

# CLASS OF '97

by

**Gill Mather**

This mystery novel is available on Amazon as an ebook and a paperback and under the Kindle Unlimited program.

The action opens in South Yorkshire in 2019. 'Greta' is clearly hiding something. Her temporary host, Francis, is also less than open. What are they concealing?

Nearly two hundred miles to the south in Ipswich, Oliver continues to labour as a criminal solicitor, unaware of the consequences of earlier events in his life and of what is yet to come. How is he to overcome his immediate problems, let alone accommodate the blast from the past that rushes in and threatens to engulf him?

'Greta' wonders whether her life will ever be easy. Oliver attempts to help her with a particular problem which she has but in the process he makes a sinister discovery which he can barely believe. Will the dark past solve anything?

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The story is told separately by 'Greta' and Oliver. Chapter 5 which follows is an early chapter told by Oliver who attends an anniversary party at the home of his matrimonial assistant solicitor, Stella. He is accompanied by his girlfriend, Alana, who is a lot younger than him. Patrick Grainger who is mentioned is Oliver's business partner in their Ipswich legal practice, Grainger Waring.

## Chapter 5

'YOU WERE right.'

'Sorry?'

'About her being too young for you. You sure she's over the age of consent?'

'You're showing your own age. At a certain point, policemen and news presenters for example start to look younger and younger.'

'And you think that applies to the girlfriends of old Lotharios like you?'

'You don't have enough information to pin that description on me. You can't know for example whether I've seduced her yet.'

'Have you?'

'Change of subject called for.' Oliver downed his drink and rested his glass on the occasional table which was substantially propping up Stella as she poured more wine into his glass, only narrowly avoiding a spillage. 'Didn't you ask Patrick?'

'No. I did not,' said Stella. 'You must've noticed how weird he's become lately. Has he behaved this oddly before?'

'No, actually. Certainly not since we formed the partnership fifteen years ago. Still, you ladies must allow for men's mid-life crises too. It's only fair. It's discrimination otherwise.'

Oliver hoped in fact that Stella would leave him alone or at least stop interrogating him about, firstly, his young girlfriend and whether he'd had sex with her, and secondly, partners with an obvious problem. He wished he hadn't mentioned Patrick Grainger. And of course it was he too who had raised the subject of seduction. Perhaps Stella wasn't so drunk as she was acting. Actually, she looked fantastic. Perhaps that's what eight years of happy marriage did for one. In fact he could quite fancy her himself at this moment. He checked himself. That was an area, if he had any sense, into which he would fiercely resist straying.

'Oh,' he said, 'here comes your adoring husband. Are you having speeches and the cutting of a cake? Is he whisking you off later to somewhere exotic for a second honeymoon?'

'I should be so lucky to be given a few days off by you pair of slave drivers.'

Her husband sidled up to them and put his arm around his wife's waist unnecessarily possessively.

'You'd better go and see where Lolita is,' Stella smiled slyly at Oliver. 'She may have found someone her own age to play with.'

'Thank you, Stella. That's a very good idea.'

HE found Alana in the downstairs cloakroom, throwing up. Wonderful, he thought. Just what I need. To have to nurse a teenager back to full sobriety over the course of the next several hours.

'Would you like me to take you home?' he asked kindly. He meant her home not his. She shared a flat with some other girls.

She nodded gratefully.

'OK. Your coat's in here already as luck would have it. I'll go and make our goodbyes, then we can be off.'

He found Stella again and, being too much of a gentleman to provide the reason for their hasty departure, resignedly bore her innuendos regarding his immediate intentions towards his young companion. Instead he nodded pleasantly, wished her another blissful eight years and was soon helping Alana to his car.

RELIEVED to be back in his flat and on his own, he spent a few minutes sitting with the lights off by his French windows looking out as the overcast sky darkened over the well-maintained communal garden, debating with himself what to do about Alana. In fact she was twenty-one, no longer a teenager, but everyone at Stella's was at least ten years her senior so it probably wasn't surprising that she'd hit the Pimm's rather too hard.

As far as he was concerned, her age dictated against any serious relationship developing. He was nearly forty. Every morning when he looked in his shaving mirror, he made out yet more grey hairs invading the dark.

Alana was no innocent however, no shrinking violet. Far from having seduced her, he had been seduced *by* her.

