



ROBERT GODDARD

HIS CLASSIC BESTSELLER

Caught in the Light



About the Book

On assignment in Vienna, photographer Ian Jarrett falls passionately in love with the mysterious and beautiful Marian. Back in the UK, Ian resolves to leave his wife for her - only to find Marian has disappeared, and the photographs of their brief time together have been savagely destroyed.

Searching desperately for her, Ian comes across a quiet Dorset churchyard. Here he meets a psychotherapist, who is looking for a missing client of hers: a woman who claims she is the reincarnation of Marian Esguard, who may have invented photography ten years before Fox Talbot.

But why is Marian Esguard unknown to history? And who and where is the woman Ian Jarrett has sacrificed everything for?

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CAUGHT IN THE LIGHT

ROBERT GODDARD

PART ONE

COMPOSITION

ONE

I WAS IN Vienna to take photographs. That was generally the reason I was anywhere then. Photographs were more than my livelihood. They were part of my life. The way light fell on a surface never failed to tug at my imagination. The way one picture, a single snapshot, could capture the essence of a time and place, a city, a war, a human being, was embedded in my consciousness. One day, one second, I might close the shutter on the perfect photograph. There was always the chance, so long as there was film in my camera. Finish one; load another; and keep looking, with eyes wide open. That was my code. Had been for a long time.

I'd come close once, in Kuwait at the end of the Gulf War, when some weird aptness in the knotted shape of a smoke plume from a burning oil well made my picture the one newspapers and magazines all over the world suddenly wanted. Brief glory from an even briefer moment. Just luck, really. But they say you make your own – the bad as well as the good.

I went freelance after the Gulf, which should have been a clever move and would probably have worked out that way, but for life beyond the lens taking a few wrong turnings. The mid-Nineties weren't quite the string of triumphs I'd foreseen when my defining image of the Gulf madness made it to the cover of *Time* magazine. That's why I was in Vienna, rather than in Bosnia or Zaïre or anywhere even faintly newsworthy. But, still, I was taking photographs. And I was being paid to do it. It didn't sound bad to me.

The assignment was actually a piece of happenstance. I'd done the London shots for a glossy coffee-table picture book: *Four Cities in Four Seasons - London, Paris, Rome, Vienna*, a European co-publishing venture that netted me a juicy commission to hang round moody eyefuls of my home city in spring, summer, autumn and winter. I'd given my own particular slant to daffodils in Hyde Park, heat haze and traffic fumes in Piccadilly, rain-sodden leaves in Berkeley Square and a snow-patched roofscape in WC1. I'd also reconciled myself to the best and truest of what I'd delivered being tossed aside. It was, after all, only a picture book. It wasn't meant to challenge anyone's preconceptions or make them see instead of look. And I wasn't Bill Brandt. Any more than my French opposite number was Henri Cartier-Bresson.

It was just after an obliging cold snap over Christmas and New Year that I handed in my London-in-winter batch and got the message that Rudi Schüssner had walked out on the job in Vienna for reasons nobody seemed to think I needed to know about. Rather than call in someone new, they offered me the substitute's role. The Austrian publishers had liked what they'd seen of my stuff, apparently. Besides, I was free, whereas the French and Italian photographers weren't. And I was glad to go. Things at home weren't great. They were a long way from that. A week snapping snowy Vienna didn't have to be dressed up as a compliment to my artistry for me to go like a shot. Anyway, *The Third Man* had always been one of my favourite films.

They put me up at the Europa, on Neuer Markt, halfway between Stephansdom and the Staatsoper, right in the heart of the old city. I'd last been to Vienna for a long weekend with Faith before we were married: a midsummer tourist scramble round just about every palace and museum in the joint. It had been hot, hectic and none too memorable. I hadn't even taken many photographs. On my

own, in a cold hard January, it was going to be different, though. I knew that the moment I climbed off the shuttle bus from the airport and let my eyes and brain absorb the pinky-grey dome of light over the snow-sugared roofs of the city. I was going to enjoy myself here. I was going to take some great pictures.

The first day I didn't even try. I rode the trams round the Ringstrasse, getting on and off as I pleased to sample the moods of the place. The weather was set, frozen like the vast baroque remnants of the redundant empire that had laid the city out. I hadn't seen what Schüssner had done with spring, summer and autumn. I hadn't wanted to. This was going to be my Vienna, not his. And it was going to give itself to me. I just had to let it come. A photograph is a moment. But you have to wait for the moment to arrive. So I bided my time and looked and looked until I could see clearly. And then I was ready.

