

Last Voyage of the Valentina

Chapter 1

London 1971

‘She’s enjoying the attentions of that young man again,’ said Viv, standing on the deck of her houseboat. Although it was a balmy spring evening, she pulled her tasselled shawl about her shoulders and took a long drag of her cigarette.

‘Not spying again, darling!’ said Fitz with a wry smile.

‘One can’t help noticing the comings and goings of that girl’s lovers.’ Viv narrowed her hooded eyes and inhaled through dilated nostrils.

‘Anyone would think you were jealous,’ Fitz commented, grimacing as he took a sip of cheap French wine. In all the years he had been Viv’s friend and agent she had never once bought a bottle of good wine.

‘I’m a writer. It’s my business to be curious about people. Alba’s engaging. She’s a very selfish creature, but one can’t help being drawn to her. The ubiquitous moth to the flame. Though, in my case, not a moth at all but a rather beautifully dressed butterfly.’ She wandered across the deck and draped herself over a chair, spreading her blue and pink kaftan about her like silken wings. ‘Still, I enjoy her life. It’ll do for a book one day, when we’re no longer friends. I think Alba’s like that. She enjoys people, then moves on. In our case, it shall be I who moves on. By then, the dramas of her life will no longer entertain me and, besides, I’ll have bored of the

Thames, too. My old bones will ache from the damp, and the creaking and bumping will keep me up at night. Then I shall buy a small château in France and retire to obscurity, fame having become a bore, too.’ She sucked in her cheeks and grinned at Fitz. But Fitz was no longer listening, although it was his job to.

‘Do you think they pay for it?’ he said, putting his hands on the railing and looking down into the muddy water of the Thames. Beside him, Sprout, his old springer spaniel lay sleeping on a blanket.

‘Certainly not!’ she retorted. ‘Her father owns the boat. She’s not having to fork out twelve pounds a week in rent, I assure you.’

‘Then she’s simply liberated.’

‘Just like everyone else of her generation. Following the herd. It bores me. I was before my time, Fitzroy. I took lovers and smoked cannabis long before the Albas of this world knew of the existence of either. Now I prefer bog standard Silva-Thins and celibacy. I’m fifty, too old to be a slave to fashion. It’s all so frivolous and childish. Better to set my mind on higher things. You may be a good ten years younger than me, Fitzroy, but I can tell the world of fashion bores you too.’

‘I don’t think Alba would bore me.’

‘But you, my dear, would bore her, eventually. You might think you’re a swaggering Lothario, Fitzroy, but you’d meet your match in Alba. She isn’t like other girls. I’m not saying you’d have trouble bedding her, but keeping her, now that’s a very different story. She likes variety. Her lovers don’t last long. I’ve seen them come and go. It’s always the same, they skip up the gangplank then, when it’s all over, they plod off

like ill-treated mongrels. She'd have you for dinner then spit you out like a chicken bone, and that would be a shock, wouldn't it, darling? I bet no one's ever done that to you before. It's called karma. What goes around, comes around. Pay you back for breaking so many hearts. Anyway, at your age, you should be looking for your third wife, not a transitory thrill. You should be settling down. Set your heart on one woman and keep it there. She's fiery because she's half Italian.'

'Ah, that explains the dark hair and honey skin.'

Viv looked at him askance and her thin lips extended into an even thinner smile.

'But those very pale eyes, strange . . .' He sighed, no longer noticing the taste of cheap wine.

'Her mother was Italian. She died when Alba was born.

In a car crash, I think. Has a horrid stepmother and a bore for a father. Navy, you know. Still there, the old fossil. Has had the same desk job since the war, I suspect. Commutes every day, very dreary. Captain Thomas Arbuckle, and he's definitely a Thomas and not a Tommy. Not like you, who are more of a Fitz than a Fitzroy, though I do love the name Fitzroy and shall continue to use it regardless. No wonder Alba rebelled.'

'Her father might be a bore, but he's a rich bore.' Fitz ran his eyes over the shiny wooden houseboat that gently rocked from the motion of the tide. Or from Alba's lovemaking. The thought made his stomach cramp competitively.

'Money doesn't bring happiness. You should know that, Fitzroy.'

Fitz stared into his glass a moment, reflecting on his own fortune that had brought him only avaricious wives and expensive divorces.

‘Does she live alone?’

