



The
Anna McColl
Mysteries
Part One

Penny Kline

Dying to Help

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Feeling Bad

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A Crushing Blow

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DYING TO HELP

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Chapter One

It's not easy to smother another human being. Unless the assailant is twice the victim's size, as with a parent and child. Karen was not a child but the tranquillizers that had been stirred into her coffee while she was out of the room were extremely effective and quite tasteless. A little sugar had been added just to be on the safe side.

Gradually the warm cosy room began to feel uncomfortably overheated. Karen rose to adjust the thermostat on the radiator but her head spun and she had to sit down again.

'I should lie down and relax.' The voice was kind, soothing. 'There, that's better.'

Karen closed her eyes and her body seemed to float, as though suspended on air. A cool hand smoothed her fair curly hair. A finger traced a pattern from her forehead down her nose until it reached her lips.

Then the cushion descended.

Legs kicking, arms flailing, she struggled, trying to turn her head to one side, trying to scream although her mouth was forced shut and no sound could emerge. Minutes later, probably only two or three, she lay still.

Chapter Two

'He never did it.'

Diane Easby leaned forward until her face was only a few inches from mine. When I gave her my full attention but made no audible response she repeated the statement, raising her voice as though she thought I might be deaf.

'I said, he never did it.'

'You believe your brother was innocent.'

'I know he was.' She tossed back her shoulder-length hair, removed two black and gold slides that scooped it up behind her ears, then replaced them more firmly. In her mid-thirties, I guessed, tall, well built, with a strong, open face. She had the coarse, slightly greasy skin that sometimes goes with fair colouring, but she was carefully made-up to draw attention to her light brown eyes.

She had arrived early for her appointment and settled herself down in the waiting room, turning the pages of a magazine but taking more interest in the other clients. As I passed the open door on my way to the secretary's office, I saw her lean across to one of Beth's clients and whisper something in her ear, and the client, a depressed woman with eating problems, had actually managed a faint smile.

When I introduced myself Diane sprang from her seat and followed me up the stairs, a little unsteady on black high-heeled shoes and breathing hard.

Although it was her first visit there were none of the usual uneasy silences, none of the anxious fidgeting with the hands, eyes looking

up then flicking away. Diane Easby's gaze was steady, determined. She had started talking the moment she entered the room, perching herself on the nearest chair, still wearing her coat, eager to get started.

'Since it happened I've hardly slept a wink. I'm a wreck, a total wreck, and the kids are driving me insane. Dr Dyer's told you all about it, I expect.'

I nodded. 'About your brother, yes.'

'He was the youngest, see, baby of the family.' Her eyes filled with tears and she searched in her pocket for a tissue, then noticed the box on my desk.

I pushed it closer. 'Help yourself.'

'Oh, thanks, love. I've always had nerves, ever since I can remember, so you can imagine what all this has done to me.' She ran her tongue round the inside of her cheek. 'Dr Dyer said you'd help me come to terms.'

'You've had a bad time,' I said. 'How old are your children?'

'Eh? Twelve and two. I left Siobhan with a friend but she won't be able to stand it very long so I'll have to be getting back quite soon.'

She was looking me up and down, trying to assess whether I was going to be any use to her.

'You're a psychologist then.'

'Yes, that's right.' I waited for the usual questions about psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists. What was the difference? But she had no interest in such distinctions.

'Keith couldn't have done it. You believe me, don't you?'

I hesitated. 'The best thing is if you tell me all about it from the beginning. We'll need to work through everything that's happened.'

Then, when it's all out in the open, the shock, the fear, the feeling of loss — '

She nodded enthusiastically. The front of her coat had come open and I caught a glimpse of fluffy mauve sweater and tight black skirt.

'I don't know where to start.'

'Start wherever you like. Just tell me whatever comes into your head.'

'Right you are.'

She began with the bare facts. How back before Christmas her brother had been taken in for questioning about the murder of a social worker. How he had confessed to a murder he'd never done because he couldn't stand people going on at him. How the following day he had hanged himself in his cell, using the webbing belt that was hidden in his underpants.

I remembered the case but knew none of the details. A social worker had been suffocated in her own home in Montpelier, a district just north of St Paul's, but with the up-market streets of Redland a stone's throw away on the opposite side of Cheltenham Road. There was only one suspect and the police had been on to him the day it happened. Keith Merchant, that was the name, and the social worker had been called Karen Plant. I had seen items on the local news bulletin and assumed Keith Merchant's guilt had never been in doubt. A tragic, pointless killing carried out on the spur of the moment by a disturbed young man Karen Plant had been trying to help.

Confident that she had gained my interest, Diane leaned back in her chair and started filling me in on some of the more unpleasant

aspects of the case. Her description of what had happened was graphic, almost as though she had been there herself.

‘Protruding tongue and staring eyes, blood leaking from the nose and ears.’

She looked up and caught the enquiring expression on my face.

‘After he done away with himself I went to the library and looked it up in a book. Asphyxia, they call it. I wanted to know what she’d have looked like. It was all there with photos and everything. Then there was a section on cut throats — ’

‘It was a book about forensic medicine?’

‘Something like that. I asked an assistant. She found it in the upstairs part.’

‘Did your brother know Karen Plant?’

‘Oh, yes, she was a friend of his. Sort of. She’d helped him find a room, fill in forms for his benefit and that. In return he did little things that needed doing round her flat. Washers on the taps, fixing a cupboard door that wouldn’t stay shut. She shared a flat with another lady, lived near the railway bridge, next to the expensive part but where the houses are getting a bit cheaper.’

‘Yes, I know where you mean.’

It sounded as though Karen Plant had made the common mistake of becoming over-involved with a client. How old had she been? How experienced? Had she been taking a special interest in Keith Merchant, encouraging him to feel he had a worthwhile contribution to make in life? Or perhaps she needed the work done anyway.

Diane interrupted my thoughts. ‘I expect you knew her, didn’t you?’

‘No, not really. I’ve heard about her. From a friend who worked with her now and again.’

'Keith liked to be helpful, see. Most people do if they get the chance.'

The room was starting to feel a little stuffy but if I opened the window a blast of cold air would blow in from the street. Diane read my mind and started fanning her face with her hands. Her fingernails were long and fuchsia pink, all except the little ones, which were neatly bitten to the quick.

Standing up she removed her brown fun-fur coat and hung it over the back of her chair, where its bulk refused to balance, and it slid to the floor and lay in a heap like a large dead animal.

I carried it to a hook on the back of the door, then we both sat down again and she began explaining how even before her brother's death she had been under severe strain, what with the kids and a husband who might be laid off any time.

'What does your husband do?'

'Eh? Oh, Alan's a long-distance lorry driver.'

'So he's away from home quite often.'

She nodded vaguely. We were moving away from the real problem and she wasn't certain she had convinced me of her brother's innocence.

'So,' she said, her voice more confident than the expression in her eyes, 'you'll tell them to re-open the case.'

I paused. 'Was there any hard evidence against your brother or did the police just go along with his confession?'

'Two tenners in his pocket but that was for putting up shelves. He was good with do-it-yourself provided you told him exactly what you wanted.'

'The police must have talked to you.'

‘Eh? Waste of time. Already made up their minds, just going through the whatsits. Desperate to make an arrest, what with it being a social worker and that. Anyway,’ she added impatiently, ‘he couldn’t have done it. Skinny he was, born premature and never caught up. Weren’t strong enough to suffocate a grown woman.’

‘Yes, I see.’

‘Not retarded, nothing like that, just easily intimidated.’ She mouthed the last two words as though she was describing the plot of a TV movie. ‘I reckon he knew they’d put him away for life, decided it weren’t worth going on.’

I glanced at the clock. ‘Look, I tell you what, Mrs ... ’

‘Diane. Call me Diane. After all it’s the name I was born with, not like the one they forced on me at the Registry.’

‘I tell you what, Diane. Shall we make another appointment, say in a week’s time?’

‘I’ve got to wait a whole week?’

‘Well, all right, Thursday. Would your friend be able to look after your daughter on Thursday afternoon?’

‘Oh, I expect so, seeing it’s for an important engagement.’ She stood up and waited for me to help her into her coat. ‘I knew you’d sort it. Knew as soon as I saw you. Empathy, they call it, don’t they. I read a feature in one of those magazines at the supermarket check-out.’ She had her hand on the door knob. ‘He was scared, see, that’s why he confessed. I knew him inside out, wouldn’t hurt a fly. Couldn’t be provoked no matter how hard you tried.’

I nodded. Now was not the time to come up with a lecture on the over-controlled personality. The quiet timid creature who one day,

after a build-up of tension sometimes lasting more than twenty years, suddenly loses control.

She stared at me for a moment, then smiled warmly. 'See you Thursday then. What time?'

'Will two o'clock be all right?'

'I don't see why not.' She held out her hand, soft and smooth with three large rings. 'Thanks ever so much. I'm ever so grateful.'

She stepped forward, kissing me lightly on the cheek, then turned and left without glancing back over her shoulder.

The scent of her body spray lingered in the room. I took my file of case notes from the bottom drawer of the desk and started writing down the relevant points.

Diane Easby, mid-thirties, married to Alan, a long-distance lorry driver. Two children, aged twelve and two. Brother, Keith, found hanging in a police cell two days after being taken into custody for questioning with regard to the murder of social worker Karen Plant.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember if there had been a picture in the paper. Tall with sleek black hair? No, I was thinking of someone entirely different. Karen Plant had 'fair curly hair, tiny hands and feet, like a doll'. But I hadn't read that in the paper. That was the way Bruce had described her. He had seemed pretty cut up at the time although, as far as I knew, he had only met her once or twice when his work in the Housing Department overlapped with hers in Social Services.

All the same he might be able to tell me more about the case. If I called in on Chris on the way home I could raise the subject with Bruce in an indirect kind of way, not mentioning Diane Easby of course, just idly curious to know what had happened.

I could hear footsteps on the stairs, the sound of voices, Martin pausing to have a few words with Nick. In a moment he would knock on my door and give me the lecture on overdoing things that he had been threatening for several days.

He was right of course. I was worn out and it was nobody's fault but my own. It was up to me to take responsibility for my own wellbeing. After all, wasn't that the essence of all psychological treatment? To help the client to take charge of his or her life and stop feeling like a helpless victim of other people? At weekend conferences attended in order to avoid spending Sunday on my own, there was much talk of 'empowering the client'. It was a word I detested. To empower. How politically correct, although when you thought about it there were echoes of Mrs Thatcher's heyday. The cult of the individual, a belief in the disabling effect of the Welfare State.

It reminded me of conversations with my father. He was so certain in his views. I was too. It had made for good discussions in the past, before ... I felt a twinge of guilt, knew I should be visiting him more often, phoning at least once a week. But we were so little use to each other. He had his own way of dealing with grief and if we had been able to speak openly he would have challenged my belief that talking helps to ease the pain.

A sudden image of my mother caught me unaware. Standing in her newly decorated kitchen with its yellow wallpaper and blobby white-gloss paintwork. Laughing, always laughing ...

Martin knocked on my door and came straight in.

'Are you free for a couple of minutes, Anna? By the way, you haven't forgotten the case conference?'

'I haven't forgotten.'

He sat down on the chair where Diane Easby had been sitting a few minutes before.

'Heather's still off sick so I've spent the morning answering the phone, making appointments.'

'Better than seeing clients.'

'You don't mean that.' He ran the fingers of one hand through his thin sandy hair. He had shaved badly, nicking a mole on the edge of his jaw. His bottle-green thick-knit sweater had pulled threads on both arms and clashed with his olive cords.

Recently, at one of our weekly case conferences, Beth had raised the subject of clothes. Should we dress casually or would the clients have more confidence in our ability to help if we were more formally dressed?

Martin had reacted badly. 'Like insurance salesmen, you mean?'

Not even bothering to correct it to 'sales persons', Beth had given him a withering look. 'It's all a question of attitude, Martin.'

'Yes, of course, but surely that's best left to personal preference.'

'Perhaps.' Beth dressed in expensive suits, silk shirts, and matching accessories.

Martin had sighed. 'Surely you don't believe there's one definitively best way to relate to each and every client.'

But as usual the argument had remained unresolved. 'Anna?'

He was gazing at me with an intent, concerned expression. I knew what he was going to say, held up my hand to stop him, but realized it would be no use.

'You look exhausted. You're seeing too many people. The way you're carrying on you'll be burned out by Easter.' He paused to take

in the effect of his words. 'Look, I do understand. We've all done it. It's a way of — '

'Making yourself feel indispensable?'

'No. Yes.' He picked up a pen that was lying on my desk, unscrewed the top, then screwed it up again. 'Beth says you and David have split up. I'm sorry. You must be having a rough time.'

'If you want the truth, Martin, it's a relief.'

He looked up, surprised at my defensive reaction. He wanted to help but I wasn't making it easy for him. He decided to take my response at face value.

'Good, I'm glad. I know things had been difficult between the two of you. Only, do ease up a bit.' He stood up to indicate the lecture was over. 'Right then, see you downstairs in a couple of minutes?'

'Oh, Martin?'

'Yes.'

'I've just seen a new client. Her brother hanged himself in a police cell. He was the one they thought was responsible for killing that social worker.'

'Well, he was, wasn't he?'

'Yes, I expect so.'

Chapter Three

Chris and Bruce and their three children lived in a large dilapidated house on the edge of the city, in a road which had been left stranded when a new flyover was built. Chris hated the place but it had the advantage that there was always plenty of parking space.

I locked the car, then checked the passenger door, then unlocked it to make sure I had remembered the handbrake. During the last few weeks sensible checks had started to turn into anxiety-reducing rituals. There was no time to think about it now. Later, back home, I would decide how to cut down on checking the electric, rings on the cooker, the bath taps, window catches. I had devised a special treatment for myself. Instead of believing something awful would happen if I failed to carry out these rituals, I reversed the superstition and decided that the awful event, whatever it was, would take place if I kept on checking and double-checking. It usually worked.

Chris's front door was ajar and the inner door unlocked. I called her name and she emerged from the kitchen, drying her hands on an orange tea towel that looked as though it had been used as a floor cloth.

'Good, I was expecting you.'

'Really?'

'I dreamed about you. We went on holiday, just the two of us, and I lost my wallet and passport and all my luggage. No, don't tell me what it meant.'

'I wasn't going to.'

'Anyway you don't go in for dream analysis, you're far too scientific.'

'Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.' I followed her into the kitchen and sat down on the only chair that wasn't covered in old newspapers or clothes waiting to be ironed.

If anything the room was even more untidy than usual. On the table a red plastic dumper truck with two of its wheels missing lay on its side in the remains of Barnaby's lunch. Next to it a shrivelled succulent had dropped most of its leaves into the plastic dish its pot was standing in. Both draining boards were piled high with unwashed crockery and cutlery. A blackened frying-pan lay on the floor next to the pedal bin and was in the process of being cleaned out by one of the cats. There was a strong smell of very old cauliflower cheese, or it might have been the drains.

Chris stood at the sink, rinsing out two chipped coffee mugs, one with red and white stripes, the other a 'gift' from a petrol station. She was dressed in jeans, a blue and white spotted shirt, and a scarlet boat-necked sweater that reached almost to her knees. The jeans were too long and the frayed bottom hung over her green bumper boots. Her dark hair, which was usually tied back, had been left loose so that it hung half-way down her back.

'Your hair looks good like that,' I said.

'Liar. D'you think I've got fat cheeks? I thought I might look better if I covered them up.'

'Idiot. If anything you look rather thin.'

'Scraggy, you mean.' She rubbed the rims of the mugs with the orange cloth in an attempt to remove the tea and coffee stains. It occurred to me that she might be wondering if my visit had some

special significance but I didn't want to tell her I was hoping to talk to Bruce. She would pretend to be offended, but the pretence would be a double bluff. For all her easy-going manner she could be quite touchy.

Was I imagining it or was she a little subdued? The house seemed unusually quiet, almost as quiet as my flat, although places where plenty of people go in and out have a different atmosphere from those where a single person lives alone.

'Where is everyone?' I leaned forward, just far enough to acknowledge Barnaby's presence in the playpen, but not so far that he thought I was going to lift him out.

'Peace, perfect peace,' said Chris, filling the kettle through its spout and ignoring the water that was splashing all over the carpet tiles. 'Rosie's at a friend's house and Jack's upstairs doing something with rubber bands and cotton reels.'

'Rubber bands?'

'His science homework.'

'He's a bit young, isn't he?'

She grinned. She wasn't subdued at all. 'Jack's teacher's one of the old school, or the new, it depends how you look at it. Anyway, it keeps him occupied and he's always been a horrid little swot.'

I laughed but felt some sympathy for the conscientious little boy. 'Anyway, I just thought I'd call round and see how you were.'

'Quite right too.' She joined me at the table, sweeping a pile of bills to one side and leaning forward with her chin resting on her hands. 'I haven't seen you for almost a whole week. What's been happening to you?'

'Oh, nothing special. How about you?'

'Well, let's think. After the sun put in an appearance I spent the whole morning trying to clean the windows and ended up with them looking even worse than before. Then yesterday Barnaby threw up all over Rosie's new duvet and the two of them screamed blue murder. Then in the evening I went from door to door selling raffle tickets for the Parents' Association Spring Fair. Shall I go on?'

Barnaby let out a loud squawk and started hurling himself against the side of his playpen. Chris ignored the noise but began crawling round the floor picking up discarded toys and pushing them through the bars. The squawking continued.

'Stop it, you little bastard. Hang on, I'll go upstairs and find his blanket. He sucks the end of it and goes into a kind of trance. D'you reckon there's some mind-altering additive in the wool?'

While she was out of the room I re-washed the two mugs, made some coffee, and looked around for a bottle of milk. I found one behind the toaster but it could have been there for quite some time. In the fridge were another four bottles, all but one of them opened and most of them still half full. I sniffed one, decided it was probably drinkable, and cautiously poured a little milk into each of the mugs.

Chris and I had known each other for less than two years but it seemed much longer. We had met at a party at Martin's house, which I had attended mainly so as not to offend Martin but also because I was new to the area and needed to make some friends.

Stuck in a corner together, giggling over the ethnic outfit that Martin's wife was wearing, we had hit it off at once. Later Chris had said it had nothing to do with Sue's dress. We came from the same tribe, we had picked up each other's scent. It was a strange comment coming from someone who despised psychology, but when

I challenged her she said there was nothing psychological about it, her theory was entirely biological. Chris was one of the main reasons that, in spite of everything, I had decided to stay on in the area.

‘How are you, then?’ She returned carrying a blue and grey blanket and draped it over Barnaby.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘could be worse.’

‘Hard day at work?’ It was a tactful way of saying that I looked tired and strained.

‘Much the same as usual.’

She gave me a sympathetic look, then stood up and started feeling along the top shelf of a cupboard. Finally she plonked an empty bottle of medium dry sherry on the table.

‘Go on, there’s a bit left. Drink from the bottle so you don’t waste any.’ And then, when I failed to obey her instructions, ‘Better than solitary drinking, although if I was like you on a whacking great salary I’d stock up from the supermarket and drink myself under the table every evening.’

She drained the dregs of sherry herself, then tore open a packet of custard creams, pushed half of one through the bars of the playpen and shoved the rest in my direction.

‘Help yourself, and don’t say “no thanks” or I’ll kill you.’ She patted her stomach. ‘D’you think I look pregnant? Well, I’m not.’

I smiled. ‘When you were upstairs just now I was thinking. My first reaction when David and I split up was to look for another job.’

‘Don’t you dare.’ Crumbs sprayed from her mouth. She brushed them off the table on to the floor.

‘No, it would be stupid. That’s what I tell my clients. Don’t run away from the problem. Making a fresh start can be much harder than

sticking things out in the same old place.'

'I hate the word *client*.'

'It's better than *patient*.'

'No, it's not. Anyway, you can't move away or I'll sink into depression and you'll have to come back and give me treatment.'

'You're never depressed.'

She pulled a face. 'Yes, I am. Oh, you mean I'm too superficial.'

'For God's sake, it was a compliment.'

The front door opened and I hoped it was Bruce, but it was Rosie, being delivered back by her friend's mother. Chris rushed down the passage to thank her and I could hear the two of them laughing as the other woman related some story about Rosie and her own daughter and a game of operations they had been playing in the garden shed.

Rosie came into the kitchen, stared at me for a moment, then snatched a custard cream and ran upstairs. I could hear Chris yelling after her. 'Have you taken one for Jack?' Then the front door banged shut and she returned to the kitchen and sat on the edge of the table.

'Anna, I'm worried about you. Tell me to mind my own business but are you sure you've made the right decision?'

'What about?'

'Oh, I know what David's like but you suited each other. I mean, you can't have everything, nobody can. Men are all the same. Dull and reliable, or — well, you don't need me to explain.'

'Surely it doesn't have to be like that.'

'Yes, it does, it's biological.'

I tried to smile. 'We were destroying each other.'

'Yes, so you said. It all sounds terribly dramatic.'

'It wasn't. It was bloody awful.' I should have been grateful, she was trying to help, but I didn't want to talk about David, not today.

'Listen,' I said, changing the subject to something safe. 'I'm seeing this man on Friday afternoon.'

'What man?' Her face lit up.

'Oh, only someone in a special unit attached to the Psychology Department. It's about the research I'm supposed to be doing. I'm beginning to wish I'd never arranged to meet him but I can't really get out of it now.'

'Of course you must go. It sounded really interesting.'

'You don't mean that. Anyway, I'm only going through with it to keep Martin happy. He wants me to cut down on the number of clients I see and spend one or two afternoons doing research.'

'Good idea. Hypochondria, isn't it? I'm terrified of illness. You can give me a questionnaire if you like.'

'I might do that.' I picked up my mug and carried it to the draining board. 'Look, you must have dozens of things you want to do. Will Bruce be back soon, only I was hoping to have a quick word.'

'With Bruce? What about?'

'Oh, nothing important. You remember that social worker who was murdered before Christmas?'

'Yes, I think so.' She lifted Barnaby out of the playpen and held him under his arms so his feet were free to stamp up and down on her knees. 'What about her?'

'You didn't know her, did you?'

'No. Why?'

‘Oh, just something that happened at work. It doesn’t matter, only I thought Bruce might remember some of the details — ’

‘I doubt it. Anyway I’ve no idea when he’ll be back. He stays on at the office later and later these days.’

Her mouth had tightened a little. I had upset her. Calling round for a chat, then admitting it was Bruce I really wanted to see.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘let’s go out for a drink some time and I promise to be better company.’

‘Don’t be silly. You don’t have to be in a good mood for my benefit.’ But she was standing up and her whole body had tensed. Holding Barnaby against her shoulder she moved towards the front door. Then she reached round his legs and patted me on the arm.

‘Sorry you’re feeling so down.’

‘I’ll get over it.’

‘Yes, of course you will.’

She stood in the front garden as I walked towards my car. I turned to wave and she lifted Barnaby’s arm and moved it up and down. She wasn’t smiling.

*

On the way home I thought I saw David in his Citroen. But it wasn’t David. The car wasn’t even green.

When I reached the house there was nowhere to park. It was one of the few drawbacks of living in Cliftonwood, but any inconvenience was far outweighed by the pleasure of living so close to the Downs. High above Clifton Gorge, less than fifteen minutes’ walk from the flat, David and I used to gaze at the city stretching away toward the Mendip Hills, or stand on the suspension bridge staring down at the muddy river, over two hundred feet below. Each year there were

several suicide attempts, mostly successful. David thought they gave the area an added fascination.

I cursed a large blue van that was taking up several spaces and blocking the pavement, then drove on and turned into a cul-de-sac, where I managed to find a gap between a rusty motorcycle and a brand-new Saab.

Walking back to the flat, I couldn't remember if I had locked the car door. Checking again, but on this occasion it would be silly to take a risk. As I rounded the corner I saw a man standing by my car. He was tall and skinny, dressed in a dark jacket and jeans. He looked vaguely familiar and if he was who I thought he was ... But I was too late. He started running and before I could catch up with him he had disappeared down the alleyway that led up to the Downs.

I returned to the car and checked that the door was locked. It was, and there was no sign of an attempted break-in. No scratch marks. Nothing. Most likely the man had been a total stranger, who just happened to be standing near my car because it was parked by a street lamp. He could have been studying a map, pausing to light a cigarette. But in that case why had he run away?

Half-way up the outside stairs that led up to the flat I heard my phone start ringing. I ran, jumping up two steps at a time, searching for my key in my coat pocket. Inevitably it jammed in the lock and by the time I managed to open the door the ringing had stopped. Forget it. Whoever it was would ring again in an hour or so.

My hand shook a little as I switched on the television, then turned down the sound. The whole house felt deathly quiet. The ground-floor flat was still empty, waiting for new tenants, an elderly woman with an invalid husband, who had bought the place and arranged to

have it completely redecorated. Before David left I had enjoyed the peace and quiet. Now I would have preferred to hear distant sounds of life. A vacuum cleaner, radio, the murmur of voices.

Leaning back in 'David's' armchair I watched the weather woman mouthing something about gale-force winds from the west. In a few minutes it would be time for the local news. Half an hour of stories about traffic hold-ups and dogs rescued from disused mine shafts, although it was on just such a bulletin that I had first heard about the murder of Karen Plant.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to imagine how it must have been. Alone in her flat with Keith Merchant, the man she was trying to help. Where was her flat-mate? Diane Easby had said she lived with another woman. It must have been a bigger place than mine, or maybe it was similar and they had a room each and shared the kitchen and bathroom. Of course, they could have had a much closer relationship.

A television reporter was standing in a field, talking to a man in a hard hat. In the background, several half-finished houses suggested a dispute about building regulations or the slump in the housing market. I switched off and went into the next room to change my clothes, resisting the temptation to put on my dressing-gown over my pants and bra and call it a day. It was only six forty-five. I had the whole evening ahead of me. I could read, work on my research project, watch a documentary on caring for psychiatric patients in the community ...

The bedroom smelled of David. His shampoo, deodorant, or was it just in my imagination? I pulled back the bedclothes, smoothed the sheet and fluffed out the pillow on my side. Thousands, millions of

people must sleep alone in a double bed. Some of them probably enjoy the extra space, room to stretch out without catching your leg on your partner's toenails.

A tissue had fallen down between the headboard and the wall. I caught a glimpse of crumpled paper, put out my hand to retrieve it, then drew back, testing my reaction. Once anything of David's, even a dirty hanky, would have been like part of me. Now, how did I feel?

I lifted the tissue between the nails of my thumb and forefinger, then dropped it as though it was red hot. It wasn't David's, it couldn't be. David's tissues had to be white. White toilet paper, white tissues, white shirts. This tissue was peach-coloured.

Perhaps Iris liked peach. David might have borrowed a tissue on one of his visits 'to see his daughter'. But then I would have noticed it before. It occurred to me with a jolt, that was not entirely unpleasant, that he still had a key to the flat and could have been round while I was out. But why would he want to do that? Because he missed me? One of these days I would have to ask for the key back. One of these days, but not quite yet.

When I drew the curtains across one of the hooks fell off and I had to climb on the windowsill to reattach it. Across the street a dark figure jumped out of sight. The man who had been standing by my car? But I had barely seen the shape, just assumed it was a human being, although more likely it was a cat springing down from the wall with the discarded food it had retrieved from a dustbin.

The house directly opposite had been divided into bedsits. Most of the houses in the road, including mine, were Victorian red-brick but the one opposite had been bombed during the War and rebuilt in the fifties. Beside its peeling front door was a row of bells and tattered

cards. A broken first-floor windowpane had been covered with a sheet of brown paper and the whole house looked neglected by the absentee landlord. Dustbins without lids littered what passed for a front garden, an old mattress, with stuffing leaking out of a rip in its ticking cover, lay curled on its side.

Suddenly the familiar road, where I had lived for nearly a year, seemed alien, menacing. Jumping down from the windowsill I decided to check all the windows and if nothing had been tampered with I would forget about the peach tissue. The simplest explanation was that I had dropped it there myself. I must have picked it up by mistake at work. Heather kept a large box of multi-coloured tissues in her office, handing them out to staff and clients alike, anyone who had the beginnings of a cold or needed to mop up a few tears.

The phone started ringing again and I realized it was probably Bruce. He must have returned from work just after I left, and when Chris told him I wanted a word decided to get the call over with before he settled down for the evening. Last time he had rung too soon. Now he was trying again.

'Hallo?'

'You're out of breath. Have I interrupted you in the middle of something interesting?'

'David?'

'Is somebody with you?'

'No.'

He laughed. 'Sure?'

'Yes, of course I'm sure.'

'Anyway, how are you?'