Next morning, I was out at dawn. Snow flurries overnight meant Stephansplatz would be virginally white as well as virtually deserted. I hadn't figured out how to cope with the cathedral in one shot. Its spire stretched like a giraffe's neck into the silver-grey sky, but at ground level it was elephantine, squatting massively in the centre of the city. Probably there was no way to do it. I'd have to settle for something partial. In that weather, at that time, it could still be magical.

But, then, there's always been something magical about photography. It certainly seemed that way to the Victorian pioneers, before the chemistry of it was properly understood. Pictures develop and strengthen and hold by an agency of their own. You can stand, as Fox Talbot did, in a darkened room and watch a blank sheet of paper become a photograph. And even when you know why it happens you don't lose the sense of its mystery. That stays with you for ever.

Perhaps that's why what happened at Stephansplatz that morning failed in some strange way to surprise me. I'd brought the Hasselblad, but I didn't take a tripod, though technically I should have. I'd always shied clear of accessories, arguing that all you needed to do the job were a good pair of eyes and a decent camera. Plus spontaneity, of course, which you don't get fiddling with tripod legs. I just prowled round the square, looking for the right angle, for some way to give scale as well as atmosphere to the scene. I backed off to the north side, where there was some shelter from the wind, and took a decent shot of the snow slashing across the dark flank of the cathedral. But Schüssner could have managed that. I was looking for something more distinctive, something that would carry my own grace note.

I didn't find it. It found me. With my eye to the camera, I tracked across to the blurred reflection of the cathedral's west front in the glass façade of the Haas-Haus, then slowly down and back until the curve of Kärtnerstrasse was an empty white arena beyond the black prow of medieval buttressing, with a shop sign gleaming like a golden snowflake in the distance. Then, just as I steadied the camera, a figure stepped into view round the southern side of the cathedral, red coat buttoned up against the chill, and I had a piece of composition you'd die for. I pressed the shutter release and thanked my stars.

The figure was a woman, dressed in boots, overcoat, gloves, scarf and fur-trimmed hat. I'd have expected her to hurry across the square, head bowed. Instead, she stopped, turned and looked at me as I lowered the camera, then walked towards me. She was frowning, I saw as she approached. She almost seemed to be angry, her dark eyes seeking and challenging my gaze. My first impression was of a pale high-cheeked face framed by the soft black brim of the hat, of eyes that could see as far as they needed to – and quite possibly through whatever stood in their way.

‘Did you just take my photograph?’ she said. The voice was English, unaccented, surprisingly deep.

‘You were in the photograph I took,’ I replied. ‘It’s not quite the same thing.’

‘It is to me.’

‘Is there a problem?’

‘I don’t like having my picture taken.’ Her nose was broad and flat, almost as if it had once been broken. Somehow that made her more striking still. That and the aggression in her eyes which camera-shyness didn’t seem to me to go anywhere near explaining. ‘Especially not by somebody I don’t know.’

‘That must be difficult for you. I expect you get a lot of requests.’

‘Funny,’ she said, looking me up and down. ‘I thought I’d be safe in Vienna from smart-arse Londoners.’

‘In January, at dawn.’ I glanced round the square and nodded. ‘It was a good bet.’

There was a moment’s silence, when the only sound was the wind mewling round the cathedral and flapping the camera-strap against the collar of my coat. She should have walked away then, or I should. But neither of us moved. Incongruity turned towards fascination, and I realized I was no longer sure how this would end.

‘It’ll be a great picture,’ I said neutrally.

‘What makes you think so?’

‘I’m a professional. Trust me.’

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘About the picture? Not really. About breakfast? Well, that’s a different matter. You can have it with your husband back at your hotel. Or with me at the Café Griensteidl. It’s on Michaelerplatz. Maybe you know it.’

‘Better than you know me, that’s for certain.’

‘You said you didn’t like having your picture taken by a stranger. This way I wouldn’t be one, would I? Not any more.’

‘What about your wife? Won’t she be expecting you?’

‘She’s not with me this trip.’

‘And my husband’s not with me. That’s how I can be sure of breakfasting alone.’

‘Please yourself.’

‘I will, thank you.’ And with that she did move, round on her heel and smartly away across the square.