‘She used to live with one of her half-sisters, but it didn’t work out. I can’t imagine the girl’s easy to live with, God bless her. The trouble with you, Fitzroy, is that you fall in love much too easily. If you could keep control of your heart, life would be a lot simpler for you. You could just bed her and get her out of your system. Ah, about time too! You’re late!’ she exclaimed as her nephew Wilfrid hurried down the pontoon with his girlfriend Georgia in tow, full of apologies. Viv could be quite fearsome when they showed up late for bridge.

The *Valentina* was a houseboat unlike any other on Cheyne Walk. The curve of the prow was pretty, upturned, coy as if she were trying to contain a knowing smile. The house itself was painted blue and white with round windows and a balcony where pots spilled over with flowers in springtime and leaks let in the rain during the winter months. Like a face that betrays the life it has lived, so the eccentric dip in the line of the roof and the charming slope of the bow, like a rather imperious nose, revealed that perhaps she had lived many lives. The overriding characteristic of the *Valentina*, therefore, was her mystery. Like a grand dame who would never be seen without her make-up, the *Valentina* would not reveal what lay beneath her paint. Her mistress, however, loved her not for her unusual features, or her charm or indeed her uniqueness. Alba Arbuckle loved her boat for a very different reason.

‘God, Alba, you’re beautiful!’ Rupert sighed, burying his face in her softly perfumed neck. ‘You taste of sugared almonds.’ Alba giggled, thinking him absurd, but unable to resist the sensation of his bristles that scratched and tickled and his

hand that had already found its way past her blue suede clog boots and up her Mary Quant skirt. She wriggled with pleasure and lifted her chin.

‘Don’t talk, you fool. Kiss me.’

This he did, determined to please her. He was heartened that she had suddenly come alive in his arms after a sulky supper in Chelsea. He pressed his lips to hers, relieved that as long as he entertained her tongue she couldn’t use it to abuse him. Alba had a way of saying the most hurtful things through the sweetest, most beguiling, smile. And yet, those pale grey eyes of hers, like a moor on a misty winter morning, aroused a strange kind of pity that was disarming. Drew a man in. Made him yearn to protect her. To love her was easy, to keep her unlikely. But along with the other hopefuls who walked the well-trodden deck of the *Valentina*, he couldn’t help but try.

Alba opened her eyes as he unbuttoned her blouse and took a nipple in his mouth. She looked up through the skylight to wispy pink clouds and the first twinkle of a star. Overwhelmed by the unexpected beauty of the dying day she momentarily let down her guard and her spirit was at once filled with sadness. It flooded her being and brought tears to those pale grey eyes, tears that stung. Her loneliness gnawed and ached, and nothing seemed to cure it. Appalled by the ill timing of such weakness she wound her legs around her lover and rolled over so that she sat on top, kissing and biting and clawing him like a wild cat. Rupert was stunned but more excited than ever. He eagerly ran his hands up her naked thighs to discover she wore no pants. Her buttocks lay smooth and exposed for him to caress with impatient fingers. Then he was inside her and she was riding him vigorously,

as if aware only of the pleasure and not of the man who was providing it. Rupert gazed upon her in awe, longing to put his mouth to her lips that were slightly parted and bruised. She looked wanton and yet, in spite of her lack of inhibition, she possessed a vulnerability that made him yearn to hold her close.

Soon Rupert's thoughts were lost in the excitement of their lovemaking. He closed his eyes and surrendered to his desire, no longer lucid enough to contemplate her lovely face. They writhed and rolled over the piles of discarded clothes on the bed until they exploded on to the floor with a thud, out of breath and laughing. She looked at his surprised face with eyes that shone and said with a throaty chuckle, 'What did you expect? The Virgin Mary?'

'That was wonderful. You're an angel,' he sighed, kissing her forehead. She raised her eyebrows and laughed at him.

'I do think you're absurd, Rupert. God would throw me out of Heaven for misbehaving.'

'Then that is not the Heaven for me.'

Suddenly her attention was diverted by a brown scroll of paper that had been dislodged from between the wooden slats under the bed. She couldn't reach from where she was lying, so she pushed Rupert away and crawled around to the other side. She stretched her arm beneath the bed.

'What is it?' he asked, blinking at her through a post-coital daze.

'I don't know,' she replied. As she stood up, she grabbed her cigarette packet and lighter from the bedside table and threw them at him. 'Light me one, will you?' Then she sat on the edge of the bed and slowly unfurled the scroll of paper.

Rupert didn't smoke. In fact, he loathed cigarettes but, not wanting to appear gauche, he did as she asked, throwing himself on to the bed beside her and running an appreciative hand down her back. She stiffened. Without looking at him she said, 'I've enjoyed you, Rupert. But now I want to be alone.'