'I'm all right.'

'Good. Look, are you free for lunch tomorrow? One o'clock. Usual place?'

I hesitated.

'Anna? Are you still there?'

'I thought we agreed not to see each other for at least two months.'

He sighed. 'Yes, I knew you'd say that, but there's something I need to tell you.'

I should have used my head. I should have said, 'Tell me now, then.' But I didn't.

Chapter Four

It was almost three weeks since we had seen each other. He arrived fifteen minutes late, just as I had known he would.

‘Oh, God, I’m sorry, have you been waiting ages?’

His eyes met mine and we both knew what the other was thinking. He was always late.

He stood beside me with his hand on the back of my neck.

‘Oh, it’s good to see you. You’ve no idea.’

He was wearing a new suit. Light grey and cut in a style which made him look taller, thinner. His shirt was the one I had given him for his birthday. The tie I had never seen before. A present from Iris?

He sat down very close so that our thighs were pressed together under the table. I had pictured this moment ever since his phone-call the previous evening. Gone over and over it in my mind. There would be no need for words. For the first few moments we would not even touch. Just sit looking at one another with all the misery of the last few months wiped out by the strength of our feelings.

‘How are you then?’ His voice was bright and cheerful and he was looking straight ahead, pretending to be interested in what was going on behind the bar. ‘Plenty of new cases on your books?’

And then, misjudging my lack of response. ‘Oh, come on, do let’s be nice to each other. No recriminations. Not today.’

He picked up the bar menu and gave it his whole attention for what seemed like several minutes. He was nervous but trying to disguise

it. He didn't want to give too much away until he had worked out what I was thinking.

'I have to be back at two o'clock,' I said.

'Me too,' he said, straightening up and rubbing his hands together. 'Anyway, it's lovely to see you.'

When I said nothing he looked a little wistful. 'You're very quiet today. Is everything all right?'

It was such a ridiculous question. 'I'm fine,' I said. 'How's Iris?'

'Ah, Iris,' he repeated gloomily, 'that's really why I thought we should meet.'

Then he smiled at me, stood up, still holding the menu, and walked towards the bar, calling back over his shoulder to confirm that I wanted 'the usual'.

I watched him exchanging pleasantries with the landlady, who looked a little like Diane Easby but without the bright brown eyes, and wondered, not for the first time, how it was possible to be in love with someone you didn't even like very much. For weeks, months I had tried to understand why he had lied to me or, as he saw it, why he had lied to himself. It was because of his basic insecurity, his fear of upsetting people, of being criticized. It was because his mother had cried so often, because he had never felt he could live up to his father's expectations. And I had fallen for it, lapped it all up, because I wanted to believe him, because I wanted him to be the ideal person I had created in my imagination.

'Right,' he said, returning with the drinks and placing them on the glass-topped table, 'what's new?'

'Nothing.' I sounded edgy. He would pick me up on it immediately.

'Something's happened. I can see it in your face.'

'I'm waiting to hear whatever it is you want to tell me.' I sipped my drink, avoided his eyes.

'Oh, nothing special. I just thought it was time we saw each other.'

'Why?'

'Does there have to be a reason?' His gaze was steady, relaxed.

He began searching in his pockets, creating a diversion, playing for time.

'My address book. No, it's all right, I must have left it in the car. I have to visit an out of town company this afternoon, based in that God-forsaken business-park place.'

'You're as busy as ever?'

'You know me. If I'm not rushed off my feet I find ways of looking as though I am.'

I made no comment, just mentally checked off the familiar tactics, the last a rueful confession of his wish to appear superhuman. If I kept up these unpleasant thoughts about him it would keep me on my toes.

He took hold of my hand. 'Have you seen Chris and Bruce?'

'Yes. Have you?'

'No, of course not. They're your friends. I don't want to make things awkward for you.'

'I wouldn't mind.'

'Yes, you would. You'd deny it, but you'd be furious.'

Perhaps he was right. He could see Bruce as often as he liked for all I cared, but come to think of it Chris was the one whose company he had enjoyed.

'You used to go out for a drink with Bruce,' I said.

'Twice, I only went twice.'

‘Did he talk about his work?’

‘Never stopped. One long moan. That’s what made him such dreary company.’

‘Did he mention any of the social workers?’

‘What is all this? Don’t tell me he’s having it off with someone at work.’

‘No, of course not. I just wondered if he’d told you about someone called Karen Plant.’

He thought for a moment. ‘Doesn’t ring a bell.’ He rubbed the back of my hand, then turned it over and inspected the palm. ‘Oh, I’ll tell you who I saw, those people who sold you the flat.’

‘The Knights?’

‘They were back here for the weekend, visiting friends. They asked after you, hoped we were enjoying living in Clifton wood.’

‘They didn’t know you were moving in with me.’

‘Someone must have told them. You remember, I met them that time you went round with the estate agent.’ The sandwiches arrived. David picked one up immediately and bit into it. Then, with his mouth full, as though that gave him some kind of protection, he started talking. ‘Iris. You want to know about Iris.’

‘Only if you want to tell me about her.’

He took a tissue from his pocket and rubbed his chin. It was crumpled and looked as though he might have used it to wipe mud off his shoes, but once it had been white.

‘David?’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

He sighed. ‘Look, this is difficult enough — ’

‘Sorry, I just wondered if you ever used coloured tissues. Peach ones.’

‘What?’ He thought I was trying to change the subject. ‘Look, it hasn’t been easy.’

‘What hasn’t been easy?’

‘Don’t bully. I’m trying to explain.’

‘Go on, then.’ I washed down a piece of sandwich that had wedged itself somewhere behind my breastbone.

He sighed heavily. ‘You hate me. I suppose I can’t blame you.’

‘I don’t hate you. I just wish you wouldn’t talk in riddles. If there’s something you want to tell me I’d prefer you to say it straight out.’

‘I want you to understand.’

I was fighting a losing battle with myself. Even as I recognized the familiar games, keeping me guessing, trying to elicit sympathy for his difficult situation, I longed to put my hands inside his jacket and feel the warmth of his body. He would respond at once, tell me how much he loved me, how he had changed, gained new understanding of himself. All he wanted was a second chance. This time everything would work out just as we had always wanted it to.

He was watching me, wondering what I was thinking, trying to find a way to tell me how he felt.

‘Anna?’

‘Yes.’

‘Iris wants me to move back in.’ He paused to assess the impact of his words. ‘For Sian’s sake more than anything.’

‘I see.’ I was struggling to control my voice.

‘I just thought you deserved to know.’

‘Yes, well, thank you for telling me but really it’s nothing to do with me.’

‘All right, I don’t blame you. What the hell’s the matter with me? I seem to mess up everything. Oh, don’t look like that. It’s best for both of us, it’ll give us a chance, take away the uncertainty. Surely you can see that.’

*

I took the long way round, crossing the Downs, then turning down Whiteladies Road and negotiating the maze of roads that led back through Redland and Cotham.

In twenty minutes’ time the Careys would be sitting in the waiting room. Mrs Carey, a depressed fifty-year-old, who wanted her husband to be more expressive, and Mr Carey, who used jokes to conceal his anxiety and only succeeded in making his wife dissolve into tears. Time and again I found myself struck by the sameness of people’s problems. The misunderstandings, opposing needs, everyone looking for love or security — or both.

Reaching an unfamiliar junction I realized that I had missed my usual turning. I glanced at a street sign, partly obscured by a bedraggled berberis. Effingham Road.

Unconsciously, I must have taken this route by design rather than accident. The address must have been stored away in my brain along with the millions of other pieces of information that might or might not come in useful at a later stage.

It was in a street off Effingham Road that Karen Plant’s body had been discovered by her flat-mate, who had been away for the weekend and returned late on Sunday evening. I was remembering a report on the television news rather than the account that Diane

Easby had given me. Now the story had a new reality. I pictured the flatmate putting her key in the door, calling Karen's name, hearing no reply, and wondering if she had gone out for the evening. Then she would have looked in the kitchen, the bathroom, and last of all the bedroom, where Karen lay sprawled across a bloodstained duvet. But there would have been no blood, well, hardly any.

Pulling up across the road from number twelve — I could even remember which house it had been — I opened my glove compartment and pretended to be studying a street map. I had no wish to appear like one of those people who slow down at motorway accidents, craning their necks for a glimpse of an injured victim, or worse. On the other hand the murder had taken place almost two months ago. The police would have come and gone, another violent death somewhere in the area would have provided copy for the local reporters. By now the road had returned to normal.

As I watched a small red-haired woman, dressed in a long black coat, came out of the front door of number twelve and climbed into a silver Metro parked outside the house. The flat-mate?

The house was a large semi with a fussy porch that had been added on and ridiculous lattice windows. There were two doorbells but it had a shared entrance. One flat on the ground floor, another on the first like my own, although mine had its own outside entrance which was one of the main reasons why I had decided to buy it.

Had the flat-mate been another social worker? This was the kind of information I had been hoping that Bruce would provide but I doubted now if Chris had passed on my message. Why had she reacted so oddly when I mentioned the case?

When I had time I would visit the library and look up the reports in the local paper. At the very least it would be a good idea to get the facts straight so that I was in the best possible position to help Diane Easby.

I released the handbrake and drove slowly down the road. Now that the Metro had left there was not the smallest sign of life, not even a curtain twitching, a shadowy face peering out. I wondered if David had reached the business park, if he had told me the truth about the afternoon ahead, or if, at this very moment, he was with Iris reassuring her that he had spoken to me, that things had been settled once and for all.

I was trying to maintain the anger that with any luck would keep me going for the rest of the afternoon. I thought about poor Karen Plant, whose death had been so swift, so shocking. It was no good. My self-pity was so much stronger than my compassion for a total stranger.

I drove slowly, unwilling to return to work even a few minutes before I was due back. While I was in the car I felt safer, insulated from the reality of my life. On the way from one destination to another. In control of things. On the move.

When I was honest with myself I could admit that the danger signals had been there right from the start. Our first weekend away together, staying in a hotel in the New Forest. Lying in bed, curled up against my back, with his hand on my breast and one of his feet twisted round mine he had said we were to imagine what it would be like if Iris suddenly walked through the door.

Why? What had Iris got to do with us? Iris was ancient history, his ex-wife.

‘She’s not like you, Anna. In fact, she’s the exact opposite.’

Then he flung back the bedclothes, exposing us to the chill of the badly heated room, and started kissing me all over, starting with my toes and working slowly up my body ...

It had started to rain. The wipers smeared the windscreen and for a moment I could barely see where I was going. Past the gates to the park, and on through the one-way system which was so simple when you knew how it worked but so impossible if you were a visitor to the city.

How could I feel so sorry for myself when there were thousands far worse off? It was a question clients often asked. ‘Surely there must be other people who need your help far more than I do?’

What they meant, of course, was that it was painful facing up to their real feelings and was the pain going to be worthwhile?

I was gripping the steering-wheel too hard, just as I had done when I first learned to drive. Sitting in my father’s Vauxhall Cavalier, trying not to get flustered when he complained that I was letting the clutch up too slowly.

I forced myself to relax. I was moving slowly, watchfully, looking out for pedestrians, children hidden behind parked cars. An imaginary test examiner was sitting beside me as I carried out each manoeuvre with extreme attention to detail, as though my life depended on concentrating on the job in hand, on keeping a cool head.

Chapter Five

Diane Easby was back, dressed in a red calf-length skirt, a black and white sweater with a zig-zag pattern, and a white zip-up jacket.

'Like it?' she asked. 'Got them from the catalogue. Alan did his nut. Well, he can't have it both ways. If he wants me to look good he's going to have to pay for it.'

I nodded sympathetically.

'Not that he's ever been mean with money, but he never knows one week to the next what he'll be getting in the way of a wage packet.'

'He's self-employed?'

'Eh?' She was licking her finger, rubbing at a snag in her tights. 'They take him on when there's the work.'

'That must be difficult.'

'Of course the kids are the real trouble. Their feet. Never stop growing. Lisa takes a size five. Soon be into adult shoes, then they're double the cost.'

'Yes, I see.' I had been all prepared for her to ask what I had found out about Karen Plant's murder, but she seemed more interested in talking about her family.

'Anyway,' I said, 'how have you been feeling since we last met?'

She crossed one long smooth leg over the other.

'Oh, ever so much better, thanks to you. What did the police say about Keith? Stuck to the same old story, I suppose.'

I hesitated. 'To tell you the truth I don't really want to involve the police at this stage.'

'No? Oh, right you are, you think it might be better to do some investigations on your own. If you want any help just let me know. Evenings are best, when the kids are in bed.'

'Tell me about your children.'

'What d'you want to know? Lisa's twelve. Siobhan's two. I was married before, see, but it didn't work out. Then when I fell for a baby — Alan's, I mean ... Of course he treats Lisa just like she was his own. They're ever so close.'

She traced a line round her lips, then inspected her finger for smudges of lipstick. 'Don't suppose you allow smoking?'

'Not really. It makes the room — '

'That's all right. Anyway, I'm giving up. D'you think it's a mistake to give up cigs and tranx at the same time?'

'It might be difficult.'

'That's what I thought.' She picked up a pencil that was lying on my desk, lifted it to her mouth, and inhaled imaginary smoke. 'Don't believe in all that addiction stuff, do you? What it is they make you feel better, like having a can of extra strong. Stands to reason you'll want some more.'

'Yes, I know what you mean.' I was letting her move away from the point. But what was the point? Her feelings about what had happened to her brother? The general state of her life? Her 'nerves'? I was keen to avoid being cast in the role of amateur detective. On the other hand since Keith's death had been the reason for her referral we could hardly ignore the subject.

'Tell me about your brother. Did you see each other quite often?'

'Poor kid. I reckon he was starved of oxygen or something. Never learned to read and write but there's lots the same and I can't see it

matters that much.'

'How old was he when he ... ?'

'Twenty-six years, two months, and a day.' She paused to dab at her eyes. 'Ten years between us, there was, only of course there's others in the middle. One sister, two more brothers. One's in London, another's up North. I expect they'll turn up sooner or later.'

She beamed at me. 'I like your hair. Have it done at that place in the new shopping precinct, do you? How d'you get a job like yours? Well-paid is it?'

'Not too bad.'

'You deserve it, mind. All those people at their wits' end.' She broke off and gave me a quizzical look. 'You're not sure about Keith, are you? No, it's all right, best to keep an open mind. Only the thing is he couldn't have done it, not on a Saturday afternoon with a home match.'

