

Praise for Jane Huxley's work

A novel of remarkable panache. Dame Beryl Bainbridge DBE

A compelling read. Simon Cowell

A fascinating read. Ken Russell

A novel affair. Brilliant. Max Clifford, Surrey Life

Huxley has an admirable grasp of structure and character. Dame Beryl Bainbridge DBE

Detective of the human psyche, Huxley elevates the novel to literary artwork. Alexandra Shelley

Huxley writes with great insight in this razor-sharp exploration of the dark side of human relationships. Erica Sissons, Daily Express

Huxley combines the thrill of the detective story with a sensual and evocative love story. Andrew Johnson, Camden New Journal

A thoroughly engrossing read. Literally unputdownable. Sally Farmiloe-Neville, Hotgossip UK

Wonderful. Will make a great film, very Brian de Palma, Alfred Hitchcockish! Linda Mindel, Surrey Occasions

A must-buy for all the fans of romantic fiction. West End Extra

From the publisher:

Jane Huxley has been recognised by Dame Beryl Bainbridge as “a clever and ingenious novelist”, by Simon Cowell as a “compelling writer” and her work compared to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s (Daily Express, London).

Her style is concise, impressionistic and theatrical. Her elegant prose flows. A thought provoking voice in romantic fiction.

A Woman Named Coral

ALSO BY JANE HUXLEY

Morgan's Castle

For the Love of Penny Whistler

Summer Night, Winter Moon

When the Lilac Blooms, My Love

A Woman Named Coral

a novel by JANE HUXLEY



DELANCEY PRESS
LONDON 2014

Published by Delancey Press Ltd
23 Berkeley Square
London W1J 6HE

www.delanceypress.co.uk
Copyright © Jane Huxley 2014

The right of Jane Huxley to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright Design and Patents Acts of 1988. All rights reserved under International Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission in writing from the author. Reviewers may quote brief passages.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

First published 2014
Painting by Peregrine Heathcote
Jacket by Michal William
Typeset by BookType
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd

ISBN 978-1-907205-23-1

In memory of
Dame Beryl Bainbridge DBE

In her arms I tasted the delights of Paradise,
and they produced these hellish torments by
which you see me devoured.

Candide
VOLTAIRE

Torments that proclaim the approach
of ecstasy, which none of us would
willingly renounce.

J. H.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

CONTENTS

ONE	An Enigmatic Question	19
TWO	Questions without Answers	23
THREE	A Not so Pleasant Outing	27
FOUR	Of Love and Money	33
FIVE	Coral as a Puzzle	39
SIX	Mischief as a Tool	45
SEVEN	Blue Skies, Green Trees and Silvio	51
EIGHT	Of Love and Happiness	57
NINE	An Ounce of Common Sense	63
TEN	San Marcos University	67
ELEVEN	An Afternoon to Remember	71
TWELVE	A Tavern called <i>Cielito Lindo</i>	77

THIRTEEN	Gossip and Mischief	81
FOURTEEN	A Penny for his Thoughts	87
FIFTEEN	Desire and the Oblique	93
SIXTEEN	Looking at the Waves	97
SEVENTEEN	When Minutes turn into Hours	103
EIGHTEEN	The Sadness Within	109
EPILOGUE		113

ONE

An Enigmatic Question

She opened her eyes to a slice of sun flickering on the pillow.

“Tom,” she groaned. “Please close the shutters. I’m trying to sleep.”

There was no answer from the other side of the bed. A vague Vétiver-scented haze from Tom’s pillow pervaded the air. A moment later her husband’s loud baritone bellowed from downstairs.

“Missy, are you awake? Come down! You’ll never guess who’s here.”

She knew at once it was her stepson, gorgeous Stefan, whose name alone suggested he was intriguing and adventurous – a sailor dangling from the mast of a storm-tossed ship.

“Coming,” she sang, as she slipped into the

bathroom, brushed her hair and inspected her face, lips and almost transparent black négligé.

“Hello, darling,” she said, as she offered him her cheek.

Stefan brushed it with his lips and his green eyes twinkled with amusement as they paused on the seductive hand placed across the breasts of his father’s wife.

Irresistible, Missy thought, gazing at the eyes, the perfect patrician nose, and those sensual lips that suggested a perpetual craving for a kiss.

“Straight from Kabul,” Tom announced, “where he had been sent by The Daily Telegraph.”

As a freelance journalist, Stefan spent most of his time in remote parts of the world, which he laughingly explained as a way to escape the drab English winter.

“Coffee and croissants,” Tom announced, as Missy set three places at the kitchen table. A moment later he addressed his son in a voice that was a trifle uncertain, “You want to tell her, or shall I?”

“Tell me what?” Missy asked.

“There has been another sighting,” Tom said.

Missy looked at him, then at Stefan, as if she thought the comment was absurd.