He had met her at an art exhibition a couple of weeks ago. The gallery owner was a client of the firm, and it fell to Oliver to attend because Patrick was away for a week on one of his mysterious trips to the USA. Having arrived as late as he decently could and having accepted the proffered glass of bubbly, he had wandered around feigning interest in the pictures. Actually they were very good; drawings of nudes, the odd portrait and some studies of large ornate buildings which, though detailed, were executed in a sweeping style that lent them a blurry impressionist feel. Notwithstanding, Oliver had no intention of buying anything. The price tags were far too high, therefore he was trying not to linger in front of any particular drawing in case he was buttonholed by the gallery owner or the artist and engaged in sales talk. In today's world of apps and mobile banking, saying you didn't have a cheque book with you wouldn't count as an excuse.

Sensing the possible approach of a member of the gallery staff, he ducked behind a large display board and barely avoided bumping into a pretty girl who was loitering there, looking somewhat furtive.

‘Everything OK?’ he hazarded.

‘No, not really. I’m trying to avoid someone.’

Oliver laughed.

‘It’s Jeff’s girlfriend.’ Jeff Ince was the artist. ‘Jeff said she wouldn’t be here. We were supposed to go on somewhere together afterwards but ... Christ, she’s coming over.’

Oliver had found himself being minutely, if briefly, studied by the girl. She must have been satisfied with what she saw, for she said:

‘I suppose you wouldn’t put your arm round me as though we’re together. Then she might go away.’

He’d been asked to do less tolerable things and duly obliged.

A tall, rather fierce-looking young woman walked round the fixture.

‘Oh,’ she said, seeing Oliver. She gave him a cursory nod before focusing on the girl. ‘I thought it was you. Glad to see you’ve brought a friend. Jeff’s had a change of plan. A big buyer wants to take us out to dinner so there’s no party.’

Playing along, Oliver had looked down at the girl and said, ‘Well, we were thinking of leaving anyway.’

‘Yes, we were. Come on then. Bye Lisa.’

The girl had taken his hand and they had walked swiftly away. Within half a minute they were outside on the pavement. Oliver wondered what to do next. Part and go their separate ways he had assumed. This girl obviously had a complicated love life and he didn’t expect to be featuring in it.

But she introduced herself as Alana and suggested a drink together. From there, they went on to a restaurant and by the end of the meal she was checking out that he was divorced and lived alone in his flat. He had felt obliged to ask her if she’d like to go to his place for a nightcap. It sounded so clichéd. He had seriously expected to put her in a taxi home after half an hour. She had different ideas and made it clear she expected to stay the night.

They had seen each other several times a week after that. How this went down with Jeff was never mentioned. Now, however, he had to make a decision. Two weeks wasn’t long, nevertheless it seemed to him as though a turning point had been reached. If he was going to end it, he should do it without delay. Oliver was quite clear that it was for her sake too. There was no point continuing when they were so ill-matched. If she was going to be hurt about it, then she’d be more hurt later.

Before meeting Alana, he had been enjoying being single for the moment, loosed from the complications of relationships with women, living alone in this flat which he loved. It was part of a large Victorian house out of the centre of Ipswich, newly converted when he bought it recently, so that it was like moving into a new property. He loved the proportions of the rooms, the high ceilings, the sturdy fittings, the wide doors, the deep skirting boards. He loved the fact that he didn’t have to slave in the garden. Someone else mowed the lawn, weeded the gravel, clipped the hedges. And yet when he wanted to, he could take a book outside and sit in the sun on the garden seat on the small terrace outside his French windows, with or without a glass of wine, and read. With a weekly cleaning lady and a bar with a decent restaurant within easy walking distance, it was the ideal situation as far as he was concerned.

If there was any sense at all in matters of the heart, then the common variety strongly indicated that if he did ever get seriously involved with a woman again, and he had to acknowledge that it was likely that he would, then it should be with a woman more his own age; a woman with her own career who wouldn’t expect to be kept, a woman with interests of

her own. Granted that although such a woman, nearing her forties as he was, wouldn't necessarily be able or willing to have children, there would be other advantages to the match. Stability, sensible conversation, overwhelmingly not having a person who was supposed to be his life partner constantly pulling on his sleeve for his attention to frivolous matters, for another pair of expensive shoes, for a foreign holiday. To abandon the wish for a child in exchange for some peace and contentment seemed a reasonable bargain. And he had no idea of course whether he'd be able to father a child. Certainly none had come along so far.