I watched her until she’d vanished down the street beside the Haas-Haus, and wondered as soon as she was out of sight why in hell’s name I’d behaved as I had. Though she wouldn’t know it, it was actually way out of character. For a moment I’d very much wanted not to let our encounter fizzle into nothing beyond a figure in red in the background of a photograph. I’d wanted that with an acuteness I couldn’t fathom. It wasn’t just disquieting, it was positively eerie. As if I hadn’t any idea of what was really going on in my head.

I tried to shrug the sensation off as I made my way down Kärtnerstrasse to the Opera House and took some speculative shots of its snow-hazed bulk from various vantage points. But I was cold now and oddly dispirited. I carried on round to Heldenplatz and managed some perspective views of its wide-open arctic spaces. Then I gave up and retreated to the Griensteidl.

And there she was, waiting for me. She was at a table near the far end of the café, so tucked away that I didn’t see her until I went to grab a newspaper from the rack and recognized her coat and hat on the nearby stand. Then I glanced round and saw her, watching me quite calmly from a distant table.

‘You did know the place, then,’ I said as I joined her.

‘I know less than I pretend.’ The anger was gone from her eyes, but their intensity was undimmed. Her hair was short, expertly cropped in some fashionable bob, and an engagement ring sparkled beside the wedding ring on her

left hand as she trailed it round her coffee cup. 'Like you, I imagine.'

'Why do I get the feeling that you *are* like me – in lots of ways?'

'I don't know. But I do know what you mean.'

'I'm sorry if I ... said anything stupid back there.'

'Why be sorry? If you'd been more polite maybe I wouldn't be here now.'

'I usually am, you know. Polite.'

'Promise me you won't be ... with me.'

'All right. That's easy.'

'No, it isn't. Polite means dishonest. Impolite means honest. And honest isn't easy.'

The waiter came over and I ordered coffee and a croissant. The uncertainty was delicious now. Just what were we talking about?

'My name's Marian Esguard.'

'*Esguard*? That's unusual.'

'My husband's an unusual man.'

'He seems a negligent one to me.'

'You don't know him. And that's good. That's actually great. I can't remember when I last talked this much to somebody who didn't know him.'

'Shall we keep it that way, then?'

'Yes.' She smiled faintly for the first time. It warmed her eyes. There was a sudden sense of exuberance, of joy, on a short leash. 'Who are you?'

'Ian Jarrett.'

'A photographer.'

'Right. Here for the winter light.'

'And you're wondering what I'm here for.'

'No. Unless you want me to.'

'I told you to be impolite.'

'But just how impolite? That's the question.'

'A question for you to answer, not me.'

'You can at least tell me what brings you here.'

'I'm not sure. Boredom. Desperation. The need to get away. The need to think.'

My breakfast arrived. She watched me sip some coffee. Then she reached across the table, tore an end off my croissant and ate it, slowly and studiously.

'Hungry?'

'I think I must be.'

'Have it all.'

'You never can, in my experience.'

'Nor mine.'

'But there are always new experiences.'

'So there are.'

'Tell me, Ian, what's the worst thing you've ever done?'

'I killed somebody once.' Hearing myself say what I never normally volunteered was more of a shock to me than it seemed to be to her. 'Hit a pedestrian late one night about five years ago while I was driving home.'

'An accident?'

'Oh yes. And I was sober, too. But I still killed them.'

'Of course.' She nodded. 'It doesn't make any difference to them, does it? The fact that you didn't mean to do it.'

'You talk as if you know the feeling.'

'I do. When I was a child I goaded a schoolfriend into walking out onto a frozen canal. The ice broke. She fell through and drowned. An accident. But she stayed dead.'

'That must have been worse. At least I didn't know the pedestrian I hit.'

'I never told anyone I'd encouraged her to do it. Never a soul. Till now.'

'Why tell me?'

'Because ...' She hesitated, searching my face, it seemed, for some kind of reassurance. 'Because I want us to do anything we want. And nothing we don't.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I am.' She looked straight at me, unblinkingly direct. 'Are you?'

'Anything and nothing?'

'Exactly.'

'Whatever that means?'

'Whatever.'

That was the last moment when I could have laughed it off and put up some kind of social smokescreen. But then the moment passed. And all I did was nod slowly in agreement and return the frankness of her gaze.

'Staying in Vienna long?'

'Long enough.'

She smiled, more broadly than before. 'That makes two of us, then.'

