

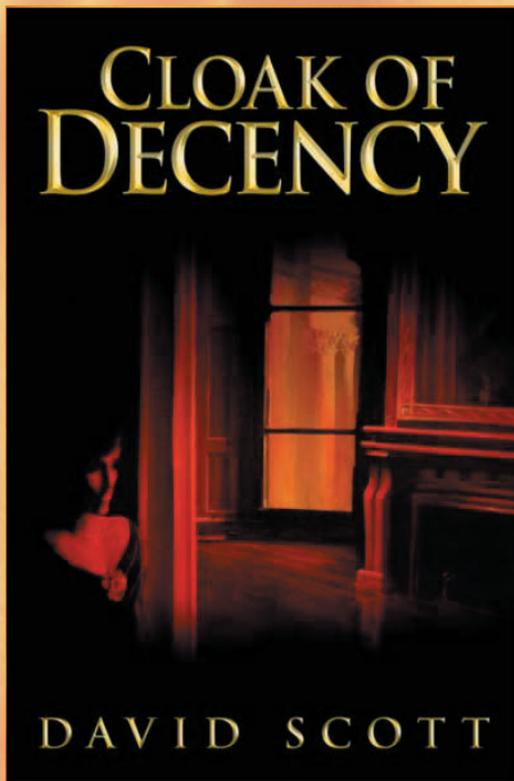
CLOAK OF DECENCY



EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

DAVID SCOTT

*Love, betrayal,
murder, revenge...*



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PROLOGUE

Conor Doyle was so captivated by a pretty girl crossing Sloane Avenue, he didn't notice two men in dark suits approaching his car from behind. As they drew alongside, one of them took out a knife and slashed the roof of his Porsche Boxster. The sound of the material ripping made him jump but, before he realised what was happening, the car door opened and he was being dragged onto the pavement.

His heart racing, Conor struggled to get free, but the man was built like a tank and, with his arm twisted painfully up his back, there was no chance of escape.

'I suggest you come quietly, Mr Doyle, unless you want your pretty face to end up like the roof of your car,' threatened the other, holding the blade to Conor's throat.

'What do you want?' Conor stammered, the razor edge now pressed against his skin.

'Just shut up and do what we tell you,' barked the other, pushing him down a side street towards a black Mercedes.

'Let me go,' Conor protested, trying hard to stop the men forcing him into the back seat of the car, his cashmere jacket tearing in the struggle.

'Just get into the car, or we'll break your legs and stick you in the boot,' one of the men threatened, grabbing him roughly and

pushing him inside.

Conor fell awkwardly into the back of the car, his sweaty palms sliding across the leather seat, his heart now thumping as he tried to breath amid the heavy stench of stale tobacco.

‘Where are you taking me?’ he ventured, as one of the men climbed in beside him.

‘Our boss wants to have a chat with you about some money you owe him,’ he answered with a smirk, stretching out his fingers, the knuckles cracking threateningly.

Conor swallowed hard, summoning the courage to continue.

‘Who’s that?’ he asked bravely.

The man in the front laughed at the question.

‘You mean you don’t know?’

Conor shook his head. ‘I have no idea.’

‘Well, if I mentioned the one hundred thousand pounds you owe him, does that jog your memory? Or perhaps you owe money to more than one person in London?’ he added sarcastically.

Unfortunately Conor did, so he decided to say nothing.

It was only as the car reached Hyde Park Corner, when the driver’s mobile rang and he started to speak in Russian, did Conor realise who they worked for.

Sergei Oblamotov, former K.G.B. official, turned corrupt capitalist and ruthless mobster, was one of the most dangerous men in London. Conor loosened his tie and undid the top button of his shirt, the collar now soaked in perspiration. He knew the Russian showed no mercy to anyone who crossed him; his last victim was found floating in the Thames, his hands and feet bound with the safety belt

ripped from his own car. Conor knew that if he wanted to stay alive, he would have to get out of the car as quickly as possible.