'What is it?' he asked, astounded that she could suddenly turn so cold.

'I said, I want to be alone.' For a moment he was unsure how to react. No woman had ever treated him like that. He felt humiliated. When he saw that she wasn't going to change her mind, he reluctantly began to dress, clutching at the intimacy they had shared only moments before.

'Will I see you again?' He was aware that he sounded desperate.

She shook her head, irritated. 'Just go!'

He did up his shoelaces. She still hadn't looked at him.

Her attention was entirely captivated by the scroll. It was as if he had already gone.

'Well, I'll just let myself out then,' he mumbled.

She lifted her eyes to the glass doors that gave on to the upper deck and stared at the pink evening sky, now dissolving into night. She did not hear the door slam or Rupert's heavy footsteps as he trod gloomily up the gangplank, only the whisper of a voice she thought she had forgotten.

'Oh dear! Someone doesn't look very happy,' commented Fitz as Rupert made his way to Chelsea Embankment and disappeared beneath the street lamps. His comment suspended their game of bridge for a moment. Sprout cocked his ears and raised his drooping eyes before closing them again with a sigh.

‘Well, she does get through them, darling,’ said Viv, curling a stray wisp of blonde hair behind her ear. ‘She’s like a black widow.’

‘I thought they ate their mates,’ said Wilfrid. Fitz contemplated that delicious thought before placing a card on the table with a snap.

‘Who are we talking about?’ asked Georgia, crinkling her nose at Wilfrid.

‘Viv’s neighbour,’ he replied.

‘She’s a tart,’ added Viv caustically, winning the trick and swiping it over to her side of the table.

‘I thought you were friends?’

‘We are, Fitzroy. I love her in spite of her faults. After all, we all have them, don’t we?’ She grinned and flicked ash into a fluorescent green dish.

‘Not you, Viv. You’re perfect.’

‘Thank you, Fitzroy,’ she replied, then turned to Georgia and added with a wink, ‘I pay him to say that.’

Fitz glanced out of the little round window. The deck of the *Valentina* was still and quiet. He imagined the beautiful Alba lying naked on her bed, flushed and smiling, with curves and mounds in all the right places, and was momentarily distracted from the game.

‘Wake up, Fitz!’ said Wilfrid, snapping his fingers. ‘What planet are you on?’

Viv placed her cards on the table and sat back. She took a drag of her cigarette and exhaled with a loud puff. Gazing upon him with eyes made heavy from drink and the excesses of life, she said,

‘Oh, the same sad planet as so many other foolish men!’

Alba stared at the portrait sketched in pastels on the scroll

of brown paper, and felt a rush of emotion. It was as if she were looking into a mirror, but one that increased the loveliness of her image. The face was oval, like hers, with fine cheekbones and a strong, determined jaw, but the eyes weren't hers at all. They were almond-shaped, mossy brown in colour, a mixture of laughter and a deep, unfathomable sadness.

They held her attention, stared right back at her and through her and, when she moved, they followed her. She gazed into them for a long while, swallowed up in hopes and dreams that never bore fruit. Although the mouth only hinted at a smile, the whole face seemed to open with happiness like a sunflower. Alba's stomach twisted with longing. For the first time for as long as she could remember, she was staring into the face of her mother. At the bottom of the picture, written in Latin, were the words: *Valentina 1943, dum spiro, ti amo.*

It was signed in ink *Thomas Arbuckle*. Alba re-read those words a dozen times until they blurred with her tears. '*While I breathe, I love you.*'

Alba had learned Italian as a child. In an unusual moment of charity her stepmother, the Buffalo, had suggested she take lessons in order to maintain some contact with her Mediterranean roots, roots that in every other way the woman had tried to eradicate. After all, Alba's mother had been the love of her father's life. And what a great love it had been. Her stepmother was all too aware of the shadow Valentina cast over her marriage. Unable to erase so powerful a memory, all she could do was attempt to smother it. So Valentina's name was simply never mentioned. They had never travelled to Italy. Alba knew none of her mother's relatives, and her father avoided her questions so she had long since given up asking. As a child she had shrunk into an isolated world of

patchwork facts that she had managed to sew together by devious means. She would retreat into that world and derive comfort from the invented images of her beautiful mother on the shores of the sleepy Italian town where she had met and fallen in love with her father during the war.