The so-called “sighting” referred to the lost

daughter of Tom's friends, the Harringtons, who had died almost twenty years earlier in a mudslide in the northern province of Ancash, in Perú.

Their bodies had been recovered days after the avalanche, but that of their six-year old daughter had never been found. There was something hopeful and pathetic about the rumours and "sightings" that sprouted from various different sources from time to time.

"Another sighting?" Missy asked in a bored voice.

"This one is different." Tom said.

"In what way?"

"The source," Tom told her. "Professor Greene, a friend of the Harringtons, has met the young woman in Lima."

"What is she like?"

"Blond and beautiful, which is most unusual if her parents are brown skinned Indians from the Sierra."

"Strange story," Missy said.

"But life goes on," Tom explained. "The girl is now in her late twenties and married to a prominent member of Peruvian society."

"So," Missy concluded. "All's well that ends well."

"Hasn't ended yet," Tom said. "In fact, it has barely begun."

Missy turned to her stepson, who was drinking

his coffee and eating his second croissant. “What do you think of all this?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” he said. “May be worth trying to find out.”

“Which is exactly what’s going to happen,” Tom said. “Because Stefan is going to Perú, on assignment from The New York Times.”

“What a strange coincidence,” Missy blurted.

“Not really,” Stefan said. “I’m doing a piece on San Marcos University. While I’m there, I don’t mind looking up Professor Greene, who has given Father this information.”

“Oh, dear,” Missy sighed. “With men the only way to win the battle is to agree with their most preposterous whims.” A brief pause before she continued, “But, anyway, will you stay and have lunch with us?”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Stefan said. “I’m expected in Hampstead. Mother wants to see me before I go to Perú.”

“Dear Frances,” Missy said, with a reptilian smile. “Give her my best, will you?”

TWO

Questions without Answers

Frances had always been an excellent cook and her favourite guest, her son Stefan, was sitting at the luncheon table, a bowl of *bouillabaisse* in front of him.

“Mother,” he exclaimed. “This is better than Maxim’s.”

“Do they make *bouillabaisse* at Maxim’s?” she asked, surprised.

“I don’t know; but if they do, yours is better.”

“Eat as much as you want. You need to put on some weight.”

“Kabul is not the ideal place for it. I must say, I was happy to arrive, but a lot happier to leave.”

They went on eating and after a while, Stefan’s eyes paused on his mother’s face. Still beautiful, despite the shadows under the eyes, the pinched

mouth that used to be always smiling, and the grey strands of hair whose existence he had only recently noticed.

“Mother,” he said, “you remember your friends, the Harringtons, don’t you?”

“Of course, darling. How could I forget them? Keith and Margo, and their beautiful little daughter, Coral.”

“Can you tell me what you remember about them?”

“Keith was an explorer, intent on finding an Inca tombstone in the northwest province of Ancash. Margo was a loving wife who found ancient ruins as interesting as a pile of mud. Their little daughter was delighted to be a part of the adventure.”

Frances lowered her head, as if she were unwilling to rake among the ashes of her memory. Through the dining room window she could see two swans gliding on the pond beyond her garden.

“I’m sorry if your memories cause you sorrow,” Stefan said, “but, as you know, there has been a sighting. What you tell me may make a difference between finding this young woman and not finding her.”

“I understand,” Frances said, and went on, “When the Harringtons announced their travel plans, both your father and I offered to keep the

little girl with us in London until their return.”

“But they declined?”

“They were unwilling to part from her, which we certainly understood.”

“So they took off and...”

“...and were killed in the avalanche.”

“Father told me. Awful story.”

Frances removed the empty bowls of *bouillabaise* and brought a tray of cheese and biscuits.

“The bottom line is Coral,” she said. “Twenty years later.”

“Father said that she was raised by an Indian couple from the Sierra.”

“That’s correct. They spoke only *Quechua*, but they sent her to a bilingual school and encouraged her to learn Spanish and English.

“What, exactly, do you know about her?”

“Not much. That she’s young, intelligent and very beautiful.”

“What about him?”

“His name is Aurelio Fernandez-Concha. He’s in his sixties, attractive, charismatic, and one of the wealthiest cotton growers in South America.”

“A perfect match,” Stefan said, with a touch of irony.

“You may not know this,” Frances said. “But most everything in life is an exchange.”

“Not very reassuring, is it? But, anyway, going back to Mr. Fernandez-Concha, I believe I can get an introduction from Professor Greene.”

“That would certainly open doors and may provide some clues. At the moment all we have are questions without answers.”

Stefan helped himself to a biscuit and a slice of Brie topped with a drop of honey.

“Sorry to impose this burden on you,” Frances said.

“Not at all. I’ll be glad to do what I can.”

“Thank you, darling. I suppose this confirms that parents are needy.”

Stefan laughed. A funny word. Needy. And yet, it brought to mind an image that was just the opposite – that of a heart of gold.