'I thought I might go out to Schönbrunn this morning. Take some pictures of the palace and the park. Why don't you come with me?'

'I shouldn't. For all kinds of reasons.'

'But you will?'

'Oh, I expect so, don't you?'

'I'm not sure I know what to expect.'

'Neither am I.' She drained her cup and replaced it in the saucer with exaggerated care. 'Isn't that why we're going?'

I don't know why I thought of Schönbrunn. I hadn't really been intending to go there that morning. But it was bound to be quiet so far from the centre on a freezing-cold weekday. We both needed time, before the next step caught up with us.

And it *was* quiet. The palace floated silently in its snow-covered park like some vast yellow ghost, so remote from the dusty, tourist-choked clamour I remembered that my visit with Faith could almost have lain in the future rather than in the past.

'They say Franz Josef preferred it here to the Hofburg,' I said as we walked out slowly behind the palace through the snow-blanked gardens towards the Neptune Fountain and

the colonnade of the Gloriette on the hilltop beyond. 'He kept his mistress in a villa near by.'

'You obviously know Vienna better than I do,' said Marian. 'Who's Franz Josef?'

'You must have heard of him. The famous Austrian Emperor. The old fellow with the walrus moustache and the chestful of medals.'

'You've lost me. But I'm no historian.'

'Neither am I.'

'No. You're a photographer. So shouldn't you be taking photographs?'

'Later. Just at the moment I don't seem able to concentrate.'

'Why not?'

'Why do you think?'

'You need to be alone. Is that it?'

'Maybe I need to be. But I don't want to be.'

'Sorry if I'm distracting you from your work.'

'You're not sorry.'

We stopped there, beneath Neptune and his frozen fountain, and turned to look at each other. Until that moment, we hadn't so much as touched. 'What's happening?' Marian murmured.

'Something that's never happened to me before.'

'Nor me.'

We were breathless now, expectant yet apprehensive. Then we were kissing: her lips against mine, her tongue, her nose and cheek, the butterfly flicker of her eyelashes, the warmth of her breath, the leather of her glove cool against my neck.

She broke away and stared at me, as if terrified, then headed along the path that led round the fountain and up to the glade of fir trees beyond, glancing back to see me following, moving faster, almost running.

I caught up as she entered the screen of trees behind the nearest of Neptune's Tritons. We kissed again.

Snowflakes shaken from the branches around us dampened her face as she arched back across the parapet, yielding or still resisting, there was no way to be sure. But there was no way to stop, either.

‘Let’s go back to my hotel,’ Marian whispered. ‘Now.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘The Imperial.’

‘The best, so they tell me.’

‘Come and find out.’

‘Talk to me about something,’ she said, staring into my eyes as the taxi sped us back through the city. ‘Anything.’

‘I can’t think of anything.’

‘Tell me about your work.’

‘I just take pictures.’

‘Is there one photographer you particularly admire?’

‘None living.’

‘Dead, then?’

‘Roger Fenton, maybe.’

‘Why?’

‘He was the very first war photographer. In the Crimea. He had to work it all out from first principles, but he still managed to come close to something like art. And his landscapes ... But you don’t want to hear this.’

‘I don’t want to think, either. Keep talking. Was he successful, this Fenton?’

‘Very.’

‘Healthy, wealthy and wise?’

‘Hard to say. He was the most famous photographer of his generation. But he gave it all up when he was still a relatively young man. Sold his equipment and negatives. Packed it in.’

‘Why?’

‘Nobody knows.’

‘But you have a theory?’

‘For what it’s worth.’

‘Go on.’

‘I think he realized he’d done his best work. That it was only going to be downhill from there. So, he quit.’

‘That must have taken a lot of courage.’

‘Or despair.’

‘Or temptation,’ she countered.

‘What was there to tempt him?’

‘The unknown.’ She twined her fingers in mine. ‘The place you most want to go. For all the risks attached.’

Marian had a suite on the first floor of the hotel: an opulently furnished pair of rooms looking down onto the street through high, thick-curtained windows. The door closed solidly behind us and she turned a switch to lower the shutters, filtering and thinning the grey winter light. It was warm and silent. The imminence of passion – of heat and flesh and broken taboos – hung almost tangibly in the air.

‘This must be expensive,’ I said.

She shrugged. ‘My husband’s paying. He likes me to spend his money.’

‘Won’t we pay, too – in the end?’