'He went to the football? Didn't anyone see him? Surely the police —'

'Went on his own, didn't he? Never had any proper friends. Anyway I know he was there 'cos he told me how a man was taken ill, heart attack or something, carried away on a stretcher. Couldn't have known about that if he hadn't been there.'

'But if he told the police —'

'Wouldn't have thought of it. I was going to tell them only then it was too late. Anyway, I'm glad he died. If they'd cut him down sooner he might've survived but with half his brain gone. I wouldn't have wanted that.'

She stood up, stretched, and crossed to the window. 'Not got much of a view, have you?'

'No.'

'D'you live near here?'

'A few miles way.'

'Near the Downs, is it? I'd like a place in that area. I reckon we could afford one of those new town houses out toward the motorway if they'd take Siobhan at the day nursery and I could go to work.'

'It'll be easier when she starts school.'

'Want to bet? You haven't any kids, then. They let them out mid-afternoon. Who's going to give you a proper job if you have to knock off at three o'clock?' She sat down again and started searching through her handbag.

'I had a letter, must have left it at home. You know anything about repossession? Only these blokes are after my washing machine. They came crashing on the door first thing. I had to put my hand over Siobhan's mouth and pretend we were out.'

'You've fallen behind with the payments?'

'Only a month or two. Anyway they're not bloody having it. How am I supposed to wash the kids' clothes?'

'Perhaps if you talked to the people in the shop, offered to pay back some of what you owe.'

'Yeah, I might do that.' She stared at me, half smiling, half mocking. I liked her but she made me uneasy. What was it she wanted? Someone to talk to? Someone to find out more about her brother? Someone to help her to hang on to her washing machine?

She had arrived late for her appointment and in five minutes I would have to tell her it was time to leave. I decided to fix an appointment for the following week. I expected her to protest that it

was too long to wait, but she seemed quite happy with the arrangement.

‘Right you are, then.’ She zipped up her white jacket, held out her hand, then pulled it back and put it in her pocket. ‘We don’t want to keep shaking hands. Too formal, makes it like a visit to the dentist. Anyway, I’ll see you. Take care.’

After she left I pulled out my file and made a few notes. How had she known about the man taken ill at the football? She couldn’t have spoken to her brother while he was in police custody. Maybe she was thinking about a different match, or perhaps she had made it up in order to try and convince me of her brother’s innocence. Did she really expect me to look into the case? I had a feeling there was something important that she hadn’t told me about yet. She was testing me out, wondering if she could trust me. Or perhaps I was just imagining it. She liked having someone to talk to and was afraid I wouldn’t go on seeing her unless she provided me with plenty of problems.

It was two minutes past twelve. My next client, a new one, would be in the waiting room, looking at her watch, wondering if psychologists were like hospital consultants and kept you hanging about for hours. On the other hand she might not have turned up at all. Her first appointment had been for the previous Tuesday but her mother had phoned up, very apologetic, to say her daughter had a bad headache. I suspected the girl had refused to come. Another appointment had been made for today.

I allowed a few moments for Diane to leave the building, then I ran down the stairs. As I passed the secretary’s office I could hear Martin and Beth talking to Heather. Beth seemed to be telling a funny story.

Martin's laughter turned into a fit of coughing and somebody had to thump him on the back. Didn't any of them have any work to do? I stood in the corridor wondering what David was doing at that precise moment. Then I took a deep breath and put my head round the waiting-room door.

'Jenny Weir?'

She was sitting near the window, staring at the brown haircord carpet. Her head moved a fraction but she didn't look up.

'Hallo. If you'd like to come this way.'

She rose slowly, wearily, and walked across the room, waiting for me to go through the door in front of her.

'My name's Anna,' I said, 'we're upstairs, first on the right.'

Dr Ingram, a local GP, had referred her. The telephone referral had been followed by a cursory note which mentioned psychosomatic symptoms, held out little hope that we would be able to help, but suggested that we were the last resort since he had 'run out of ideas'.

Martin had been delighted. Referrals from Dr Ingram were virtually unheard of and a year or two ago he had spoken publicly about the advisability of saving money by cutting down on the Psychology Service. Martin thought something might have happened in his personal life and he had had a conversion. I doubted this but agreed to have a go. If everything else had been tried there was nothing to lose.

Jenny Weir stood in the doorway of my room, waiting to be invited in and her expression managed to be both ingratiating and resentful. Her hair was light brown, straight, and cut short like an old-fashioned schoolgirl. Her skin was pale with a few freckles on her prominent

cheekbones. She was not pretty but there was something attractive about her long thin face and narrow eyes. I smiled at her but she wasn't looking at me. I took her blue anorak and hung it on the back of the door.

'I expect it feels a bit strange — coming here,' I said, pointing to a chair and quietly closing the door.

She sat down stiffly on the edge of her seat. Without the letter from Dr Ingram I would have guessed she was about fourteen. In fact she was nearly seventeen.

'I know a little about you,' I said, 'but I hope you'll be able to tell me more. Your doctor's been treating you for headaches and muscle pains. He thought it might help if you talked to someone. I think he wondered if you might be feeling a bit low.'

I waited to give her a chance to speak but she continued to stare at the floor.

'Perhaps there are things that are worrying you, making you unhappy?'

She looked up briefly, then her eyes flicked away from mine. I tried again.

'I expect you've missed quite a lot of school. Did you manage to take your exams?'

No response. She didn't even nod or shake her head.

'Perhaps you resent being asked to come and see me. You feel the decision was made over your head, by the doctor, or your parents.'

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She was dressed in a royal-blue corduroy skirt, a white shirt, and a hand-knitted cardigan, also blue but with pink and white flowers embroidered round the

buttonholes. Her thick woollen tights were brown and she had brown slip-on shoes with fringes.

These silent teenagers were always the most difficult. I silently cursed Martin for allocating her to me. He kept telling me to ease up on work, then made sure I had the worst cases. But it was early days yet. Often the most resistant people turned out to be the most rewarding.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said, ‘there’s plenty of time. First of all I just want us to get to know each other a little. Later, if there are things you want to talk about I’ll be happy to listen.’

She sighed deeply and stared at her hands. Even a sigh was a start.

‘I want you to know that anything you tell me is completely confidential. I won’t be reporting back to your doctor or — ’

‘What’s the point, then?’ The whisper was so faint I only just made it out, but she had broken her vow of silence.

‘Well, the aim is for you to feel safe to talk about whatever you like. I don’t want to ask you a whole lot of questions but maybe you could tell me a little about yourself, your family.’

She turned her head and gazed through the window at the light drizzle just visible against the outline of a group of beech trees. I wasn’t going to get much out of her this morning. It would be best to just make a few friendly remarks, but no pressure, let her feel in control, then make another appointment and take it from there.

‘All right, Jenny, I don’t want to keep you very long this morning.’

She turned and glared at me and her eyes were cold, unnerving. Now she thought I was trying to get rid of her. She wanted to leave but she also wanted to stay.

'Look,' I said, 'I know how difficult this is. That's why it's best to take things slowly. The headaches, they're bad, are they? And you also get pains in your arms and legs.'

She nodded, pressing her lips together.

I moved my chair back a little to allow her more space. 'When Dr Ingram wondered if the symptoms might be psychosomatic that didn't mean he thought you were inventing them.'

No response. We sat for several minutes in silence. I can tolerate silence better than most people. All the same, I found my throat becoming dry and uncomfortable. It was something to do with the conflicting messages she was communicating. Leave me alone. Do something. Finally she stood up, looking round for her coat.

I followed her to the door, took her anorak off the hook, and helped her as she struggled to get her arms into the armholes. When she snatched the coat from my hands she looked close to tears.

'Don't worry,' I said, touching her lightly on the arm, 'next time you come it will be easier for both of us.'

She spun round, surprised that I had included myself in the difficult situation. Then she turned her back on me and left closing the door behind her.

*

The postcard was lying just inside my front door. A reproduction of *The Harlot's Progress* by William Hogarth. It was the end of her progress. She was lying in a coffin surrounded by a group of unconcerned mourners, one of whom was spilling his drink as he attempted to touch up the woman standing next to him.

When I turned the card over there was no stamp, no name or address, just a short message in neat block capitals: I KNOW ALL

ABOUT YOU.

My first response was anger. Iris must have been round while I was out at work. But why would she do that, especially now that David was going back to live with her? And why was I a harlot? At the time of our meeting she and David were already in the process of getting a divorce. She could hardly accuse me of breaking up their marriage.

Since I had never met Iris I could speculate indefinitely about what might be going on in her mind. It was a lost cause, and when I calmed down a little, I realized that it was far more likely that the card had been delivered by one of my clients.

Communications from clients were not that unusual. They found out where I lived and sent me reminders of their existence between appointments. But not anonymous ones. I ran through a list of possible 'suspects'. Mr Barnes, a bitter unemployed man in his forties, with palpitations and an unsympathetic wife? Mrs Fitch, exasperated that I had failed to find a way of getting rid of the itchy rash that started under her chin and ran up to her face every time she ran into the colleague who had been promoted over her head?

But whichever way I looked at it one stood out from all the rest. Rob Starkey, angry that I had stopped him coming to see me, was determined to demonstrate that I would not be able to get rid of him so easily. Hanging about near my car, then disappearing down the alleyway only to reappear lurking in the dark outside my bedroom window.

An intelligent but restless young man who drifted in and out of work, was easily bored, and had a likeness for alcohol and soft drugs. I had tried to help him but felt we were getting nowhere. When I told him my decision he had seemed to accept it, even said he was

surprised I had put up with him for so long. But he must have been hiding his real feelings and now resentment had got the better of him. I would have to look him up, talk to him, maybe invite him to return for a limited number of appointments.

The card was unpleasant but Rob was silly rather than dangerous. There was nothing to get worked up about. It was just part of the job.

I froze and a prickly sensation ran up the back of my neck. Had I misjudged Rob? Did he feel so vindictive that he was prepared to find a way of breaking into the flat? I pictured him moving from room to room, picking things up and putting them down. Grinning to himself, then — just for a laugh — tucking himself up in my bed and accidentally on purpose leaving a crumpled tissue pushed down between the mattress and the headboard?

Chapter Six

The entrance to the library was blocked by a party of primary-school children, milling round their teacher, waiting for permission to go in and change their books. I squeezed past and stood in the foyer, breathing in the sharp sickly smell of floor polish.

The reference section was on the first floor and I was half-way up the stone steps before I remembered that back-numbers of newspapers were kept in the reading room in the basement. I started back down, circling round and round, made slightly dizzy by the smooth white walls. In under an hour, I had an appointment with Owen Hughes at the university. We had spoken briefly on the phone, during which time he had appeared to be having an argument with somebody in his room. His response to my request had been less than encouraging. Yes, he would have a look at my research proposal but it was not really his field and I would be unlikely to obtain any funding, which would mean registering as a private part-time research student. Yes, he could see me on Friday afternoon. Three forty-five would be best, although he wouldn't have very long as he had a meeting at four thirty.

In many ways it would have been a relief to abandon the whole idea but Martin had talked me into going through with it.

'Oh, come on, you'll enjoy it. Besides it'll be good for the Psychology Service, help to encourage links with local doctors. And it needn't take up too much of your time.'

I had waited for him to point out that my evenings and weekends were likely to provide plenty of spare time, but of course he was far too tactful.

‘All right then,’ I said, ‘but this Owen Hughes doesn’t sound my type at all.’

‘He doesn’t have to be your type, just a guy with the power to say yes or no to us mere mortals.’

In the spare forty minutes before leaving for the university I had decided to visit the library and look through old copies of the local paper to see what I could find out about the Karen Plant affair. That way I could persuade Diane Easby that I had taken her request seriously and then, when she agreed that most likely her brother had been guilty after all, I could concentrate on helping her to come to terms with what had happened.

In the reading room a solitary man sat on a tall stool turning the pages of last week’s Sunday paper. He was dressed in a tweed coat and wore a flat cap of the kind sold in country sports shops. Retired, trying to fill up an afternoon? He looked up briefly, coughed without putting his hand over his mouth, then returned to the section on Style and Living.

I waited by the counter, wondering whether to press the bell for service then decided against it since the librarian, who was only a few feet away between two dark shelves and well aware of my presence, would be irritated by my impatience.

Finally she appeared, not smiling, but asking pleasantly enough if there was anything she could do to help.

‘The local paper. I want to look up something that happened about two months ago.’

'You don't know the date?'

'No, not exactly. The middle of December. About then.'

She disappeared for a few moments, then returned with a collection of unbound newspapers.

'If you need any more let me know.'

'Thanks.'

I lifted the heavy pile and carried it to a table in the corner, pulling out a paper at random, checking the date, then starting to read the main stories. The murder might have been headlines. On the other hand, if a bigger story had broken at the same time, Karen Plant's death could have been relegated to an inside page.

After ten minutes' search I found the first relevant story: a brief description of how Keith Merchant had been found hanging in his cell. I skimmed it through but it told me no more than I knew already. Putting it to one side I began searching backwards for an account of how Karen Plant's body had been discovered.

Eventually I found it. The newspaper had been torn right across, but I pieced it together and started reading.

The body of social worker, Karen Plant, twenty-four, was discovered late on Sunday evening by Fleur Peythieu, nineteen, her flat-mate.

Fleur Peythieu? It sounded French, although quite likely the reporter had spelled it incorrectly. The woman I had seen outside the house was older than that. In her late twenties or early thirties. I read on.

Miss Peythieu returned to the flat in Belvoir Road after a weekend away, staying with friends. There was no sign of a break-in but the

police say cause of death was asphyxia. An unemployed man in his twenties is helping with their enquiries.

Another report the following day said that Keith Merchant, a handyman, had been charged with the murder.

It was alleged that he had been doing odd jobs round the flat. A post-mortem on the body had revealed no evidence of sexual assault.

It was getting late, time to go to the university. I made a note of the relevant dates, told the uninterested librarian I would return in a day or two, and made my way up the steep steps and out into the fresh air.

I had learned very little, apart from the fact that the flat-mate had a French name and was only nineteen. Perhaps that was all there was to know about the case. Karen Plant had asked Keith Merchant to do odd jobs round the flat. He had tried to take the friendship further, a struggle had taken place, and he had lost his temper, smothered her with a pillow, then run off. The police had no difficulty in tracing his whereabouts. He was the obvious suspect. It was an open and shut case.