The two men in the front were now arguing about a football match, while the man sitting beside him was picking at a scar on the back of his hand. Looking ahead, Conor knew the car would have to stop at the junction with Sloane Street; there he would make his move.

He swallowed hard, feeling the dryness in his mouth. As the Mercedes eased to a halt outside Harvey Nichols, he grabbed the door handle and hurled himself out of the car. For a brief second he thought he was free, but just as his feet touched the pavement an arm of steel tightened around his neck as the man sitting beside him wrenched him back into the car. The driver glanced around briefly before accelerating hard, the car door slamming shut as it smashed against a lamp post as they sped across the junction.

‘That was a very stupid thing to do, Mr Doyle,’ the man shouted angrily, still holding Conor in a tight headlock. He pulled a piece of rope from under the driver’s seat and tied it securely around Conor’s wrists, the rough fibre cutting deep into his skin.

‘It’s too tight,’ Conor protested, trying to get free.

‘You should have thought of that before you tried that stunt, now sit there and shut up or we’ll stick this down your throat,’ the man in the front threatened, throwing a dirty rag into the back seat.

The car slowed down as they passed Beauchamp Place, turning suddenly into Ovington Street. The long black vehicle snaked its way along the narrow street, finally stopping outside a four-storey terraced house. A sombre-faced man stepped forward and opened

the car door.

Conor, by now quite dazed, stumbled towards the large front door of the building until one of the men stepped in front of him, forcing him down a short flight of steps and in through another door into the basement.

The room was dark and dank with just a table and two wooden chairs in the middle. In one corner were two Rottweiler dogs, tied to an old radiator. As the men entered, the dogs started to bark, pulling hard at their leads, their sharp teeth bared menacingly.

‘Shut up,’ shouted one of the men, ‘you’ll get your chance at him soon enough,’ he laughed.

Despite the coldness of the room, Conor could feel perspiration running down his back as the dogs kept growling, their sharp claws scraping across the concrete floor as they tried to break free.

Suddenly, the door burst open and a large, heavy set man strode in, flanked by two bodyguards, Colt .45 pistols clearly visible under their black leather jackets.

‘What a pleasant surprise,’ Oblamotov leered, a cruel smile creeping across his hard, weather-beaten face. He settled down in one of the chairs, his large stomach hanging over his broad pin-striped trousers.

‘How are you today, Mr Doyle?’ he asked, fixing a steely glare that penetrated Conor to the core.

‘I’m very well, thank you,’ Conor stammered nervously, ‘and you?’

The Russian laughed mockingly.

‘I’m wonderful, so kind of you to ask. You know, that’s one

thing I really admire about the British, their manners; always so polite and courteous, even when they are in such grave danger. Sit down,' he ordered, a harsh tone suddenly colouring his voice.

Before Conor had a chance to move, one of the men grabbed him by the collar and pushed him roughly into the other chair.

'I am very disappointed in you, Mr Doyle,' he said, shaking his head disapprovingly, 'not only have you failed to repay the money you owe, but I think you have been avoiding me. Isn't that right?'

Conor fidgeted uneasily in the chair.

'No, Mr Oblamotov. I haven't been avoiding you, I have been trying to get your money,' he answered, nervously.

'Oh good, so you have my money then?' the Russian smiled, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

'Almost, I just need a few more days, that's all.'

'A few more days?' the man repeated in surprise, 'but you don't have any more time, Mr Doyle; I want my money and I want it now,' he barked angrily.

Conor glanced up at the man nervously.

'I don't have it, honestly I don't. But I will get it for you, just give me a little longer,' he pleaded.

'You should have had it before now,' Oblamotov scolded sternly, turning around in his chair to look at the dogs, still barking behind him.

'Maybe we should let them off their leads, I don't think they have eaten today,' he threatened.

Conor swallowed hard. 'I don't think so,' he ventured.