‘Maybe. But first ...’

‘Yes?’

‘We can have what we’ll pay for. And make sure it’s worth the price.’

She took off her coat and gloves. We kissed slowly and lingeringly, knowing this time that we wouldn’t stop. The madness of it was part of the pleasure. I didn’t know her and she didn’t know me. But nothing was going to be held back. Already, I sensed it was going to be better than it had ever been before, her desire fitting mine like the skintight leather she’d just peeled from her fingers.

And it came so close. As close to perfection as I could dream of it being. Morning drifted into afternoon as we surrendered to each other, at first with clumsy eagerness,

then in subtle variations on a theme that always had the same savoured ending. So much released and discovered, about the mind as well as the body. What we were capable of. What we couldn't have admitted to any but the strangers we were even then ceasing to be. Each climax found and surpassed a new limit. By the end there were no inhibitions left. We'd been shocked into a drained and exhausted tenderness.

'You can't photograph that, can you, Ian?' she said as we lay on the bed, still warm from the heat of all we'd done. 'You can't capture it in any picture.'

'I wouldn't want to.'

'Then what *do* you want?'

'You've already found that out.'

'Tell me anyway.'

'I want you.'

'Well, you've got me now.'

'But I can't keep you.'

'That's lucky for you, isn't it? You can fuck me and forget me. Most men would envy you.'

'I'm not most men.'

'I noticed.'

'And I'm not very good at forgetting.'

'Well ... you have to have some weakness, I suppose.' I refused to laugh. 'What's yours?'

'Strangely enough ...' She smiled. 'The same.'

It wasn't the first time I'd been unfaithful to my wife. It wasn't even the second. But, still, I'd never known or done anything like it before. The intensity of the experience was bewildering. Already the question wasn't whether it would be repeated, but whether I could even bear the thought of it not being repeated.

I stayed at the Imperial that night, returning to the Europa only briefly to pick up a change of clothes. We dined in the hotel's grand luxe restaurant. Marian wore a

black dress that looked as if it had been made for her by a top designer, but no jewellery and very little makeup. My mind's eye kept flashing back to just a few hours before. I tasted her rather than the wine and relished the recency of the memory.

'What are we going to do, Ian? I don't mean tonight. I mean ...'

'Eventually.'

'Yes.'

'I don't know. You have a husband. I have a wife. And a daughter.'

'You didn't mention her before.'

'She's fourteen. It's not as if ...'

'I have no children.'

'The truth is, Marian, we hardly know the first thing about each other.'

'But you've realized already, haven't you?'

'What?'

'That what we do know is all that matters.'

'I know I've never felt like this before. Never felt so much so soon.'

'Neither have I.'

'What is it?'

'It's a chance in a million.'

'Then we should make the most of it.'

'And to hell with the consequences?'

'Just now, consequences don't seem to matter.'

'Liberating, isn't it?'

'It could get to be a habit.'

'Yes. I know exactly what you mean. A habit you can't kick.'

'For the moment, I don't even want to try.'

We went back to her suite long before we'd eaten or drunk enough to slake our appetites. The chambermaid had pulled the mirror-panelled doors across between the two rooms. We watched our reflections in them as I unzipped

her dress and slid the flimsy layers of silk from her body and pulled her down onto the thick-piled carpet, in the lamplight's glow. The sustained urgency of our lovemaking was alarming me now. Already, it was certain my life had changed. But what had it changed *to*? As Marian had unwittingly predicted, the temptation to find out was irresistible. But it was also frightening.

We fell into bed and a pit of slumber. I woke from it as if I'd only had my eyes closed for a few minutes, though it must by then have been the early hours of the morning. Marian was still asleep, but mumbling to herself, breathing heavily and tossing her head on the pillow, as if trying to throw off some stifling weight.

'I won't let you do this, Jos,' I heard her say. 'I won't let you.' A moment's silence, then, in a louder voice, 'You can't stop me. I'll show you what—' Suddenly she was awake. She jerked up in the bed, coughing and panting and throwing out her arms. 'Oh ... Oh God ...'

'Take it easy,' I said. 'You must have had a nightmare.'

'I'm OK.' She fell back against the pillow and began to breathe more easily. 'God, I'm sorry. I don't know ... what happened.'

'You were talking in your sleep. Is Jos your husband?'

'I *named* him?'

'You did.'