As I walked back to the car it started to rain. A group of 'travellers' had congregated on College Green, some on a wooden seat, some on the grass, opposite the cathedral. Their mongrel dogs ran loose, trailing pieces of rope behind them. One of the men called out as I passed: 'Got any change for a bite to eat?' I put my hand in my pocket half-heartedly, then shook my head and quickened my pace, glancing at my watch as I crossed the road, anxious not to be late for my appointment.

A stream of traffic was coming towards me down Park Street. A taxi, followed by a bus, followed by a huge container truck painted in the familiar colours of a well-known supermarket. If I reached the next lamppost before the bus did then everything would be all right. Stop it. Slow down. Start thinking like a rational human being.

Standing with my car keys in my hand I stared into the distance, expecting to see Rob Starkey lurking down a side road or behind a bus shelter. It was well over a month since his last appointment, the third in a row at which he had turned up high on drugs, giggling, showing off, talking in a baby voice. It had been a waste of time trying to help. Forget it. Ignore the stupid postcard. He wanted to provoke me, force me into some kind of a response. If I took no notice he would grow bored, stop wasting his time, and turn his attention to something else.

Parking outside the Research Unit was restricted to those with a staff pass. I drove slowly up the road, then round the corner, searching for a gap. Needless to say Owen Hughes had given no warning that parking would be a problem. Why should he care?

A small white car pulled out from the kerb and I eased forward, claiming the space as though it was a game of musical chairs, glaring at the driver of a car approaching in the opposite direction although he had no intention of pushing in.

Walking back towards the Unit I rehearsed in my head what I was going to say. 'Hallo. I'm Anna McColl. I spoke to you on the phone about the possibility of doing some research into the factors underlying hypochondria.'

His voice had been cold, business-like. He might be anything between forty and fifty. Impatient, hard pressed, someone who liked

to stick to facts, dispense with social chit-chat. Had there been a hint of Welsh in his voice? Or perhaps I had just assumed that with a name like Owen Hughes ...

The building was of dull grey stone, four storeys tall and slightly dilapidated. Inside the front door a diagram on a wooden noticeboard indicated that the Research Unit was on the first and second floors. I climbed the stairs and pushed open heavy swing doors. There was nobody in sight.

Surely there must be an office, receptionists. I started down the corridor, glancing at the nameplates on each door, but reaching the far end without a sign of a Dr Owen Hughes.

‘Lost?’

A tall fair-haired woman adjusted the pile of files and papers she was carrying under her arm and stood, blocking my way.

‘I’m looking for Dr Hughes.’

She smiled. ‘Another floor up. Through the swing doors, then third on the left.’

‘Thanks.’

I seemed to have spent half the afternoon going up flights of stone steps. My back ached and I had the beginnings of a headache which was almost certainly psychosomatic. No wonder I had taken a liking to Jenny Weir.

The third door on the left was slightly ajar. When I knocked it swung open revealing a man sitting bent over a desk at the far end of an untidy narrow room. He looked up but continued writing. Then he pushed some papers aside, swung his revolving chair to face me and gestured towards another chair a few feet from his own.

I moved a couple of heavy books and sat down.

‘Anna McColl,’ I said.

He nodded. I had interrupted his work. He saw people like me every other day. It was a part of his job he would happily dispense with given half a chance.

I searched in my bags for the notes I had prepared and he watched me, drumming his fingers on the edge of the desk. Already he had me taped. An Upper Second in Psychology from a university he almost certainly considered inferior to his own. Some hair-brained scheme for a research project. But he would hear me out. He had no choice.

‘I made some notes. I’m just trying to find — ’

‘You’re a clinical psychologist. D’you like the work?’

‘Yes. Well, most of it.’

‘Doesn’t it get you down, seeing all those depressed people?’

‘Not really. They’re not all depressed.’

He glanced at me, then turned back to his desk and wrote something on a pad. He had dark blue eyes and a nose which looked as though it had been broken then straightened out. His hair was flecked with grey but he looked younger than I had expected. In his late thirties or early forties. Bad things had happened to him, not recently perhaps, but a few years back. I knew the signs.

‘Right then, you want to register as a research student. I’m not sure you’ll get a grant but I suppose you might persuade some charitable foundation.’

‘Oh, I wasn’t really expecting — ’

‘Hypochondria.’ He leaned down to open a drawer in his desk.
‘How do you intend to go about it?’

‘I haven’t worked it out exactly. It just seemed ... Well, some people visit their doctor all the time — ’

‘Really?’

‘They worry about their health, even the slightest symptom, and then because they’re forever checking how they feel, of course they think they’ve got more symptoms than — ’

‘And there’s really nothing much the matter with them. I can’t stand doctors but that doesn’t stop me thinking I’ve got every fatal illness under the sun.’

‘Yes, I know. But the thing is — well, we probably don’t go and see the doctor every other week. Actually it’s quite an interesting condition. I mean, it may not be just anxiety. For some people it may be a way of getting attention.’

‘Oh, I’m sure it is.’

‘Or it may be an integral part of a relationship. The partner who’s not a hypochondriac looks after the one who is and that makes him or her feel needed.’

I broke off, aware that he was not really listening. ‘Time for the tea trolley.’ He stood up and started moving towards the door. ‘Want a cup?’

‘Yes. Thanks.’

‘Hypochondria. More to it than meets the eye. Of course you’ll need something definite to work on. Some of these research projects have a tendency to fall apart almost before they’ve got off the ground.’

I followed him down the corridor and for the first time I was able to see that he was fairly short, about five foot eight, with broad shoulders for his height. He wore a dark grey jacket and trousers of

a different grey. One trouser leg was caught up at the back, tucked into his navy blue sock. His shoes were expensive but needed repairing.

The tea room was cold and sparsely furnished. A semicircle of metal and canvas chairs were placed unevenly round a cheap coffee-table. On another table at the side of the room stood a large urn, a collection of plastic cups and two tins, one containing white sugar, full of lumps and tea stains, the other, dehydrated milk.

Owen Hughes nodded in the direction of two other men, but didn't introduce me. Then he helped himself to tea and, as an afterthought, poured a cup for me and muttered something about milk and sugar.

We sat at one end of the semi-circle. I was not certain if we were supposed to continue discussing my research proposal or whether that was to wait until we returned to his room. He took a sip of tea, then spoke with the cup still held near his mouth.

'How long have you been doing your job?'

'D'you mean clinical psychology or this particular job?'

'Whichever.'

'I've been working here for nearly two years. Before that I was in London.'

He nodded vaguely. 'Like it, do you? No, I asked you that before. Must keep you busy, all those unhappy people. How are you going to find the time to carry out a research project?'

'Oh, I think I could fit it in all right. The principal psychologist is all in favour of it. He thinks we should do more research.'

'Martin Wheeler.'

'You know him?'

‘Know of him.’ He shuddered slightly. ‘Freezing in here, shall we take our tea back to my room?’

The rest of the interview only took a few minutes. He suggested I put something definite on paper, a proposal which included the methods I intended to use. There would have to be questionnaires, personality tests. I wondered about in-depth case studies but he looked dubious.

‘Up to you. Can be interesting but it’s not clear what you can do with them.’

I thanked him for seeing me and he smiled for the first time, probably with relief that I was just about to leave.

‘Goodbye then ... ’ His voice trailed away, he had forgotten my name already. ‘I’ll await your proposal.’

As he held open the door he was humming under his breath the way people do when they want to relieve the tension. He had done what was required, now he could return to his proper work.

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It was twenty past four. Too late to go back to the office, but too early to go home. I took a detour and drove along Effingham Road again, pretending to be doing it for Diane Easby’s sake but aware of my morbid curiosity. I considered turning down Karen Plant’s street and waiting to see if anyone returned to the house, but even if they did I would be none the wiser. Besides it was time to stop thinking about the case. I was using it as a diversion — because my own life was in such a mess. In different circumstances I would barely have given Diane’s story a second thought.

Putting my foot down on the accelerator I drove away, pushing the picture of Karen Plant’s cold, stiff body out of my head, replacing it

with an image of my father sitting in his office in the Planning Department, occupying himself with files, agendas, reports. Keeping busy.

Keeping going. Perhaps we were not so different after all.

Because it was still early there were plenty of parking spaces in my road. I left the car in front of the steps up to my flat, then started walking towards the supermarket on the corner.

It called itself a supermarket although really it was no more than a glorified corner shop. As I pushed open the door I caught my ankle on a cardboard box containing tins of a well-known brand of cat food. A woman I knew by sight smiled sympathetically.

Two young men with shaved heads were stocking up with frozen food and cans of beer. A group of pensioners stood by the check-out, complaining about the price of eggs, but reassuring the woman on the till that it wasn't her fault, it was the government.

Waiting in the queue with my half-pint of semi-skim-med and bar of Turkish Delight I went over the interview with Owen Hughes. He had said nothing about whether or not he was willing to act as my supervisor. Was I supposed to assume that he would do it? Perhaps it all depended on what kind of detailed plan I came up with. Perhaps he was hoping I would lose interest and never come back.

A screech of brakes interrupted my thoughts and I felt myself pushed to one side by other people in the shop who wanted to see what was going on.

Outside on the pavement a small crowd had gathered by the bend in the road. I steeled myself. Not a child knocked down? Not a death. I couldn't bear that. I hurried forward and was just in time to see a dark-haired young man being lifted to his feet and dusted down.

Someone wanted to send for an ambulance. The man in the car that had hit him looked white and shaken, his anxiety turning to anger as he described how a figure had appeared from nowhere, running across the road without looking to left or right.

I could only see the back of the young man's head and shoulders but it was enough. He turned round, unhurt but embarrassed, then caught sight of me and started running. Several people called after him, advising him to go to Casualty, see his doctor. An old woman in a shiny raincoat asked if I knew who he was.

I shook my head, unwilling to become involved.

'Young people,' she said, 'always in such a hurry.'

'Yes.' Preoccupied by what I had seen I almost started home without paying for my shopping. Others in the same position began pushing their way back into the supermarket, talking in loud voices, telling the woman at the check-out what had happened. A wild young man, who looked like a gypsy, not looking where he was going, lucky not to be killed. It was amazing how easily people could embellish a story, confusing fact and speculation, anything as long as it broke the routine of the day, contributed to the general excitement.

Chapter Seven

Something woke me in the night. An intruder? But when I listened, holding my breath, I heard nothing except the faint crack of furniture cooling now that the central heating had switched itself off. Perhaps I had been dreaming, although no memory of a dream remained, only a general feeling of foreboding.

I tried to concentrate on everyday happenings, plans for the weekend. But I had no plans. Before David moved out, my weekends had followed a regular pattern. Shopping on Saturday morning, going out in the afternoon for a walk in the country or by the sea, visiting friends in the evening or seeing a film. Sundays followed another familiar routine. A long lie-in, lunch at the pub, lazing about for the rest of the day.

Now, for the first time in my life, I found myself looking forward to Monday.

Climbing out of bed, I wrapped myself in the duvet and walked down the passage to the kitchen. The lino felt cold under my bare feet. I pulled the curtain back a little and watched dark clouds moving across the sky. The garden, neglected since the previous ground-floor tenants moved out, looked bare and dingy, but in a week or two purple and yellow crocuses would start to open out. I wondered if the new tenants were interested in gardening. Not the one in a wheelchair, although somewhere I had read about special gardens with raised beds.

I redrew the curtain, switched on the electric kettle, and sat down at the table trying to organize the jumble of thoughts in my head. I had bought the flat a year ago, partly because it was good value for money, and partly in the hope that David would move in with me. He had, for nearly five months, and at first it had been almost perfect. A few good-natured differences of opinion about what we ate, who did the washing and cleaning, but none of that had mattered. We were happy. Talking, laughing, making love, painting the kitchen, arguing about politics, making love ... Then I found out about Iris.

He had been seeing her two or three times a week, after he left the office, when I thought he was working late. He hadn't lied to me, well, only a little and because he didn't want to hurt my feelings. It was just that he missed his daughter and dropping in at the house informally after work seemed a far better arrangement than taking her out at the weekend. Of course I had to agree about that.

'But I wish you'd told me, David. If we can't trust each other — '

'Nobody tells anyone everything. Oh, don't start making trouble. Come here. Come on. You can't be jealous of a twelve-year-old girl.'

Then one day he had let slip that Sian was staying with her grandmother during half-term. In that case why had he been going round to the house the same as usual?

We sat for several minutes, enduring an unpleasant silence I refused to break. Finally he looked up, sighed, and started talking in a sad, mournful voice that implied he was a victim of emotions he found it difficult to comprehend.

'I can't explain, Anna. Not in a way that would make sense to you. I suppose it's something to do with having known Iris for such a long time. She's familiar, knows me inside out, accepts me for what I am.'

'And I don't?'

'Yes. No. It's different with us, we're in love with each other. Oh come on, surely a psychologist can understand.'

At the time I had comforted myself with the knowledge that new relationships always have problems relating to previous ones. It was just a question of being patient, controlling my anxiety, and telling myself that things would change over time.

They did, they got worse. We argued continually, and eventually, following a row which almost ended in physical violence, he moved out and went to stay with a friend.

'Just to give us some breathing space, Anna. We're not doing each other any good. I moved in with you too soon. I should have taken longer to sort myself out.'

I wanted to believe him. I had to believe him. So much had been invested in our relationship. It was the most important thing that had ever happened to me.

David and I had met less than three months after Kit. I had known Kit ever since the first year of the Clinical Psychology course and we had lived together for two and a half years. We had got on well enough, even talked of getting married, but when we qualified and he expected me to follow him to a town in North Wales, even though I wanted a job where I could be within easy reach of my mother, I realized that part of me had known for some time that we would split up sooner or later.

Since then we had written to each other regularly and in his last letter he had told me he was engaged to a doctor's daughter. Kit engaged? He despised all rituals but presumably the doctor's

daughter had talked him into it. I was happy for him and wrote back wishing him all the best. I didn't tell him about David.

It was cold in the kitchen but if I switched on the electric fire it would be like admitting my night's sleep was at an end. Four fifteen. I wished I had some of the tranquillizers I advised my clients against so vehemently.

'They make you feel better, see.' I could hear Diane's deep seductive voice. Then the thought of Diane reminded me of Karen Plant and I wondered whether I should have told the police about Keith Merchant seeing a man taken ill at the football match. Only I was certain they would have checked his alibi and found it to be false. Keith was dead. It was over and done with. All that remained was for Diane to understand that her wish to prove him innocent was an understandable way of expressing the anger that helped to cover up her feelings of grief.

