

Persuade Me

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First published 2011 by Choc Lit Limited
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK
www.choclitpublishing.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library
ISBN 978-1-906931-21-6

Foreword
by Will Darcy

A magazine headline, circled in black ink: ‘Never forgive, never forget’. You can tell a lot from what’s on a person’s desk ...

Some years ago, just before I met Elizabeth, I took my sister Georgie to Australia for a much-needed holiday. She was going through a particularly difficult time; so, when she showed a spark of her previous passion for saving the planet, I encouraged it in every possible way.

During a brief visit to Melbourne I discovered that there was an expert in marine conservation based at one of the local universities, a Dr Rick Wentworth. I sent him an email, using the pretext of possible interest from the Pemberley Foundation in his Save the Sea Dragons campaign – although I usually avoid the ‘grand benefactor’ act at all costs. When I received a terse and somewhat begrudging invitation to meet in his office, I immediately pictured an old, cross, bespectacled nerd.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. He turned out to be young, charming and, judging from Georgie’s sharp intake of breath, very easy on the female eye. And he was English, with a northern accent that had apparently resisted all attempts at Australianisation.

He even apologised for the tone of his invitation. He told us that, with his work attracting more and more media attention, he’d become wary of requests like mine. This led to a brief discussion about the drawbacks of being a modern celebrity, especially a reluctant one.

As we talked, I realised that he was meticulous about his research – and not just on sea dragons. I’d given him no

indication of my sister's troubles and had taken the necessary steps to gag the press, although inevitably some details had leaked out. Yet I sensed he knew – and understood – what she'd been through ...

So I watched in genuine admiration as he drew Georgie out of her dark shell into the wider world, if only for an hour. He held us both spellbound with stirring tales of battles against natural elements and man-made disasters, often in the form of short-sighted bureaucracy, and showed us stunning footage of the fragile creatures he was fighting to protect. Of the man himself I learned very little – until we got up to leave.

At this point he scrawled his personal email address on a piece of paper and handed it to a blushing Georgie, urging her to get in touch with any questions. That in itself made me warm to him and decide on a generous donation from the Foundation for his campaign – an unusual instance of my heart ruling my head.

But the piece of paper had been hiding something on his desk, a magazine article with a big bold headline. A headline that obviously had a greater significance because he'd drawn a brutal black ring round it: 'Never forgive, never forget.'

They were words I could relate to completely. Except that I was thinking of the man who'd broken my sister's heart, whereas he – as I discovered much later into our friendship – was thinking of the girl who'd broken his.

Although neither of us knew it then, their paths would cross when he wrote a book and, despite some misgivings, visited England to promote it.

This is their story ...

Prologue

Her voice gatecrashed his thoughts. ‘Rick, who’s that woman you’ve been dreaming about?’

He frowned. Typical Shelley, scratching at the scab of their relationship just when he was about to leave for the airport. He picked up the last pair of new shirts, still in their cellophane wrapping, and forced them into the suitcase.

Then he looked across at her and said quietly, ‘What do you mean?’

Her eyes brimmed with accusation and she took a long gulp of air before she spoke again. ‘You’ve been calling out to her in your sleep. I didn’t think that much about it at first, but now it’s been three nights in a row.’

He must have had that dream, the one where ...

It hurt to breathe, yet his hands were steady as he closed the suitcase; and he held her gaze as though he had nothing to fear. ‘What did I say?’

‘You said “Annie”, over and over again. And you sounded so different, so gentle, as if – as if –’ She broke off, but the damage was done. His eyes flinched shut. In a heartbeat he was ten years younger, far away, with someone else.

‘Rick, who’s Annie?’

Never forgive, never forget.

His eyes snapped open and he swung the case off the bed on to the floor. ‘I don’t know anyone called Annie,’ he said. And he couldn’t have made his voice less gentle if he’d tried.

Shelley stepped forward and grabbed his arm. ‘Is she in England? Is that why you’re going back there all of a sudden?’

He stared down at her, struggling to conceal his impatience.

'It's not sudden, as you very well know. It takes months to organise a book tour on the other side of the world. And Sophie's been on at me to visit for ages. She and Ed can't afford any more trips over here.'