'Just goes to show ... you can't get away from some people ... as easily as you think. Yes, Jos is my husband. He'd be touched to know, I'm sure, that he was in my thoughts.'

'Are you afraid of him?'

'Why should I be?'

'It sounded as if ...'

'He means nothing to me. Not a thing. And he knows that. There's no reason for me to be afraid of him.'

'But you were dreaming about him.'

'Some sort of automatic guilt mechanism, I expect.'

'It doesn't seem to have kicked in in my case.'

'It will. And when it does I probably won't see you for dust.'

'You're wrong.'

'Am I?' She'd reached out for me in the dark and was teasing me now, with her fingers as well as her words. 'Prove it.'

'I can't. Not yet. But I will.'

'All right. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Meanwhile, there's something you can do for my guilt problem.'

'What?'

'Take my mind off it.' She pulled me closer. 'Any way you like.'

Early next morning, while Marian was in the bath, I left the hotel and went across to the Café Schwarzenberg on the other side of the road for hot black coffee and a cold-dawn's-light appraisal of what had happened and what was going to happen. Her husband meant nothing to her, she'd said. But was that true? More to the point, did *she* mean nothing to *him*? I'd detected fear in her voice, for all her denials. And I was a threat to him now, whether he knew it or not. Just what was I getting myself into?

Then there was Faith. Our marriage had been running on empty ever since the accident had thrown my affair with Nicole in her face. I still suspected she'd only patched it together then for Amy's sake. But Amy was away at boarding school now. And that had largely been Faith's decision, one that could have been intended to pave the way for a separation. But at a time of her choosing, not mine, and certainly not to make things easier for me. If I tried to turn this into something more than a five-night stand, Faith and I were going to have to acknowledge that we no longer loved each other. And it wasn't going to be easy.

Nor was walking away from Marian at the end of my week in Vienna, though. We'd been together for just twenty-four hours, yet already I couldn't bear the thought of us being apart. A chance in a million, she'd called it. And she'd been right. It was also a chance I knew, soberly and surely, I wasn't going to let slip.

'I have to take some photographs today,' I said over breakfast back in her room. 'The publisher wants the job wrapped up next week.'

'Then you'd better jump to it.'

'Will you come with me?'

'I'd like to. But look what happened at Schönbrunn. Not a lot of pictures.'

'I'll have to go back there.'

'Why don't you hire a car? It would give us more time ... for other things.'

'My budget won't run to it.'

'Mine will.'

'Actually, there's another problem.' This was how it was bound to be, I knew: the spilling and sharing of secrets, one by one. 'You remember the accident I told you about? The woman I killed.'

'You never said it was a woman.'

'Didn't I? Well, it was. And I ... I've not driven since.'

'You lost your licence?'

'No, no. It wasn't my fault. At least, not officially, although I've often wondered ... I lost my nerve, if you want to know the truth. The thought of how easily it happened just wouldn't go away.'

'Does it upset you to talk about it?'

'Not any more. But, like I told you last night, I'm not very good at forgetting.'

'Some things you have to forget.' She reached out and touched my cheek with a gentleness that seemed to soothe

some wound of her own as well as mine. 'Sounds like you need a driver. Can I apply for the job?'

'The pay's lousy, the hours are diabolical and the boss won't be able to keep his hands off you.'

'I'll take it, then.'

So I got to have my cake and eat it, too. Marian hired a smart Mercedes and took me out to the farthest suburbs and beyond, as well as round all the obvious, and some of the not so obvious, photogenic corners of the city. The weather held in finest winter mode and everything went too smoothly to be true. I took some pictures I reckoned I'd be proud of, and Marian and I ... Well, what did we do? Fall in love? Develop an addiction to each other? Indulge a seductive compatibility of mind and body? I wouldn't know what to call it. But I know what it felt like: the real thing, experienced for the first and surely only time.

'You haven't tried to take my photograph again,' she goaded as we explored the snowy grave-lined avenues of the Zentralfriedhof, Vienna's vast central cemetery, halfway through the week that was already accelerating towards its end - and our crisis. 'Why's that?'

'You made your views pretty plain on the subject, as I recall.'

She pouted. 'But that was before we'd been properly introduced.'

'I'd like to take your picture, Marian. I'd like you to want me to.'

'You talk as if it really matters.'

'I'm a photographer. It's bound to matter.'

'Why?'

'Photographs - the best ones - capture the reality of things. And of people.'

'How long have we had them?'