But when I thought about it, Diane showed few signs of being grief-stricken. Her doctor had referred her for bereavement counselling but, as far as I could tell, she was a frequent visitor to the surgery with her 'nerves' and he had probably jumped at the opportunity of passing her on to someone else. All the same, she seemed pretty certain that her brother was innocent, and if he had been that meant someone else must be guilty. Someone who had got off scot-free and could hardly believe his good fortune.

I switched my attention to my other new client, the silent Jenny Weir. I liked her. There was something about her that intrigued me. She looked so waif-like, yet underneath I had a feeling she was a pretty determined kind of character.

I was doing what Martin had warned me against. Using my clients' problems as a way of escaping from my own. I abandoned my cup of tea, put the mug on the draining board, and returned to bed, where I lay on my stomach, pulled the duvet up round my neck, and started counting backwards from a thousand. It usually worked. Just as I was dropping off to sleep I had a fleeting image of a second coffee mug standing in the washing-up bowl. The one with hippos dancing. A present from David. But I never put mugs in the sink, in case their handles got knocked off. I must have imagined it. It was wishful thinking.

*

In the morning the hippo mug was still there. I picked it up and inspected it for dregs of tea or coffee, but it was unused. Without thinking I must have taken it from the cupboard, then put it down and selected my usual mug. But how could I have done? That particular mug had been pushed to the back, out of sight. I would have to have moved a pile of plates in order to reach it.

I rinsed it out, dried it, and put it on a high shelf. I wouldn't give it another thought, nor the peach-coloured tissue and my ridiculous notion that Rob Starkey had been in the flat.

I found my coat, which was precisely where I had left it, over the back of a chair, and set out for the large supermarket in Whiteladies Road to stock up with my staple diet — boil-in-the-bag cod in parsley sauce and boil-in-the-bag beef casserole with dumplings. Neither of them added up to much of a meal but with a couple of slices of bread I felt reasonably satisfied. And the beauty of it was there were no pans to wash afterwards.

At the back of the store an elderly woman, who had asked me to help her control a compulsive desire to eat cakes and pastries, was busily filling her trolley with health foods and diet soups. I kept my head well down, paid for my two bags of shopping, and escaped before she could start telling me about her eating habits.

The bookshop was the next place on my list. I wanted something heavy — heavy in weight, but light in content. Something that would relax me, send me to sleep in midsentence. The fact that the bookshop was one of David's favourite haunts didn't enter into it.

The shop was crowded. Several small children sat on the spotted toadstools provided for them and turned the pages of large glossy books, while providing a running commentary of what they could see in the pictures. I moved towards the sections on Psychology, Psychiatry, Sociology, then 'Women's Titles'.

In the middle of flicking through a paperback entitled *Feminism: the backlash*, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

'David?'

'Sorry, love. Only me.'

'Chris.'

Her hair was tied back again and she was dressed in a denim jacket, an orange T-shirt, and a pair of baggy black cords. It was unusual to see her at the shops on her own.

'Hallo. Where are they all?'

She groaned. 'My parents are down for the weekend. Mum's looking after Barnaby. Bruce has taken the others swimming. Time for a quick coffee?'

'Where? That caff near the camera shop?'

'No, the prices are ridiculous. There's a place at the top of that new store on the corner. You're not in a hurry, are you?'

She squeezed my arm. She was doing her best but she exuded that feeling of wellbeing that people are unable to disguise. My life was in a mess, hers was blissful. She was desperately sorry for me, but at the same time my misery served to highlight her good fortune.

We walked side by side, blocking the pavement so that nobody could squeeze past.

'Lucky I bumped into you,' said Chris, 'I would have gone home earlier but I was accosted in the street by this woman doing market research for some travel company.'

'She wanted you to fill in a questionnaire?'

'I suppose so. It was hard to tell since she didn't speak very good English. Actually I felt sorry for her, poor sod, probably a single parent trying to make a bit of extra cash. Anyway, I filled in six or seven forms, all with slightly different answers. My good deed for the day.'

'Let's hope she doesn't get the sack,' I said.

'Why on earth should she? Oh, I suppose you think you've coined the market in helping the sad and deprived.'

She stared at me, trying to keep a straight face, then let out a shriek of laughter, jumped up the last two stairs, and ran past a display of large china dogs, almost knocking over a vase of dried poppy heads.

In the cafeteria we shared a tray, selected slices of Black Forest gateau that looked stale and were definitely overpriced, and collected two large cups of coffee.

The place was crowded and Chris spent several moments deciding on a suitable table. Finally we joined a silent middle-aged couple who were collecting up their belongings and looked as though they were just about to leave. Chris piled her shopping bags against the wall.

'God, my mother,' she groaned. 'She could do with some of your brilliant psychological treatment.'

'You don't believe in psychological —'

'I reckon she's a psychopath.'

'Of course she's not a —'

'Don't keep interrupting.' She kicked my ankle under the table. 'Well, if she's not a psychopath she's a bloody trouble-maker. Always going on about my God-like sister.'

'Willa?'

'I've only got one sister. Willa, the family's success story. Apparently she's hoping to specialize in Paediatrics. Heaven help her patients, they'll be treated like tiny specimens in Frankenstein's laboratory. Anyway, enough of that. Tell all.'

'Nothing to tell.'

'Liar.'

'I saw David.'

She nodded as though she had known all along. 'Saw him in the street or really saw him?'

'We had lunch together.'

'And.'

'He's going to move back in with Iris.'

She pulled a face. 'More fool David.'

'You don't know Iris,' I said feebly.

'I don't need to. Anyway, at least it makes things more — well, more of a clean break.'

'That's what David said. It's called rationalization.'

'Oh, don't start all that.' She broke off a piece of gâteau with a fork and lifted it to her mouth. She was wondering if I wanted a clean break and I was wondering if David moving back in with Iris might not have exactly the opposite effect. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Familiarity breeds contempt. Two of those tired maxims that nevertheless contain a certain amount of truth. I pictured David on his knees, begging to be allowed back into my life, promising that things would be different. I would listen to him in silence, my face expressionless, my voice cold as ice. 'I'm sorry, David, it's over. Don't try getting in touch with me again.'

'You're scowling,' said Chris, wiping crumbs from her mouth with a peach-coloured paper napkin. 'Put the bastard out of your mind for once and listen to what my father said about psychologists.'

'Must I?' The coffee was tepid, something to do with the design of the cups. 'Look,' I said, 'there is something I want to tell you about. This client I used to see, a young man in his mid-twenties. I stopped seeing him because — well, I won't go into it all.'

'You can if you like. I'm always longing to hear about your patients, especially the real nut-cases.'

'They're not nut-cases.'

'Anyway, what about this young man? Is he fanciable?'

'He's been following me, lurking about outside the flat.'

'He's got a thing about you. Isn't that part of the treatment?'

'He sent me a picture post card. *The Harlot's Progress*.'

‘Really? What does she look like? Orange hair and her boobs hanging out of her bodice?’

‘She’s dead.’

‘Oh.’

‘Then yesterday evening this man I was telling you about was knocked down by a car, outside the shop on the corner of Queen’s Road.’

‘Oh no, how awful. Killed?’ She spat crumbs in all directions but didn’t apologize.

‘No, but it made me feel as though it was my fault.’

‘How could it be?’

‘Shh, keep your voice down, people are staring at us.’ I finished off my cold coffee and gave up on the gâteau. ‘The thing is, he comes from a terrible background. His mother was an alcoholic, in and out of various clinics.’

She raised her eyebrows a little. ‘Lots of people have difficult childhoods. I’ve never thought it was an excuse for turning out delinquent.’

We had been here before. Chris had a low opinion of most psychological theories. She believed suffering was good for the soul. Something like that. The only problem was she herself seemed to have led a charmed life. I decided to change the subject, tell her about my research.

‘You know I told you I had an appointment at the university?’

‘Yes, what was he like?’

‘All right. I told him I was hoping to study the underlying causes of hypochondria and — ’

‘No, I mean what did he look like? Is he married?’

'I've no idea.'

'Is he fat, thin? Tall, short? Oh, come on, my life's so humdrum I need some vicarious thrills.'

'I can't remember,' I said, irritated by her lack of interest in my research project, provoked into asking if Bruce had said anything about Karen Plant.

She turned her head to study a lifeless flower print hanging on the wall to our left. I could see the muscles in her jaw clench and unclench. 'What? Oh, that. Sorry, I forgot all about it.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Look, Anna.' She was searching in her bag for something or other, then she started to gather up her shopping. 'I'll have to go. If I'm out too long my parents get edgy and there's a terrible atmosphere and all the children start playing up. My dear mother keeps wearing herself out playing with Barnaby, then claims she's not tired at all only "you forget how full of energy they are at that age". Silly old cow.'

She was talking too much and her voice had a high-pitched nervous quality she was unable to conceal.

'I like your mother,' I said crossly.

'I'll send her round to your house, then.' She grinned and swung one of her carrier bags against my leg. She had gained control of herself. Now she was putting on a jolly carefree act. 'God, I envy you the peace and quiet. You can do exactly as you like all weekend. Pure heaven.'

Perhaps she meant it. She might be tactless but she wasn't malicious. But what was it about Karen Plant that had made her face muscles tighten and her hands clench into fists? Karen Plant and

Bruce? It was impossible. Bruce was the archetypal family man, quiet, steady, reliable. In any case, if there had been anything going on Chris would have told me. She and I told each other everything. Didn't we?

Chapter Eight

I overslept and had to rush out of the flat without even a cup of coffee. Arriving at work at nine fifteen I was just in time to collect my first client, a woman in her early sixties who had been the rounds. Doctor, vicar, aromatherapist, acupuncturist, I was her latest acquisition, 'the only person who could really understand how she felt'. It wouldn't last. In a week or two I would join the ranks of those who had failed to come up to expectations.

She sat opposite me and the tears ran down her soft fat cheeks. I was sorry for her, I really was, but every time she spoke it was like listening to a character from a bad soap opera. I tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

'It's their eyes, dear. I had this friend. Austin, he was called. Very well spoken and a good job with the Post Office. But his eyes, they made me feel all peculiar.'

'You feel you've always wanted a close relationship with a man, but something in you holds back in case you get hurt.'

'Yes, that's it, dear. Is there a cure for people like me?'

After she left I took my letters out of my bag. I had picked them up on the way out but there had been no time to read them. The first was a brief note from my father, telling me he had decided to visit Steven in Australia. He was not sure he wanted to be away for a whole six weeks but perhaps the change would do him good. He hoped my work was going well and sent his regards to David.

Why had he written a letter instead of phoning? Perhaps a letter was easier. He could tell me the facts without having to worry how I would interrupt them. Whenever I tried to help I only made things more difficult for him. All the same, I decided to ring him in the evening, just to wish him well.

The second letter was from David. I unpeeled the envelope, slowly, cautiously, trying to prepare myself, although what was there left to say? It was written in black ink on stiff white paper.

‘Anna, what can I say? Since our meeting last week I’ve thought of nothing but you. I’m back in the house but it’s like a prison and I think Iris feels the same way although we communicate so little I have no means of knowing what she thinks. You’ll despise me. I don’t blame you. How could you ever trust me again? But please finish reading, don’t tear this up before you’ve heard me out. Things had become so tense between us I believed that moving out was the only hope of protecting everything that had been so good. Now I see that I should have tried harder. We both should. Can we give it another chance, or at least can we talk about it? I’ll park in your road this evening and hope you come out and invite me in. If not I’ll try to understand. I love you. David.’

Martin buzzed me to say that he and Nick were taking Beth out to lunch and would I come too.

‘Yes, all right, is it something special?’

‘I’ll leave Beth to tell you herself. Come down as soon as you’re ready.’

I was in no mood for guessing games. Presumably Beth had got the job in London she had applied for. A higher grade and an opportunity to specialize in group therapy.

I should have applied for it myself, moved right away from the area and returned to the anonymity of London.

I locked my filing cabinet, combed my hair without looking in the mirror, and walked slowly down the stairs.

They were waiting for me in Martin's office. Nick seemed to be running his hand down Beth's stomach. Martin was laughing, taking his jacket off a hook on the back of the door. Just after I entered the room Heather put her head round the door, saw Beth and walked over and kissed her on the cheek, then, when she heard the front door creak open, left to deal with whoever had just come into the building.

'Hi,' said Beth. She was dressed in a short brown skirt with a brown and beige jacket. The blonde streaks in her hair had been transformed into a whole section of pale gold, which contrasted with the darker shade just above her ears.

'What's all this I hear?' I said, trying to sound excited although it came out as false cheerfulness. 'You got the job?'

'Job?' She looked slightly puzzled, then realized nobody had told me the news. 'I'm pregnant, seven weeks gone. Isn't it amazing?'

'Pregnant? But I thought ... '

'I know, we've been trying for ages. I'd practically given up hope.'

'Congratulations.' I gave her a hug. 'I'm really pleased. So you won't be leaving us. Not yet anyway.'

'I shall bring it to work in a basket, or I might invent a new kind of treatment where the clients have to hold a baby as a kind of calming agent.'

Martin snorted. 'You wait.'

Martin had four, two of them non-identical twins. His wife was finding it hard to cope and Martin talked endlessly about sleepless nights, teething, and temper tantrums as though they were the most fascinating subjects in the world. Chris and Bruce were just the same although, to be fair, Chris had hardly mentioned the children on Saturday.

I steeled myself for a jolly lunch-time session in the pub. Nothing alcoholic or none of us would be able to work in the afternoon, although Beth sometimes had 'something to restore her sanity'. She was going to have to give up on the gin and tonics, and the cigarettes. She was going to find it tough. How spiteful I was becoming, although face to face I was as pleasant as can be. Could I help it if mean feelings overcame me before I could censor them out of existence?

The White Hart was as crowded as ever. Nick went to order some food and the rest of us squeezed round a table near the fireplace. Beth was still as high as a kite. She and Martin started discussing whether or not it was a good idea for the father to be present at the birth. Martin thought it was an essential part of the formation of a strong bond between father and child. Normally he tried to avoid jargon but today he was talking like the worst kind of psychologist and Beth was all ears.

'But the actual birth, Martin, isn't it a bit off-putting. I mean afterwards, later on, you know, sexually speaking.'

'I don't see why. Only if the guy's a really screwed-up kind of character.'

'It would put me off,' I said.

'What would?' Beth leaned forward, resting her face on her hands.