'You don't think so,' the man repeated sarcastically. 'I'm not

interested in what you think, I'm just interested in getting my money.' He banged his fist angrily on the table, making Conor jump.

The Russian sat back in his chair, resting his elbows on the scuffed wooden arms, his hands clasped piously in front of him.

'Tell me, Mr Doyle, does your fiancée know about your penchant for high stakes gambling?' he asked, with a menacing smirk.

Conor looked surprised.

'What do you mean?' he mumbled, stalling for time.

'Martha Jefferson, the American heiress, she is your fiancée, is she not?'

'Yes,' Conor answered hesitantly.

'Well, does she know you come to my club and gamble money you don't have?'

'No, she doesn't.'

The Russian shook his head. 'Oh dear, that's not good, keeping secrets from the woman you are going to marry, especially when she is so well connected in London society. Don't you agree?'

Connor nodded timidly.

'Why don't you get the money from her, Mr Doyle? I hear she is one of the wealthiest women in London, or would she not trust you to pay it back?' he mocked.

Conor looked aghast.

'I could never ask Martha for the money,' he said, dropping his eyes to the floor.

'Still so proud,' the Russian rebuked angrily, 'I have to laugh at you, Mr Doyle. You swan around London in your designer suits, eating at all the best restaurants, living the life of a rich man when, in

reality, you have nothing. Nothing except Martha Jefferson to pick up the tab; tell me, what is it like to be a kept man, Mr Doyle?’

Conor sat in silence, but did not reply.

‘That is the correct term, isn’t it? I’m not sure what it is in Russian...’ He turned to ask one of his bodyguards, the exchange making the other men in the room laugh scornfully.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Doyle, but it seems the term does not exist. In my country a man would sooner die than live with the shame of being kept by a woman,’ he mocked.

‘Just give me a few days, I will get the money for you,’ Conor pleaded.

The Russian shook his head. ‘As I have already said, I am not prepared to wait any longer,’ he shouted, his piercing, hawk-like eyes fixed threateningly on Conor.

‘What can I do then?’

The Russian leaned forward and rested his arms on the table.

‘Now let me think,’ he pondered, ‘I wonder, is there anything you could do for me?’ He smiled, slowly twisting the heavy gold signet ring on his fat, sausage-like finger.

‘Anything,’ Conor replied, enthusiastically.

‘You may not know it, Mr Doyle, but I am something of a fine art connoisseur,’ the Russian boasted. ‘At my home in St. Petersburg, I have an impressive collection of modern art - two Matisse, several Gauguin and an exquisite Balla. There is, however, one artist for whom I have a great admiration, but have never been able to acquire any of his work. I am of course referring to Pablo Picasso.’

Conor looked puzzled.

‘But what has that got to do with me?’ Conor interrupted.

‘Patience, Mr Doyle, let me explain. Tomorrow afternoon, at a prestigious Bond Street gallery, a previously undiscovered Picasso will come up for sale. It has been in the collection of a Spanish Marquesa, whose husband was a friend of the artist. I want you to buy it for me.’

Conor frowned at the request.

‘But how can I do that? I have no money.’

‘That’s not the problem. I will give you the money. I just want you to conduct the transaction for me.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Conor continued, still looking confused, ‘why don’t you just buy it yourself?’

The Russian leaned forward, lowering his voice. ‘Quite simply, Mr Doyle, I want to pay for it in cash, up to £5 million in cash. A reputable auction house will never accept that amount of money from me. You, however, with your connections to Miss Jefferson, who I hear is a respected art collector, will have no difficulty getting them to take the cash. Isn’t that so?’ he smiled, threateningly.

Conor hesitated before replying.

‘I’m not sure, it’s a great deal of money.’

The Russian stared crossly at Conor, his pock-marked cheeks flushing red with anger.

‘Well, Mr Doyle,’ he snapped furiously, ‘you better be sure, because if you don’t get me that painting,’ he hesitated, glancing around at his henchmen, ‘Miss Jefferson will find you hanging

under Chelsea Bridge. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Perfectly,’ Conor stammered, swallowing hard.