'Photographs? Oh, a hundred and fifty years or so.'

'Who was the first person to have theirs taken?'

'I'm not sure. Fox Talbot's wife. Or one of his servants at Lacock. Then again, Daguerre might have—'

'Lacock *Abbey*, near Chippenham?'

'Yes. You know it?'

'I went there once. I ... can't remember much about it.'

'William Fox Talbot invented photography at Lacock during the eighteen thirties. There's a museum at the house devoted to the subject.'

'It can't have made much of an impression on me, I'm afraid. Sorry.'

'Never mind.'

'But I'll make up for it.' She ran skittishly ahead and turned round, smiling back at me. 'Take my picture here.'

'Why the sudden conversion?'

'Because half the people in this cemetery must have died before photography was invented. But they were just as real as you and me. Maybe more so.'

'How could they be more so?' I raised the camera to my eye and stepped to one side, widening the angle to capture the long, pale perspective of bare trees and brooding gravestones beyond Marian, in her blood-red coat. She was grinning at me stubbornly. 'You're real enough for me.'

'It's just that I'm so happy I reckon there's a good chance I'm dreaming all this.'

'Well, you're not.' Her smile was the making of the photograph. It looked so genuine, and yet so glaringly inappropriate in that snow-draped avenue of the Viennese dead. 'And now we have the proof.' I took the picture in that instant and felt a ludicrous sense of triumph that she'd allowed me to do it. 'Thank you, Marian.'

'What for?'

'For letting me capture your reality.'

'Oh, you've done that all right.' She was still smiling, more broadly than ever. 'Didn't you know?'

On our last full day together in Vienna, we went out to the Donaupark. From the top of the Danube Tower, its railings bristling with frost, I got some crisp and effective shots of the UNO-City office blocks and an evocative view of Stephansdom's spire, as distant now as our meeting beneath it seemed. More distant, for sure, than our parting.

Over lunch in the tower's revolving restaurant, with Vienna slowly tracking round below us, we each waited for the other to say what had to be said. Eventually, I told myself as well as her, 'There's no way I can avoid leaving tomorrow.'

'I know.'

'I wish—'

'I know that, too.'

'When will you go?'

'I have a flight booked for Friday.'

'And then ... we can meet?'

'There's a problem, Ian.'

'Your husband.'

'Jos wouldn't ...' She gazed out through the window at the snow-bleached horizon, struggling to compose her thoughts and words. 'He lets me do much as I please. Like this trip, for instance. But ... there are limits.'

'And I'm beyond them?'

She looked back at me. 'In England, you would be. He'd feel I was making a fool of him. As I suppose I would be. And that would make him very angry. Which wouldn't be a good idea. Not at all. Believe me, I know. From bitter experience.'

'Do you have to tell him?'

'Look at me, Ian. What do you see?'

'A beautiful woman.'

'If that's true, it's because of you. I wouldn't have to tell Jos I was having an affair. He'd know at a glance.'

'I'm not going to give you up.'

'I think you may have to. Unless ...'

‘What?’

‘It’s all or nothing, as I see it.’

‘I’m ready for that.’

‘Are you? What would your wife say? And your daughter?’

‘Whatever they wanted to say. It wouldn’t make any difference to me. I’ve made some mistakes in my life, but this wouldn’t be one of them. Come away with me, Marian. We’ll make a clean break of it. A fresh start. Together.’

‘Can we really do that?’

‘I don’t think we can do anything else.’

‘You’re right, of course.’ She reached across to clasp my hand. ‘We can’t. I’ve known that all along.’

‘Then why didn’t you say so?’

She smiled. ‘Because I wanted to hear you say it first, I suppose.’

We went back to the Imperial and made love. The sex was searing and committed, like two drowning people clinging to each other. The experience had deepened every time, until now it took us to places I wouldn’t have believed existed. She let me photograph her afterwards, lying naked on the bed, her lover’s eyes playing with the camera lens. The pictures, too, were a proof of our sincerity. What they meant could never be denied.

‘What time is your flight tomorrow?’ she asked as we lay together in the encroaching twilight.

‘One o’clock.’

‘I’ll drive you to the airport.’

‘No. Let me say goodbye to you here. In the best kind of way. Let me have that memory to hold in my head.’

‘When will you tell your wife?’

‘Straight away.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Oh yes. I’m sure.’

'Me, too. Amazing, isn't it? I love you, Ian. Do you realize that?'