Thomas Arbuckle had been handsome then, Alba had seen photographs. In his naval uniform he had cut quite a dash. Sandy hair and pale eyes and a cheeky, confident grin that the Buffalo had managed, with the sheer weight of her forceful personality, to reduce to a disgruntled scowl. Jealous of the houseboat he had bought and named after Valentina, the Buffalo had never set foot on its deck, referring to it as ‘that boat’ and not by its name. The *Valentina* conjured up memories of cypress trees and crickets, olive groves and lemons, and a love so great that no amount of stamping and snorting could denigrate it.

Alba had never felt she truly belonged in her father’s house. Her half-siblings were physical reflections of their parents but she was dark and alien, like her mother. Her halvesiblings rode horses, picked blackberries and played bridge, but she dreamed of the Mediterranean and olive groves. No amount of shouting at her stepmother and father had extracted the truth or compelled them to take her to Italy where she might get to know her real family. So she had moved into the houseboat that carried her mother’s sacred name. There she felt Valentina’s ethereal presence, heard her voice in the rise and fall of the tides a mere whisper away, and cocooned herself in her love.

She lay on the bed, beneath the skylight through which the stars now glimmered in their hundreds and the moon had replaced the sun. Rupert might just as well have never been

there. Alba was alone with her mother, her soft voice speaking through the portrait, caressing her daughter with those soft, sorrowful eyes. Surely this picture would melt the layers of ice that had built up over the years and her father would remember and talk about her.

Alba did not waste any time. She rummaged around the untidy cupboards for suitable clothes, placed the scroll carefully into her bag and hurried down the narrow staircase and out of the boat. A couple of squirrels were playing tag on the roof and she shooed them away irritably before setting off up the gangplank.

At that moment Fitz, having lost at bridge, was leaving Viv's houseboat, light-headed with wine and startled by the coincidence that set his path and Alba's in tandem. He didn't notice that she had been crying and she didn't notice Sprout. 'Good evening,' he said cheerfully, determined to ignite a conversation as they walked up the gangway towards the Embankment. Alba did not reply. 'I'm Fitzroy Davenport, a friend of your neighbour, Viv.'

'Oh,' she replied in a flat tone. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, partly obscured behind her hair. She crossed her arms and dug her chin into her chest.

'Can I give you a lift somewhere? My car's parked around the corner.'

'So is mine.'

'Ah.'

Fitz was surprised she didn't even raise her eyes. He was used to being looked at by women and was well aware that he was handsome, especially when he smiled, and he was tall, which was an advantage; girls always fancied tall men. Her lack of interest unbalanced him. He watched her long legs striding

out, clad in blue suede boots, and felt the anxiety tighten about his throat. Her loveliness debilitated him completely.

‘I’ve just lost at bridge,’ he persevered frantically. ‘Do you play?’

‘Not if I can help it,’ she replied.

He felt foolish. ‘Very wise. Dull game.’

‘Like the players,’ she retorted, then gave a small smile before climbing into a two-seater MGB and disappearing down the road. Fitz was left alone under the street lamp, scratching his head, unsure whether to be offended or amused.

Alone in the car where no one could see her, Alba sobbed.

She could fool everyone else with her bravado, but there was no point trying to fool herself. The sense of loss that had overwhelmed her earlier now resurfaced and this time with greater intensity. Her isolated world of cypress trees and olive groves was no longer sufficient. She had a right to know about her mother. Now she had the picture, the Buffalo would be forced to step back and let her father talk. How it had got there, she didn’t know. Maybe he had put it there so the Buffalo wouldn’t find it. Now she would know because Alba would tell her. It would be a pleasure. She changed gear and turned into the Talgarth Road.

It was late. They wouldn’t be expecting her. It would take her a good hour and a half to get to Hampshire in spite of the clear roads. Not a cat on them. She turned on the radio to hear Cliff Richard singing ‘*Those miss-you nights are the longest*’, and her tears cascaded all the more. Out of the darkness and into her headlights her mother’s face loomed. With long dark hair and soft, mossy brown eyes, she gazed upon her daughter with enough love and understanding to heal the entire world. Alba imagined she would have smelled of

lemons. She had not a single memory, a single recollection of her scent. She had only her imagination and who knows what falsehoods that conjured up.

It was easy to see why the Buffalo hated Valentina. Margo Arbuckle wasn't beautiful. She was a big lady with sturdy legs better suited to Wellington boots than stilettos, a large bottom that moulded well into the saddle of a horse and freckly English skin bare of make-up and washed with Imperial Leather soap. Her style of dress was appalling, tweed skirts and billowing blouses. Her bosom was substantial and she had lost any waist she once had. Alba wondered what her father had seen in her. Perhaps the pain of losing Valentina had driven him to choose a wife who was the opposite of her. But wouldn't it have been better to live with her memory than compromise in such a pitiful way?