Oblamotov smiled again.

‘We will meet you at the gallery tomorrow with the money.

Normally, I am not so generous,’ he paused, ‘but if you do as I ask, I may just forget what you owe me; but any mistakes and you are a dead man.’

Sergei Oblamotov stood up and Conor felt his chair being pulled from under him.

‘Until tomorrow, Mr Doyle,’ he continued. ‘By the way, don’t think of doing anything silly like not turning up, you know I will always find you,’ he smirked.

Conor nodded as the Russian left the room. The basement door suddenly opened as one of the men grabbed him by the collar and unceremoniously threw him out into the street.

‘I take it you can find your own way home,’ the man jeered, slamming the door shut.

Conor brushed himself down and straightened his jacket as he made his way along Ovington Street, all the while wondering how he could persuade the gallery to take the money.

It was just as he reached the Fulham Road that he had an idea. It was a long shot, but he knew he had to give it a try, as this was all too clearly a matter of life and death.

ONE

‘The only thing worse than no husband is the wrong husband,’ Francesca quipped, drawing deeply on her long white cigarette, easing herself back into the red velvet couch.

‘So why don’t you leave him?’ her friend asked naively.

‘Quite simply, Ines, I like his money.’

‘That won’t bring you happiness.’

Francesca smiled condescendingly. ‘I know, but if you’re going to be miserable, you might as well be rich,’ she retorted, finishing the last of her champagne. ‘And besides, it’s not just the money. There’s the apartment in the 16th Arrondissement, the villa in Spain, not to mention how useful the title is whenever you want a table in a good restaurant,’ she added, smugly.

‘So what’s the problem?’ asked Ines.

Francesca sighed wearily. ‘Eduardo is just so dull. I need excitement, someone dark and dangerous, who will bring some passion into my life.’

Ines looked aghast. ‘Francesca, you are outrageous,’ she reproached, her criticism cut short as a waiter appeared at their table.

‘Excuse me, Marquesa,’ he interrupted, ‘the gentleman at the bar would like to send over a bottle of champagne.’

Francesca looked first at her friend and then turned her attention to the handsome young man, sitting on a stool at the bar.

Slowly, he raised his glass and smiled confidently, his tanned good looks cutting an imposing figure at the art deco bar.

‘I really should be going,’ Ines stammered nervously, glancing down at her watch.

‘You can’t go yet,’ Francesca objected, ‘and besides, it would be rude to decline his invitation.’ She turned back to the waiter and smiled.

‘Will you tell the gentleman we would be delighted to accept his kind offer,’ she paused, ‘on the condition he joins us for a glass.’

Ines gasped silently as the waiter acknowledged her request and returned to the bar to convey the message.

‘Francesca, do you think it was wise asking him to join us? We have no idea who he is and, in case you hadn’t noticed, he’s young enough to be your...’

‘Yes, I know, isn’t it wonderful,’ Francesca interrupted, ‘and so very handsome.’ She smiled, seductively fingering the long rope of pearls around her neck. ‘He’s obviously quite taken by us, which makes it even more exciting.’

Ines snorted dismissively. ‘It’s you he’s taken with, not me,’ she added bitterly.

Francesca tried to seem surprised. ‘I’m sure that’s not the case, but we are about to find out. He’s coming over!’

The young man stood up and casually sauntered across the Cambon Bar with all the confidence of youth, his radiant good looks drawing admiring glances from the diners as he passed.

‘I’ve ordered a bottle of Krug, I hope that’s alright?’ he announced assuredly, a broad smile lighting up his handsome face.

‘Brains and beauty,’ Francesca complemented.

‘You’re very kind,’ he replied, gently kissing the back of her hand.

‘I’m Francesca,’ she smiled ‘and this is Ines,’ she added hastily, sensing her friend’s accusing stares.