'But *seven weeks*? You've never been away for that long before. And it's not as if you can study your precious sea dragons over there, is it? Especially in the depths of Somerset or wherever your sister's bought her crummy little garden centre!'

These were basic observations, and she could have made them at any time in the last few months; but she'd waited until he was ready to walk out of the door. He sighed. She sounded so shrill and resentful, as though she really did care.

He smiled as he framed her face in his hands and tilted it up towards him. 'I know. So I'll be coming back. To the sea dragons – to my life in Australia.'

Hardly a profession of love, but it was better than nothing. And maybe, when he did come back, they could make a fresh start. Because, after ten years, it was time to forget the past.

Forgiveness was an entirely different matter.

Chapter One

He made the headlines, naturally.

On Saturday morning, in the neat privacy of her little flat, Anna read them all; from *The Sun*'s 'Sex-in-the-Sea Doc Comes Home' to the more sedate 'Celebrity Scientist on UK Book Tour' in *The Times*.

To her shame, it was the article in *The Sun* that she lingered over. It had the most detail, real or imagined, about Dr Rick Wentworth: a description of his girlfriend, the Australian supermodel Shelley McCourt, in tears as he left for the airport; an interview with a woman on the same flight, featuring some banter about asking him to join the Mile High Club – an invitation he'd apparently refused; his little altercation at Heathrow with a TV reporter who'd had the temerity to question something in his research.

And *The Sun* had the best photo of him – sitting on the deck of a boat, studying some small creature cradled in the palm of his hand, his expression intent yet relaxed, as though he didn't want to be anywhere else in the whole wide world. It was a look she'd known well, once upon a time.

She let out a long breath. If she wanted to, she could meet him again; she had a ticket for his Bath book signing in four weeks' time. She could see herself now: waiting in line, counting the minutes that brought them closer and closer, full of dread yet unable to tear herself away. At last, it would be her turn and she'd stand awkwardly in front of the table as he opened another copy of *Sex in the Sea*. Head down, pen poised, he'd ask 'Name?' and she'd whisper 'Anna Elliot'. Then that sleek blond head would snap up and ...

But at this point the picture became blurred. Would he

force a smile and write 'To Anna from Rick' as if she were just another of his fans? Or would he jump up, send table and books flying, and carry on where they'd left off all those years ago?

If that happened, it would be an ugly scene. Anger and recriminations on his part, no doubt – tears and resentment on hers; which would probably do his book sales no good at all. And book sales were the main reason he was here; that much was obvious from all the newspapers she'd read this morning. He'd be off to Australia again as soon as the book tour was over and the only people he'd be visiting in England were his sister and her husband. No mention of looking up the girl he'd once begged to sail with him to the other side of the world.

A knock at the door made her start. What if ...? She gave a rueful smile. Silly to think, even for a split second, that it could be him; he neither knew nor cared where she was. She got to her feet, scooped up all the newspapers except *The Times* and stuffed them behind the sofa.

It was Jenny, her landlady and work colleague; more than that now – her best friend. She and her husband Tom, wheelchair-bound since a car accident, occupied the ground floor of this large, end-of-terrace house in central Bath, having converted the rest into self-contained flats. That income, together with Jenny's part-time job, could never compensate for Tom's previous salary as a sales director, but they managed. And Jenny always claimed that her frequent visits to Anna on the top floor did her far more good, both physically and mentally, than the gym memberships and theatre trips she could no longer afford.

Now, with no indication that she'd just run up several flights of stairs, she breezed past Anna into the living room. 'Just seeing if you want me to get you anything at the shops. You're off to Kellynch soon, aren't you? And I thought we

could eat together when you get back tomorrow night – unless you’ve got something else planned?’

They both knew she hadn’t, but Jenny’s voice was still full of hope.

‘Yes, I’d love to eat with you,’ Anna said, ‘and no, I don’t need anything from the shops. I’ve already been out, to get a paper.’

Jenny went over to the table where *The Times* was spread out next to a solitary mug and an empty cereal bowl. ‘Isn’t that Rick Wentworth? Good job I got our tickets for his book signing as soon as they went on sale – I was in Molland’s last night and there were none left. I bet it’s mainly women who’ve bought them – women with absolutely no interest in marine biology, like me!’