'If I was a man.'

'If you were a man,' said Nick returning from the bar, 'we could have a really good time together, you and I.'

Nick was on my side. He had no wish to spend the lunch hour discussing childbirth. But after all we had come specially to celebrate Beth's good news.

'Anyway,' I told Beth, 'you and Dominic must be really thrilled.'

She smiled at me, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. She had been going to say it would be my turn next, then she remembered that David and I had split up, that anything she said would only make things worse.

*

If I stood on a chair by the bedroom window I could see his car, parked fifty yards down the road by the turning into the cul-de-sac. When we were together we had used the path at the end of the road as a short cut up to the suspension bridge, passing the graveyard with its thirty or so stones, speculating about the plague victims who had been buried there over three hundred years ago when they ran out of space in the churchyard. Nobody tended the graves any more, or even scythed the grass. Ivy and buddleia grew everywhere and in the summer the place was full of red admirals. The wrought-iron gates were padlocked but the railings on either side had been pulled out of the ground and twisted over. Stray dogs wandered between the graves. Every so often a group of small boys from the nearby estate played hide and seek amongst the crumbling headstones and statuettes.

With the light from a street-lamp I could just make out the back of David's head. It was moving slightly to the rhythm of one of his CDs.

Music while you wait. I had no idea how long he had been parked there. It was twenty to nine and I doubted if he would have arrived much before eight-thirty, probably later. I went downstairs, counting. If I reached his car before I had taken a hundred steps everything would be all right. Another stupid anxiety-reducing ritual. I tried to confuse myself, ran a series of jumbled numbers through my head, but it made no difference. Sixty-seven, sixty-eight. I walked towards his car, trying to look as relaxed as possible. Seventy-three. He must have seen me in the driving mirror but he pretended to be lost in the music and when I tapped on the window he jumped slightly, then looked up and smiled.

While he was climbing out of the car I glanced up and down the street, half expecting to see Rob, although there had been no sign of him since the incident outside the supermarket. I decided to tell David about it, and about the card. Then I changed my mind, remembering how he had once accused me of encouraging my clients to become totally dependent, then fall in love with me.

We walked up the road, not touching, not saying anything. David was humming whatever he had been listening to in the car. He was wearing grey cords and a black sweater, and carrying a jacket over his arm.

Back at the flat he waited silently in the small hallway, behaving like a guest, not wanting to appear too much at home. Then he followed me to the kitchen, rubbing his hands together.

'I brought you a bottle. Left it in the car. Shall I go and fetch it or would it seem too much like softening you up?'

'With a bottle of wine?'

‘Oh, come on, don’t start — ’ He broke off. ‘No, go ahead, be exactly the way you want to be. I deserve it.’

He was half-way to the front door. ‘As a matter of fact it’s rather good wine, won’t give you a horrible hangover.’

I found two glasses and went and sat in the living room. Where did Iris think he was spending the evening? I decided not to ask. He might say he had told her the truth. I wouldn’t believe him.

The front door was on the latch. I hurried to the bedroom to make sure the curtains were drawn, and to move the chair away from the window. I had no wish for him to find out I had been standing, craning my neck, praying for a glimpse of the green Citroen. Not that David would be coming in the bedroom.

I could hear him returning with the wine, clearing his throat, looking in the kitchen, then the living room, but not calling my name.

A few minutes later I joined him. He was lying on the sofa with his eyes closed. He stretched out a hand.

‘My father’s going to Australia,’ I said.

‘Really? For good?’

‘No, of course not. To visit Steven and Jane. I’m glad. He’ll enjoy seeing the boys. They must both be at school by now. It’s amazing. Time goes so fast.’

I was talking too much. David started making small squeaking noises, like a dog who wants a piece of biscuit.

‘Come here.’ He held out his arms.

I sat down on a chair and cleared my throat.

‘David, I want to know what this is all about.’

‘How d’you mean, what it’s all about?’

‘When we had lunch last — ’

'You got my letter.' His voice was relaxed, almost sleepy, but he was pretending. He had expected me to fall into his arms. I was spoiling things.

'Look, we've got to be honest with each other.'

'Of course.'

'I'll open the wine,' I said, going to the kitchen to find a corkscrew, then returning with two glasses.

David stood up and came towards me. He didn't kiss me, just put his arms round my neck and rested his head on my shoulder.

'God, I've been such a fool. I suppose it was because of Sian. I felt guilty. No, it wasn't Sian. I was confused, needed to get away. Only it doesn't work like that, does it? Anyway, I don't blame you not trusting me. I shall just have to be patient, stick it out, and hope one day ...'

The pulse in my neck was throbbing. It was difficult to breathe properly.

'David.' I tried to put a laugh in my voice but it didn't sound very convincing.

'Anna.'

He kissed me lightly on the lips. 'Come on, just be glad we're together. I love you, you know that. No, don't say anything. That's better.'

'I think we should talk,' I said feebly.

'Not now.'

He sat on the sofa, pulled me down next to him and started whispering in my ear. 'Oh, God, I've been waiting for this moment for ...'

For how long? A week, an hour? But I didn't say anything. I couldn't speak. His hand was stroking the back of my knee, his

finger moved slowly up the inside of my thigh.

‘David — don’t. Please.’

My head was tipped back. His lips brushed against my throat and one of his nails drew a line down the soft skin behind my ear. I shut my eyes and wondered if Karen Plant’s eyes had been closed when the pillow descended on her face — or had it been a cushion? Had she trusted her assailant or had her death been the culmination of a violent quarrel that had lasted for an hour or more?

‘D’you love me?’ David whispered.

I made a half-hearted attempt to wriggle away but he held me like a vice, pushing me down hard.

‘I know you do. Oh, Anna.’

Then nothing mattered. The pain of the past few months, the uncertainty about the future. None of it made any difference. All I knew was what was happening now. I closed my eyes and the darkness enclosed me like a warm protective blanket. My body seemed to flow as though it was boneless, melting. I could feel his breath on my cheek. He raised his body for a moment, then crushed hard against me. I clutched at his hair, twisted it in my hands, and a deep shuddering spasm ran through my body, making me cry out and gasp for breath. David shouted out loud, a shout of triumph. Then he rolled free and sat up, eyes wide open and a big grin on his face.

‘That was nice. Bit quick, but if we give ourselves a moment or two we can do it all over again.’

Chapter Nine

Jenny Weir sat a few feet away from me, head down, fingers locked together. She was my last client of the day and I was feeling pleasantly tired.

Now and again she drew in a breath and opened her mouth as though about to tell me something, then changed her mind. She was teasing me, keeping control.

Most of the time we both remained silent but every so often, in order to relieve the tension I made some comment about how I thought she might be feeling. She was dressed in the same outfit she had worn on the previous two occasions. Perfectly good clothes for a twelve-year-old but Jenny would soon be seventeen.

I decided to give her a summary of the few pieces of information I had acquired, most of them passed on by Dr Ingram in his brief note.

‘You were ill during your summer term in the fifth year, but you went back to school in September and were hoping to take some exams at Christmas.’

She glanced at me with an expression which indicated that I didn’t understand at all.

‘Correct me if I’m wrong, Jenny, but the reason Dr Ingram wanted you to come and see me — he thought you might be depressed or worrying about something. You haven’t been eating very well and you have difficulty getting to sleep at night.’

I paused but she sat quite still, her face as near expressionless as she could manage.

'Of course,' I continued, 'many people don't realize that anxiety and depression are often accompanied by minor psychosomatic symptoms. Headaches, stomach pains, aches in the joints.'

She sighed and I could feel myself becoming a little irritated.

'If you don't tell me there's no way I can understand what's on your mind.'

'You could ask my mother.' The words had slipped out against her better judgement.

'I could, but I'd much rather hear about it from you.'

Silence.

'Are you an only child?'

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

'Yes, I see. Your father then, what does he do?'

'He's dead.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' Why on earth hadn't Dr Ingram told me? 'It must be hard for you and your mother.'

She shrugged. We were making progress of a sort.

'Was it a long time ago — your father?'

'I forget.'

'Does your mother have a job?'

No response.

'Anyway, I'm very sorry about your father. I didn't realize.'

When had the father died? Recently? But surely Dr Ingram would have told me about it. Of course, it could have been ages ago, when Jenny was a baby.

'Look, I know you find it difficult to talk. Lots of people do. They're not used to it. Just tell me about something ordinary. How you spend

your spare time. What kind of books you like reading, what television programmes you — ’

She stood up and yanked her anorak off the hook. She couldn't take any more. I was talking too much, asking irrelevant questions. I felt angry — with myself for not handling the situation better.

‘Look, I'm sorry if I've upset you. You'll come again next week, I hope. Would this time on Tuesday be all right?’

She might have nodded faintly. Really it was impossible to tell.

‘The thing is, Jenny, I don't want us to leave too long between appointments.’

But already she had her hand on the door. She stared at me for a moment, then left, returning briefly to make quite certain the catch had clicked. After a brief pause I heard her walk quickly down the stairs.

I waited a few minutes until I knew she would have left the building, then I ran downstairs to look for Martin. I wanted to catch him before he left, ask if he had any ideas as to how I could persuade Jenny to feel safer and start telling me what was on her mind. Or did I just want someone to talk to?

Heather was coming out of her office with a bundle of folders under her arm.

‘Oh, Anna.’ She extracted a slip of paper from her pocket. ‘Someone phoned from the university. I'm afraid I couldn't catch the name and he rang off before I could ask him to repeat it.’

‘Dr Hughes?’

‘Could have been. I said you'd ring back.’

‘Thanks.’

What did he want? To tell me he had been thinking about my project and it wasn't the kind of thing he wanted to supervise? If I liked he might be able to put me in touch with someone else in the department, or maybe someone at another university...

I picked up the phone in Heather's office and punched out the number. It barely rang before a voice barked: 'Owen Hughes.'

'Hallo. This is Anna McColl. You left a message — '

'Only to let you know — of course you may know already — they have a list in the library. Charitable foundations that occasionally provide funding for research. I don't hold out much hope but there's always a chance.'

'Oh, thanks. Thank you very much.'

'So you'll let me have your proposal as soon as possible.'

'Yes, I will. Thanks.'

But already the line had gone dead.

*

I left work just before six. David was coming round at eight. His daughter, Sian, always spent Thursday evening at a friend's house and Iris was attending a special reception for credit-card holders at one of the department stores.

David had volunteered the information, along with the news that he was moving back into his friend's house at the weekend. Did Iris know about it? Of course. What had she said? Surely, I didn't want to hear the sordid details. But if Iris knew he was moving out why bother to choose an evening when she and Sian would both be out? I didn't ask. It was frustrating, but I knew it was better to leave him to sort things out in his own way.

We had managed to spend the whole evening together without arguing, but also without discussing Iris or Sian. Later we had made love again, slowly, gently, and when David announced around eleven-thirty that he was going home I had made no protest and didn't even complain about the use of the word 'home'.

It was arranged that he would call round the following evening, tonight, and maybe we would go out for an Indian meal. There was no need to make definite plans. We would wait and see what we felt like. On Wednesday we had enjoyed just being together again. Today we would talk. All I knew so far was that although things hadn't worked out between him and Iris and although he loved me passionately, he realized he couldn't just move back in and that, in any case, it would be best for everyone if he lived on his own for a time.

When I reached home I tidied up a bit, checked that there was enough in the fridge to concoct some kind of meal if we decided to stay in, then settled down to work on my research proposal. I needed a definite outline, something I could take into work the following day and type out on the word processor.

I wrote *Hypochondria* at the top of the page and immediately started wondering if it was a sensible topic to have chosen. The doctors I knew hardly ever mentioned the word, although they complained long and loud about what they referred to as 'frequent attenders', and wondered what was the best way to help them — or get rid of them. Perhaps I should forget about hypochondria and do research into the factors leading to frequent attendance. Most doctors would be only too willing to co-operate with such a project.

Jenny Weir had been a frequent attender, still was as far as I knew, although I had made a decision to talk about her medical symptoms as little as possible and concentrate on other aspects of her life.

With a ballpoint that kept threatening to run out I crossed out *Hypochondria* and wrote *Frequent Attenders*. Then I started making sub-headings. *One: A definition of what constitutes a frequent attender. Two: Different types of frequent attenders. Three: Frequent attenders broken down by age, sex, and social class. Four: The prescribing of drugs to frequent attenders.* It was all rather vague, but it was a start. I could show it to Owen Hughes and ask for his comments and suggestions. Surely that was the whole point of having a supervisor. He wouldn't expect me to have worked it all out in detail on my own.

I wrote a new heading. *Frequent Attenders at an Urban Health Centre.* It sounded quite good. I knew the attendance figures. Men consult their doctor an average of three point two times per year. For women the average number of consultations is four. The figures had been used to suggest that women worried more about their health but already I could think of plenty of other reasons for the sex difference. And what effect did people like Jenny and Diane Easby have on the figures? As far as I could tell Jenny had visited Dr Ingram at least once a fortnight, sometimes more often, during the last couple of years. I felt some sympathy for him, but it didn't last more than a moment. After all, he had failed to tell me about her father, and probably about other important events in her life, and his main reason for referring her seemed to be to prove that she was impossible to help. I would serve the purpose of demonstrating that he wasn't the only one to give up on her. Her appointments with me

might mean that she eased up on visits to the surgery, but quite soon she would be back demanding blood tests, referrals to specialists, just the same as before.

But he was wrong. In spite of Jenny's reluctance to talk I felt certain I was starting to get through to her. Eventually she would tell me what was on her mind. It was just a question of being patient, building up trust.

I stood up and stretched my neck which was stiff and painful after sitting hunched up over the coffee-table while I wrote. Crossing the room I pulled back one of the curtains and glanced down at the pavement below. Someone moved quickly out of sight. A man wearing a dark jacket and a knitted hat.

I shouted, 'Wait!' but the window was closed, and in any case whoever it was would be unlikely to hang about waiting for me to go down. If it was Rob I might just manage to catch up with him. I raced to the front door, then realized I had forgotten my key. I could leave the door on the latch, but how long would I be gone? In no time the figure would have disappeared into the darkness. I would have to guess which way he had gone and while I was searching for him anyone might walk into the flat — or David might turn up and wonder where I was.

As I reclosed the door my foot slipped on a piece of paper. I bent down, picked up the picture post card and turned it over. The writing was in neat block capitals. YESTERDAY AT TWO FIFTEEN YOU PARKED OPPOSITE THE OLD PEOPLE'S HOME. AT TEN PAST SIX YOU BOUGHT A CARTON OF MILK AND A LOAF OF BROWN BREAD.