‘Fabio Ricci,’ he beamed, pulling a chair closer to Francesca, ignoring the empty seat beside the other woman. The waiter arrived with the champagne and proceeded to fill the crystal flutes, only pausing when Ines placed her hand over hers.

‘None for me,’ she announced tartly, taking her gloves out of her handbag and snapping it shut.

‘You’re not going already, are you?’ Francesca asked, trying to sound disappointed.

‘Yes, Francesca, I am. I may never have been particularly good at maths, but even I know that three into two doesn’t go.’ She stood up and buttoned her jacket.

‘If you’re sure, darling? I’ll call you tomorrow, is that alright?’ Francesca ventured, leaning over to kiss her friend.

‘If you’re not too busy,’ Ines replied, turning and glaring at Fabio, before marching off.

‘I think I have offended your friend,’ he said, pulling his chair closer, his leg brushing against hers.

‘I wouldn’t worry about it, she’s very easily offended. I blame it on her convent education,’ laughed Francesca, lighting another

cigarette. 'That's where we met.'

Fabio swallowed hard, trying not to choke as he set down his glass.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh,' he answered. 'I just can't imagine you in a convent.'

'Neither could I, but my parents thought it would make me a respectable young lady. Unfortunately I just kept running away,' Francesca recalled glibly.

'Where did you run to?'

'Anywhere I could, I didn't care, so long as it was far away from the nuns; they kept bringing me back until one day I ran away and got married.'

'And you lived happily ever after?' he teased, lifting the bottle of champagne to fill their glasses.

'I don't believe in happy endings,' Francesca corrected.

Fabio looked surprised. 'Isn't that a little cynical?'

'It's the only way to avoid disappointment,' she answered philosophically, calling the waiter to the table.

'Can you bring me another packet of cigarettes?'

'Certainly, Marquesa,' he smiled, clearing the empty box from the table.

'Marquesa,' Fabio repeated, raising his eyebrows. 'I thought the French had beheaded the aristocracy?'

'Unfortunately not all of them; but if you know anyone with a sharp guillotine, I have just the candidate,' she quipped.

The young man laughed at her candour. ‘Surely not the Marques?’

‘However did you guess?’ she grinned.

‘I thought he would be waiting patiently for you upstairs.’

‘Do you think I would be sitting here if he was? Besides, he hates Paris, hence the reason I spend so much time here,’ she scoffed.

‘So you have installed yourself at the Ritz?’

Francesca shook her head. ‘I have an apartment on avenue Georges Mandel.’

‘Your cigarettes, Marquesa,’ announced the waiter, setting down a silver dish, the open-box carefully placed on top. ‘Would you like another bottle of champagne?’ he asked, turning to Fabio.

‘Shall we?’

‘Not for me, I’m just about to leave,’ said Francesca, dismissing the waiter with a smile.

‘You’re not going so soon, I hope?’ the young man frowned, clearly disappointed.

‘I’m afraid I must,’ she confirmed, lifting the cigarettes and dropping them into her handbag.

‘May I give you a lift, my car’s just outside?’ he offered eagerly.

Francesca shrugged her shoulders. ‘If you like,’ she answered, standing up and slipping on her jacket.

The warm summer evening had left Place Vendome almost deserted as they emerged from the hotel, with only the rustling of

the flag over the Justice Ministry breaking the silence.

As Fabio opened the door of his Maserati, Francesca stepped down into the low sports car, her short black dress creeping up her long, slender legs as she slipped into the passenger seat.

‘Aren't you getting in?’ she asked impatiently, catching the young man staring, as he stood motionless on the pavement beside her.

‘It’s so hot this evening,’ he remarked, climbing into the car beside her, loosening the top button of his shirt.

‘Just the way I like it,’ she answered coyly, pulling the seatbelt around her slim waist and snapping it shut.

‘I will remember that,’ he replied with a smile, suddenly looking around to see what she had picked up from the floor. ‘I take it this belongs to your girlfriend,’ Francesca remarked off-handedly, dropping a bottle of perfume into the glove box and banging it shut.