The point was, he debated with himself as he sat there, Alana wasn't going to bring anything other than chaos to his life. For example, she had nearly got herself arrested last week attending a friend's hen night in a flat in a block at a nearby seaside town. The party had made such a lot of noise, creating drunken mayhem both inside and outside the flat, that the long-term residents of the building had given up trying to sleep at three in the morning and had called the police. Alana had telephoned him to come and get her.

He realised that of course these days older women too, approaching or even past middle age, donned ridiculously high heels and flimsy dresses and behaved outrageously with their mates, but he wouldn't get involved with a woman like that. Not anymore.

He was about to pour himself a double Scotch and put some serious effort into working out exactly how to break it off with Alana, when his phone rang. Checking the display, it was Patrick.

'Sorry to call you at this time on a Saturday. Would you come over. I need a bit of ... d'you mind?'

'Couldn't you come here?'

'I can't. I'm not feeling well.'

This was no surprise. Patrick Grainger had always been something of a hypochondriac and these days he really did look ill sometimes. Oliver was tempted to refuse. Thinking about it though, he wouldn't mind a peek inside Patrick's house, see if he could detect anything untoward, sinister. If his partner, who did trust and tax work and handled many tens of millions of pounds for clients, went off the rails, it would be very bad news for the practice, and for Oliver. It didn't, in fact, bear thinking about.

'SO what's up, Patrick?'

As he said this, Oliver cast about the room to which Patrick had led him, a little den at the back of the house whose walls were mostly lined with bookcases. Nothing very spectacular here. There seemed to be a preponderance of books about various diets, macrobiotic, vegan, the advantages of fasting; colonic irrigation, how to stay young, how to live to a hundred and fifty, procedures to halt and reverse ageing. Oliver shook his head. Everyone knew it was largely codswallop, put about by those whose main aim was to raise people's expectations unrealistically while making tons of money for themselves.

'Thanks for coming. I do appreciate it. We haven't really spoken since I came back from the States. Wonderful trip. Great company. Spectacular scenery. The organisers put on some very interesting lectures. We—'

'Look Patrick, I'm sorry. It's late. Any chance you could get to the point. You said you didn't feel well, but I assume that's not why you got me over here.'

'No, no, course. Oliver, let me show you something.'

So saying Patrick leapt to his feet.

'Follow me,' he said, striding from the room into the hall and thence the kitchen, showing no obvious signs of illness now.

'Look at that,' he said pointing out of the back door, the upper half of which was glazed.

'Patrick, it's quite dark outside.'

‘Oh yeah, of course.’ Patrick pressed a switch near the door and an outside light came on. ‘What d’you think of that?’

All Oliver could make out were enormous piles of earth, six or more feet high, covering the lawn, the flower beds, almost pushing over one of the boundary fences. The piles continued out of sight round to the side of the house.

‘Patrick, I don’t quite see—’

‘No, course. The stairs aren’t finished yet but there’s a ladder. Come on.’

Patrick went ahead to the dining room adjoining the kitchen. The room where Oliver had enjoyed many a convivial dinner in the past was in disarray. The French doors and what furniture was left had been damaged and were filthy. In the middle of the room was a dark gaping hole where floorboards and joists had been removed and into which Patrick had disappeared.

Deep misgivings were chasing each other around Oliver’s head by now as he gingerly placed one foot below the other on a rickety ladder and stepped onto a damp concrete floor. Patrick was playing torchlight around the large space under the house. Clearly he had built himself a cellar. Oliver somewhat anxiously tilted his head up and eyed the ceiling. There appeared to be no supporting structures to hold up ... well, the house basically.

‘This is what it’s for.’ Patrick walked into the middle of the cellar. ‘Had a bit of trouble with the electrics,’ he said.

The dark concrete surfaces absorbed almost all of the feeble light produced by his torch. A shiny curved metal object resembling an oversized coffin emerged indistinctly from the gloom. It was standing on some sort of plinth. Patrick gestured to Oliver to come over.

‘I’ll stay here if you don’t mind,’ Oliver said, still at the foot of the ladder. ‘What the hell is it?’

‘It’s a sensory deprivation tank. They’re quite common you know. They’re heavy, of course. Get filled with salt water.’

‘And you need one of these because?’

‘Oh, there’s lots of benefits. An hour a day in this and ... wow, you’re a new man. Adds years to your life.’

‘I’ll take your word for it. Actually, where are Mandy and the kids?’

