots of caresses and baby-blue eyes? They don’t see the shrewd mind behind the blue eyes. Well, actually, I think Lucas did. She seemed to amuse him. She’s an excellent hostess and she loved being Lady Muck and living in the penthouse. I thought it might last. But he’s gone.’

 ‘She wanted reassurance from you that she was still lovable?’

 ‘She wanted me to fetch her best black from the cleaners. She had tickets for the theatre and wanted to wear that particular dress. Oh, and she wanted an escort for the evening, and why hadn’t I learned to drive yet, it was extremely thoughtless of me not to realise she was going to need someone to keep her company, though not with that makeup that makes you look like a clown, and why you wear that stupid top, I do not know, because it doesn’t give you anything in the way of a shape, dear, which you really could do with, take my word for it, and no wonder your husband decided he could do better, because honestly, dear, you don’t even try, do you?’ Silence. ‘I’m going to emigrate.’

 ‘Mm. Why has Lucas left her?’

 A shrug. ‘He says someone tried to murder him and it’s not safe for him to live there until the culprit’s been dealt with.’