Anna managed a laugh. ‘Yes, his marketing’s spot on, isn’t it? Good-looking bloke writes a book called *Sex in the Sea* and appears half-naked on the cover – I’m sure quite a few people will be disappointed to find they’ve bought a detailed study on the mating habits of sea slugs and the like.’

‘Nice cover photo, though.’ Jenny picked up the paper. ‘What my Aunt Jane would call a fine specimen of manhood. D’you think he’ll sign our books dressed like that? We can but dream.’

Anna glanced at the photo. Jenny would see a man sitting on a beach, in swimming trunks and a baseball cap, his back to the camera, long legs outstretched towards the sea, those tanned, broad, muscular shoulders proclaiming him as a fit outdoor type.

Whereas she ... she saw the restlessness that she’d found so attractive in him; head turned to the side, his attention caught by the slightest of movements; arms and legs tensed, ready to launch him up off the sand; back – ah, his back ... how many times had she traced those muscles, with her fingers, with her

lips? Too many times, yet never enough ...

Yes, this photo could easily have been her favourite, but it didn't show his face. How she'd loved watching him at work, waiting for his expression to change: one moment, still with concentration; the next – as she made some provocative remark – alive with laughter and, although she hadn't realised it at first, desire.

That's why she preferred the photo in *The Sun*. You could see his face, and imagine ...

'This is the man,' Jenny was saying, 'who almost made me get satellite TV, remember? That was the only way to see his documentary series, but you talked me out of it. Very sensible too, we need to economise and Tom watches enough TV as it is. Just as well he has his voluntary work at Open Door, since no one wants to employ him.' She gave a little sigh, her eyes still fixed on the newspaper. 'I'm sure they'll bring out a DVD soon, in the meantime the book will do nicely.' Then she chuckled. 'It says here that he's a world expert on sea dragons. Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? They must be huge, although at least they can't breathe fire if they're under water!'

'They're tiny actually, I read somewhere that they're related to the sea horse.' To Anna's relief she sounded more brisk and business-like than she felt. 'Look, I've finished with the paper for now – why don't you take it? Tell Tom I expect him to get all the Sudoku done, even the Killer, before I see him tomorrow.' She checked her watch. 'I'd better get going, or I'll be late for our special family meeting and Walter will say all the important stuff while I'm not there.'

Jenny pulled a face as she folded up the newspaper. 'I'll never understand why your father insists on you girls calling him by his Christian name, it's not natural.'

'But then,' Anna said, with a little shrug, '*nothing* about

my father is natural.'

'Except his preference for your obnoxious older sister. She's a chip off the old block, if ever there was one.' Newspaper in hand, Jenny turned towards the door and stopped short. 'Ah, there's the other thing I came for.'

Anna followed her gaze to the DVD case lying on top of the TV. '*Anna Karenina*?'

'Yes, the very thought of Sean Bean as Vronsky ... Tom likes watching him in *Sharpe*, as you know, but I want something more romantic.' Jenny picked up the DVD and hesitated. 'Are you in the middle of watching it?'

'No, take it. I'll just need it back a week on Monday, when term starts.'

Jenny grinned. 'For your opening lecture to the first years? They're always full of it when they come into my office afterwards – you're so good at getting them to relate to nineteenth-century Russian literature. How does it go again? "Would you give up everything for your lover ..."'

"Would you give up everything in your life – family, friends, your place at this university – for your lover?" Anna said softly. "Anna Karenina did. She ignored the advice of those closest to her and left everything she had – husband, child and social position – for Vronsky. When it all went wrong, she threw herself under a train." A pause. "Tragic heroine – or selfish fool?"

'Brilliant opening to a brilliant lecture!' A wry chuckle. 'Of course, the students who *have* given up their place at Bath & Western University for their lover aren't there to hear it, but you certainly make an impression on the students who are. I've always meant to ask you – which one do *you* think Anna Karenina was?'

'A selfish fool.' The response was automatic, a consequence of subtle indoctrination since childhood.

Besides, if Jenny knew what had happened all those years ago, she'd realise it was the obvious response from a woman like Anna Elliot.

A woman who'd followed the advice of those closest to her: to keep her family, friends and place at university – and give up her lover instead.

To be continued