'I realize I love you.'

'I wish I could fly back with you.'

'Why don't you?'

'Because Jos is away on business until Friday. I can't tell him until then. And I'd rather wait here to do it than in his house.'

'Isn't it your house, too?'

'Not really. Esguards have lived there for generations. And I've never been one of them. Not where it counts, in the blood. It might have been different if I'd produced a son and heir, but ...'

'You don't have to tell me why that never happened, Marian. Unless you want to.'

'I want to, but I'm not going to. The less we know about each other's marriages the better. By Friday night they'll be history.'

'Three days from now. It sounds a long time.'

'Just long enough' – she rolled onto her side and stretched out her hand to me – 'to put a real edge on your performance.'

'I think I can guarantee that.'

'You can phone me here in the meantime and tell me what to expect.'

'Where shall we meet?'

'You've got this irritating practical streak, you know.' She let go of me and sighed. 'It must be your photographer's mind. Exposure times. Light readings. Focal points. All that detail.'

'Well, talking of photography, you mentioned you'd been to Lacock. Could you get there on Friday night?'

'Lacock? Easily. Why?'

'There's a wonderful old inn in the village. The Sign of the Angel. You know the kind of place: oak beams; creaking floors; log fires; antique furniture; and nice cosy bedrooms.'

'Sounds great. Especially the cosy bedrooms.'

'I'll book the cosiest one they have.'

'You'll be able to show me round the Abbey. Explain all that stuff about Fox Talbot I seem to have missed.'

'Fraid not. The Abbey will be closed at this time of the year.'

'Never mind. There'll be other opportunities.'

'Lots, I hope.'

She kissed me lightly on the cheek and settled her head on my shoulder. 'As many as you want, Ian. Starting Friday.'

We went no further that evening than the Café Schwarzenberg, where we lingered over wine and coffee and our vaguely formed plans for the future. But the complexities of life in England seemed too many to grasp while we still had one Viennese night to savour. We'd resolved to meet at Lacock when a decisive break with our pasts had been made, and that seemed as much as we were capable of for the moment.

'Tell me how Fox Talbot came to invent photography,' said Marian, as we finished our last coffee. 'I'd better start boning up on this kind of thing now I'm going to be living with a walking authority on the subject.'

'I'm hardly that. And it's a long story.'

'Give me the potted version.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yes. I'd like to know.'

'Well, ever heard of a camera lucida?' Getting no answer, I went on. 'It was a drawing instrument popular with amateur artists in the first half of the last century. Basically an adaptation of the camera obscura. I don't suppose you've heard of that, either.'

She pouted. 'As a matter of fact I have. Besides, I know enough Latin to have got ahead of you. Camera lucida: light room. Camera obscura: dark room. Right?'

‘I’m impressed. Anyway, it works like this. Paint one wall of a darkened room white and drill a pinhole in the opposite wall. Given decent light, an inverted image of the scene outside the room will be cast onto the white wall. Put a lens in the pinhole and you can turn the image upright and focus it. Install a mirror in the room and you can reflect the image onto a sheet of paper and trace it. Shrink the room to a box and you have a portable drawing device. That’s the camera obscura. It was in widespread use by the end of the seventeenth century.’

‘You know it all, don’t you?’

‘You did ask.’

She smiled. ‘Go on.’

‘OK. The camera lucida on the other hand comprised a small prism mounted on a telescopic stem. You stood it on your drawing board, adjusted the angle and looked down into the prism at the reflection of the scene in front of you. Then you moved your eye just far enough towards the edge of the prism for the images of the scene and the sheet of paper below to merge, apparently *on* the paper. All you had to do was trace what you saw. It was invented by a man called Wollaston at the end of the eighteenth century.’

‘But we’re still a long way from photography.’

‘Not really. It just took a few decades for someone to have the idea. Why not try to fix the images created by these devices as permanent pictures? William Fox Talbot, Wiltshire squire and amateur scientist, spent his honeymoon in the Italian Lake District in the autumn of 1833, trying unsuccessfully to rival his wife’s drawing skills using a camera lucida. When he got home to Lacock, he started experimenting with ways of removing his dodgy draughtsmanship from the equation altogether. The light-sensitive properties of silver nitrate were well known to him. What he did was treat a sheet of paper with a salt solution of the stuff before exposing it in a camera obscura. The result was a negative photographic image – light for