‘They’re at her mother’s for the weekend. They’ll be back tomorrow night.’

‘What do they think of this then?’

‘Well, when it’s finished, the cellar, we’ll have a proper gym down here. The tank is just one of the bits of equipment.’

This didn’t tell Oliver whether or not Mandy was in favour of this madness, but he had seen enough and wanted to go home.

‘Right, well you’ve obviously been busy. Thanks for the tour,’ he said. ‘I think I’ll be on my way.’

He started to mount the ladder back to the ground floor and some sort of sanity.

‘No you can’t go yet. We haven’t had our chat.’

Oliver, who seldom lost his temper, could feel his blood pressure rising.

‘Well, make it quick. And I’m not having it here. You’ll have to come upstairs.’

‘No problem.’

The two men seated themselves in the den again. Oliver tried not to fidget.

‘How about a drink?’ Patrick indicated a tray of bottles and glasses next to him.

‘No, Patrick. Tell me what you want. Stop pissing about.’

‘It’s quite hard to broach the subject.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘You know my father died when he was young. And his father too.’

‘You have mentioned it once or twice.’

‘Well obviously, you look for a way to avoid that. You hope for longevity, even if it’s not that likely, given your genes.’

‘I’m sure you do. But what has this to do with me?’

Patrick took a deep breath. ‘These things cost money. Lots of it. I was hoping you’d give me a loan. Right, I’ve said it. Will you lend me some money?’

Oliver tried to conceal his surprise. ‘How much were you thinking of?’

‘Hmm, something in the region of fifty, a hundred thou’ would be very useful.’

Oliver couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘What, so that you can make structurally unsound alterations to your house and die of claustrophobia in that monstrous thing you’ve got down there? You’ve got to be kidding me.’

‘It’s not just the alterations. It’s ... everything. I’ll let you in on it, you know. You’ll never regret it. Many years from now, you’ll be glad you did it.’

‘Patrick, I’m not doing anything. It’s not ... look I’m going home now.’

‘How could you be so mean! You can afford it. We all know Stella got you a wonderful deal from your last divorce.’

Oliver was about to stand up, but at this he stayed sitting. ‘What did you say? Have you been going through my divorce file?’

‘You’ve obviously got tons of dosh left. You got a mortgage to finance most of your flat purchase. You must have the bulk of your divorce settlement left.’

‘And my property purchase? That’s none of your business. I’m appalled.’

Patrick was right, which must mean he’d been snooping in Oliver’s own personal case files.

Oliver’s last wife Cynthia, after running him ragged and bleeding him dry, had suddenly had a major windfall. Her father had considerably dropped dead leaving her a large fortune. Turned out she was as anxious to get shot of Oliver as he was of her and, as a result, had been most generous in her offer to him. He had decided that, instead of spending all the money on a home for himself, he’d take out as big a mortgage as he could obtain and keep the majority of the cash. He was left with an investment portfolio of around a hundred and fifty thousand pounds which, for a man of his age who had worked his arse off since leaving university, wasn’t an especially impressive nest egg. Nevertheless, to Oliver it was like an insurance policy, something he could rely on in old age, by which time he’d have paid off his mortgage and could wallow in modest financial security. No way was he going to part with any of it to Patrick for his harebrained schemes aimed at longevity.

‘I’m a partner,’ Patrick said. ‘I’m entitled to look at the files.’

‘I beg to differ. But arguing won’t change things.’

Oliver rose to his feet and made his way to the front door. He found that Patrick was following him.

‘OK, so how much *would* you lend me?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I can’t believe it. You don’t *need* the money.’

He continued in this vein and practically barred Oliver’s way out of the house. Oliver found himself pulling open the door with some force as Patrick leaned against it. He was shocked to realise that tonight he simply didn’t recognise his old friend from university.

At last he was outside. The clouds had cleared and Hercules was standing in the summer night sky overhead near the slain dragon. Lowering his gaze, Oliver felt as though he, too, had been assaulted.

He half-wished that he’d taken Alana home tonight so that she’d be there now in his bed, waiting for him, in a stupor maybe but warm and firm and real. A comforting presence, not ninety percent round the bend as Patrick appeared to be. However, people weren’t props and

you shouldn't use them as such. He should carry through his earlier resolution to end the relationship, whatever the immediate fallout and discomfort to himself.

He drove home in a state of disquiet, knowing that the rest of his weekend was ruined. And he hadn't even asked Patrick what SBS stood for.

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