‘I don’t think so,’ Fabio retorted, starting the engine and pulling away from the kerb.

‘Doesn’t she wear perfume?’

‘Yes, but not that one,’ he answered with a cheeky grin.

It was now almost one o’clock. The wide boulevards of the first Arrondissement lay still and lifeless, as mansion apartment blocks slumbered peacefully in the nocturnal calm, with just the occasional glow of an upstairs window betraying any sign of life. It was only when they reached the bright lights of the Trocadero that the silence of the journey was broken. The young man turned and looked at

Francesca.

‘I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met.’

Francesca smiled cynically. ‘I can’t imagine how many times you’ve used that line before,’ she replied ungraciously.

‘Not as often as you might think,’ he answered. ‘Besides, it doesn't make it any less true,’ he continued, turning the car into the broad tree-lined avenue where she lived.

‘You can leave me at the front door,’ she instructed, as they approached the imposing five-storey building, elegantly adorned with splendid bay windows and fine wrought-iron balustrades.

Fabio carefully manoeuvred the car into a free space and switched off the engine before coming around to open Francesca’s door.

‘Thank you,’ she smiled, stepping out of the car and making her way towards the impressive double doors. It was only when she heard his footsteps on the path behind her, did she stop and turn around.

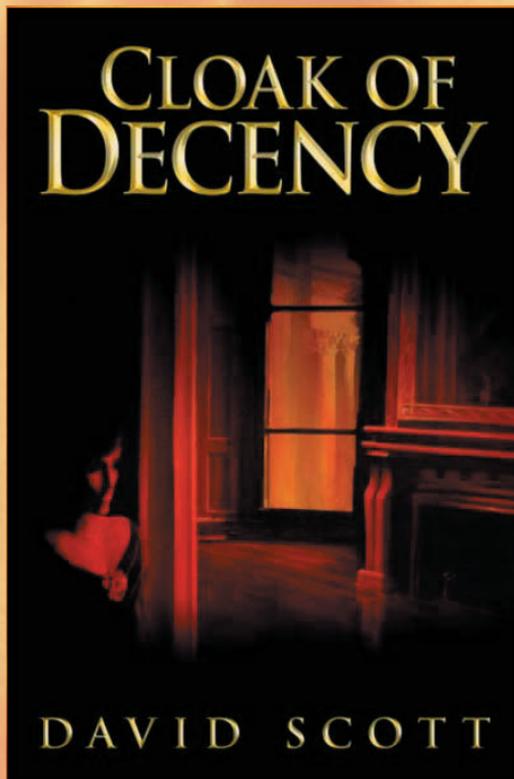
‘Where do you think you’re going?’ she asked bluntly.

The young man stopped dead, looking surprised.

‘I thought you might invite me in for a drink,’ he ventured timidly.

Francesca smiled coyly. ‘Of course, it’s the least I can do; but don’t you think it would be better to park your car around the back, rather than leave it in the street all night?’ Turning around, she slipped the key into the lock.

*Love, betrayal,
murder, revenge...*



Available exclusively online at:
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Set in London and Paris, Cloak of Decency is a pacy thriller that revolves around love, murder, blackmail, cold-hearted revenge - and painful remorse.

Smooth-talking womaniser, Conor Doyle is offered one last chance to save his own neck by Russian mobster, Sergei Oblamtov, who wants him to buy a rare Picasso painting on his behalf - in cash. Faced with the seemingly impossible task of getting the gallery to accept fi ve million pounds in used notes, Doyle stops at nothing to pull off the daring stunt, knowing its quite simply a matter of life and death.

At the sale, he meets the seductive but callous, Francesca de Cortes, who also has a vested interest in the sale of the painting. Straightaway Conor, with his fraudulent, amoral ways recognises a kindred spirit and when the two join forces the stage is set for passion, intrigue - and finally murder, vengeance and karmic payback.