As for the children they had had together, well, they had wasted no time in that department. Alba had been born in 1945, the year her mother died, and Caroline only three years later in 1948. It was shameful. Her father had barely had time to mourn. He had certainly not had time to get to know her child, the one he should have loved more than anyone else in the world as the living part of the woman he had lost. After Caroline came Henry and then Miranda – with each child Alba was pushed a little further into her world of pine and olive groves and her father was too busy making another family to notice how she cried. But it wasn't her family. *God*, she thought unhappily, *does he ever sit down and think what he's done to me?* Now she had the portrait, she was determined to tell him.

She turned off the A30 and headed down narrow winding lanes. Her headlights illuminated the hedgerows bursting

with cow parsley and the odd rabbit that darted hastily back into the bushes. She rolled down the window and sniffed the air like a dog, taking pleasure from the sweet scents of spring that swept in with the rattling sound of the motor. She imagined her father smoking his after-dinner cigar and swirling brandy in one of those large, swollen-bellied glasses he was so fond of. Margo would be rabbiting on about Caroline's thrilling new job in a Mayfair art gallery owned by a family friend and Henry's latest news from Sandhurst. Miranda was still at boarding school – little to report there except top grades and fawning teachers. How dreadfully dull and conventional, Alba thought. Predictable. Their lives would all run accordingly, along tracks laid down at their birth like perfect little trains. 'The runaway train came down the track and she blew, she blew . . .' sang Alba, her misery lifting as she contemplated her unconventional, independent existence that ran along a track entirely of her own making.

Finally she turned into the driveway that swept up for about a quarter of a mile beneath tall, copper beech trees. She could just make out a couple of horses in the field to her right, their eyes shining like silver as they caught the lights of her car. Hideous beasts, she thought sourly. Amazing they weren't all buckling at the knees considering the weight of the Buffalo. She wondered whether the woman rode her father like she rode her horses. She couldn't help but giggle at the thought, then swiftly dismissed it. Old people weren't into that sort of thing.

The wheels of the car scrunched up the gravel in front of the house. The lights blazed invitingly but Alba knew they didn't blaze for her. How Margo must resent her, she thought. It would be easier to wipe away Valentina's memory if she

weren't around as a constant reminder. She parked her car beneath the imposing walls of the house that had once been her home. With its tall chimneys and old, weathered brick and flint it had withstood gales and storms for well over 300 years. Her great-great grandfather had apparently won it at the gambling table, but not before he had lost his wife as a consequence of his addiction. She had swiftly become mistress to some duke who had an addiction of similar proportions but a much deeper pocket with which to indulge it. Alba rather liked the idea of the mistress; her stepmother had forever tainted her concept of marriage.

She sat in the car, contemplating the picture while three small dogs scurried out of the darkness to sniff the wheels and wag their stumpy tails. When her stepmother's face appeared around the door she had no option but to climb out and greet her. Margo looked pleased to see her though her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. 'Alba, what a lovely surprise! You should have telephoned,' she said, holding the door so that the orange light flooded the steps leading up to the porch. Alba went through the ritual of kissing her. She smelt of talcum powder and Yardley's Lily of the Valley. Around her neck hung a fat golden locket that rose up and down on the ledge of her breasts. Alba blinked away the image she had conjured up in the car of Margo riding her father like one of her horses.

She walked into the hall where the walls were woodpanelled and hanging with austere portraits of deceased relatives.

At once she smelt the sweet scent of her father's cigar and her courage flagged. He emerged from the drawingroom in a green smoking jacket and slippers. His hair, although thinning, was still sandy and brushed back off his

forehead, accentuating pale eyes that appraised her steadily. For a fleeting moment Alba was able to see beyond the heavy build and extended belly, past the ruddy skin and disgruntled twist of his mouth, to the handsome young man he had been in the war. Before he had sought comfort and oblivion in convention and routine. When he had still loved her mother. 'Ah, Alba, my dear. To what do we owe this pleasure?' He kissed her temple, as he always did, and his voice was thick and grainy like the gravel outside. Jovial, inscrutable; the young man had gone.

'I was just passing,' she lied.

'Good,' he replied. 'Come on in for a tippie and tell us what you've been up to.'