So he was following me. Walking round the area where I worked, watching out for my car. Then turning up again outside my flat, hiding near the supermarket, checking his watch, making a note of the time and the place. Just a few minutes ago he must have crept up the outside stairs, pushed the card through the door, then waited in the shadows to see if I came out and looked for him.

I turned over the card and found a reproduction of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*. A group of Dutch surgeons were bending over a dissected corpse, whose arm seemed to have been neatly skinned, revealing muscles, sinews, and blood. It was typical of Rob Starkey to have chosen such a picture. Or was it? Where was he buying the cards? They were the kind only obtainable from major art galleries. Had he really taken the trouble to travel up to London, and if so how had he been able to afford the fare?

If it wasn't Rob it must be another of my clients. Or someone entirely different. The cards were never addressed to me personally. Perhaps they were intended for the previous occupants of the flat. But I knew there was very little likelihood of that. I decided to show the cards to David after all. He would find them highly amusing and make a few remarks about all my secret admirers, but when he stopped laughing and listened to what I had to say he might have a few ideas about the identity of the sender.

I returned to my notes on frequent attenders and started trying to work out which of the local doctors would be the most likely to allow me to interview his patients. Certainly not Dr Ingram but there were plenty more congenial than he was.

The phone started ringing. I reached across, catching my arm in the flex, pulling the base of the instrument to the floor, but managing

to retrieve it before I cut off the call.

'Yes?'

There was a momentary pause.

'Anna? You sound a bit fraught.'

'Not really. I dropped the phone.'

David coughed loudly, ending up with a kind of dry wheeze. 'Look, I'm not feeling too good.'

'Oh.'

'I think it's only a cold but it could be flu. Anyway, I don't want to pass it on to you.'

I wanted to say I didn't mind, to beg him to come round just the same. But I managed to stop myself. 'Right, well you'd better go to bed early.'

'You're angry.'

'No, of course I'm not.'

'I can tell. Look, I'll give you a ring in a day or two.'

'All right. Fine. I hope you'll feel better soon.'

'I love you.'

'I love you too.'

'You don't sound too sure.'

'Sorry, it's just that I keep getting these anonymous post cards.'

'Really?' His croaky voice seemed to have righted itself.

'It's not important. Just an ex-client or something.'

'Poor old you, but I'm sure you can handle it.'

'Oh, by the way, David?' I was trying to stop him ringing off. 'That time you went out for a drink with Bruce ... '

'What about it? That was months ago.'

'Yes, I know. I just wondered, you're sure he didn't mention someone called Karen?'

'Not as far as I can remember.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Right, well, see you soon. Take care.'

I replaced the phone, slowly, carefully, feeling the dampness of my palm on the cold plastic. Iris had come back into the house. I could tell. He had heard the front door and finished the call as quickly as possible. He wouldn't move out at the weekend, he wouldn't be well enough.

Picking up the post card which had fallen on the carpet when I answered the phone, I wondered, just for an instant, if David had pushed it through the door. It was a game, the picture was a joke, the description of my movements was a way of letting me know that, in spite of everything that had happened, he was as obsessed with me as I was with him.

Wishful thinking again. Of course it wasn't David. I picked up the wine bottle that had rolled behind the sofa and lifted it to my lips, just as Chris had done with her medium dry sherry. The trickle missed my mouth, ran down by chin, and dripped on to the collar of my shirt like thin red blood.

Chapter Ten

On my way out of the building I bumped into Martin. It was the first time I had seen him that day. He had a sticking plaster over his left eyebrow and was looking extremely sorry for himself.

‘What happened? Been beaten up by a client?’

He didn’t laugh. ‘One of the twins. Threw a piece of her building set, caught me on the eye. Bloody agony.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘No, you’re not. Anyway, where are you going?’

‘Diane Easby, the one I told you about. Sycamore Road. Things seem to have got out of hand. Something to do with her husband. She’s shrieking and yelling, demanding I go round there at once.’

‘Keep well out. Phone her social worker.’

‘I don’t think she’s got one. Anyway I’d better see what’s going on. I don’t mind, I can do it on my way home.’

Martin pulled a face. ‘Rather you than me.’

‘Oh, Martin?’ I was half-way through the door but I had to tell him.

‘You know my research project?’

‘What about it? D’you need any help — ’

‘Owen Hughes actually phoned to give me some advice about funding. He sounded quite keen.’

‘I’ll bet he did. It’s good for their careers to collect a group of research students. Might lead to publications in the journals. His name at the top, yours at the bottom. Get it?’

My high spirits evaporated and as I walked across the car park I regretted allowing Diane Easby to talk me into visiting her at home. What did her marital problems have to do with the reason for her referral? First her brother, then her washing machine, now it was something entirely different. On the other hand, I despised psychologists who stuck rigidly to the first presenting problem regardless of everything else that was going on in the client's life.

I had never visited that part of the city before but Diane had given me instructions, barely audible against the noise of a screaming child.

Up Gloucester Road, right by that pub with an eagle on the sign, left along Beech Avenue, then first on the left. Uneven numbers were on the right-hand side. Her house was number seventeen.

I drove slowly, unwilling to arrive too soon. It was three days since David had phoned saying he had flu. I had decided to take his explanation at face value rather than indulge in pointless speculation. It was easier said than done. Was he back at work by now, planning to phone but putting it off until his business affairs had been attended to? He would know I was worried, upset, but the longer he waited the greater the intensity of our reunion. Everything on a knife edge, exciting, precarious, exhausting. Just the way he liked it.

I almost missed the turning by the pub. Slowing down I glanced at the scribbled instructions I had left on the passenger seat. Beech Avenue, then first on the left into Sycamore Road.

The houses had pebble-dash fronts, some of them painted a pastel shade, others still their original dingy grey. Council estates where some of the houses have been sold to their tenants are easily

recognizable. New front doors and neat front gardens mark out the owner-occupiers. Those still paying rent lack the motivation even to trim the privet hedge. But perhaps I was just jumping to conclusions. Number eleven, thirteen, fifteen. I pulled up outside seventeen, which still had its downstairs curtains drawn.

When I stepped out of the car a Jack Russell terrier approached me, barking and growling. I stretched out my hand and it ran off again, pausing to cock its leg against the wall, then crossing the road and disappearing behind a collection of hydrangeas, still bushy with last year's dead paper-thin flower heads.

The path up to Diane's house was littered with soggy newspaper, a crushed can of Diet Coke, several polythene bags, and a deflated plastic football. There was no doorbell or knocker but Diane's face peered out from a bedroom window and I heard her running down the stairs, shouting at the child to stay where it was.

'Thank God you come.' She wrenched open the front door, which scraped along the ground, and I squeezed through the crack. 'It's always the same when it rains.'

Did she mean the door or her family life? A small child was coming down the stairs backwards. Part of its nappy had come adrift and was threatening to catch in its foot. I went to meet it, lifting it up and carrying it into the front room, where Diane had already settled herself on a brown and white check sofa-bed.

'Sorry to inconvenience you, love, only I had no one else to turn to.'

'What's happened exactly? Your husband's — '

'I told him to clear off.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Better off without him.' She stood up and started searching in a cupboard next to the television stand. 'Still in nappies, this one. Drives me insane. The doctor threatened to send the health visitor. No, thanks, I said, I've trouble enough without that cow poking her whatsit into my affairs.'

She tugged at the waistband of her jeans. 'Look, I've lost pounds these last few months.'

'Yes, I can see.'

She was wearing no make-up and her hair looked darker as though she hadn't bothered to wash it for several days. The child had wriggled free from my knee and was sitting in a corner sucking part of a toy machine-gun.

'You must be Siobhan,' I said, leaning in her direction and picking up a toy dog with large goggling eyes.

'That's right,' said Diane, snatching at the child and pulling down her damp knickers, which she threw towards the fireplace. 'Nice of you to come. Don't know why I phoned you really. Oh, it was because of my appointment. That's what the row was about, see. Alan said he had to sign on. I wanted him to stay with Siobhan.'

'Alan's out of work?'

'Oh, didn't I tell you? Bloody murder it's going to be. No money and him under my feet all day long.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Thing is, we get on all right if he's away half the week. Makes sense doesn't it. More to talk about when he comes back, only of course he don't tell me the half of it.' She paused to make sure I had understood.

‘To be honest I don’t think he bothers. Other birds. It was sex that got us together in the first place. Still good when we’re in the right mood.’

I smiled and she grinned back. She had pulled Siobhan on to her lap and taken hold of one of her small sticky hands. ‘Round and round the garden like a teddy bear. Upstairs, downstairs — ’

Siobhan laughed, then struggled to get down.

‘Oh sod off, you little bugger.’

Diane plonked the child on the floor, rather too firmly, although Siobhan raised no objection.

‘Makes up for the rest don’t it — if the sex is good.’

‘Yes, yes it does.’

Siobhan was balancing herself by clutching at my skirt with a hand that seemed to have small pieces of a red boiled sweet between each finger.

‘Of course, when Alan’s at a loose end like now the tension builds up in him. Stress, it’s called. Well, I don’t have to tell you. Not that he’s ever what you’d call violent, but he threatens.’

‘Threatens you?’

‘Sometimes. Mostly it’s what he’d like to do to people like you. Anyway I was half-way down the road on my way to see you when he ran after me, said if I went out Siobhan would be left alone in the house and if the place caught fire it’d be my fault.’

‘Couldn’t he have taken her with him?’

‘Exactly. That’s what I said. But he done it before and they had to wait over an hour because of a form that needed filling in or something and she went berserk, kicked a woman on the ankle.’

‘Oh, dear.’

'That's not what Alan said. Anyway, I was wondering if you did marriage guidance. If he comes back, I mean, which I know he will seeing as how he's got nowhere else to go.'

My heart sank. 'If you think it would help.'

'Oh, I'm sure it would.' She leaned forward, smiling warmly as she reached for a packet of cigarettes on top of the video-recorder. 'Now you know where I live we'll be more like friends.'

I nodded, opened my mouth to say something encouraging, but she hadn't finished.

'Oh, I know we're not really friends. It's what they call a professional relationship. Best that way. Of course, the social worker pretended she was a proper friend.'

'You have a social worker?'

'Not now I haven't. Been waiting for a replacement but I expect they've forgotten I exist.'

'Who was it? If you like I could get in touch with Social Services.'

I hoped she didn't think I was trying to shift the responsibility but from the look on her face no such thought had entered her head.

'Don't bother, love, I'm much better off with you. You're a bit older, see, more mature. Besides the evil cow tried to have the kids put in care. Bloody cheek, she was no more than a kid herself. Alan couldn't stand her. I had to keep him out of her way. Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, that's what he said. Still, mustn't speak evil of the dead. Nobody deserves to be done in like that, not in their own home.'

'Your social worker was Karen Plant?'

'Didn't I tell you? Must have done. No, I was talking about Keith, wasn't I. Poor little bugger, although I sometimes think he's better off

out of it.'

It was time to leave. 'I tell you what,' I said, standing up and removing Siobhan's hand from my leg. 'Come the same time as usual and bring Alan with you. Your friend could have Siobhan for an hour or so, couldn't she?'

'I don't know. If not I'll bring her with me.'

'Yes. Well, try to come on your own, just the two of you, but if it's quite impossible ... Oh, Diane?' I tried to sound as though what I was going to say was of no real importance. 'You didn't send me a post card, did you?'

'Let's have a look.'

Her response threw me for a moment. 'I haven't got it with me. It's just that whoever sent it forgot to put their name.'

'Funny thing to do. Anyway I don't know your address.'

'It's in the book.'

'What did it say — the card?'

'Oh, nothing much. It had a picture, a reproduction of a painting.'

'What of?'

'Oh, I forget. A woman.'

We stared at each other for a moment. Was she trying not to smile, or was it just that her mouth turned up at the corners naturally? Her eyes were as bright as ever, even without the thick black mascara. I was the first to look away.

*

On my way home I wondered why Diane had thought Karen Plant wanted to have the children taken into care. It was true that she seemed rather inconsistent in the way she behaved towards Siobhan, but surely she was no worse than thousands of other

mothers. Had there been evidence of non-accidental injuries, either to Siobhan or to Lisa? Perhaps I should get in touch with Social Services, but then if Diane found out she would know I was checking up on her and any trust that had been built up would be destroyed. Besides, although Siobhan had been damp and rather grubby, she showed no sign of bruises and seemed quite a happy, contented child.

When I arrived back at the flat the phone started ringing before I had taken my coat off.

'Hallo.'

'Anna? It's me, Chris.' Her voice had an ominous wheedling tone. 'Look, I know it's terribly short notice, but could you possibly baby-sit, just for a couple of hours?'

'When? Now?'

'D'you mind? Only Bruce has been interviewing this man from Manchester. His wife came down with him and he wants us all to go out for dinner.'

'I've only just got home.'

'I know. I tried to reach you earlier, even thought of ringing your office except I've lost the number.'

'I would have come but I'm feeling absolutely whacked and I think I'm getting a cold.'

'Nice warm fire. TV supper in the fridge.'

I almost gave in. 'Look, if you can't find anyone else.'

'No, it doesn't matter. Just forget I called. See you.'

I sat down and kicked off my shoes. I could imagine her telling Bruce what she thought of me. How I usually enjoyed seeing the children, how she didn't know what on earth had got into me lately.

How she knew I was missing David but surely an evening in a different house would have made a pleasant change.

I sighed. As a punishment for my dishonesty I could feel a scratchiness in my throat. The beginning of a real cold or the power of suggestion? Perhaps David had been speaking the truth when he said he had flu. Perhaps it was a particularly virulent strain and that was the reason he still hadn't phoned.

The flat felt cold. In a masochistic effort to economize I had turned down the heating and set the timer to come on too late to warm it up properly before I came home. I stood up and went out into the passage to adjust the thermostat, then on into the kitchen to check if I had any food, if I would have to go out again and buy more milk.

Something was wrong. I could sense it. Someone had been in the room. But when I looked more closely everything was exactly as I had left it. Breakfast things cleared away on to the draining board, empty cereal packet on the side because it was too large to fit in the pedal bin.

On the windowsill above the sink a small pool of water threatened to run over the edge and drip on to the floor. I must have run the tap too hard and the water had splashed up out of the bowl. Then I noticed the green and white saucer where a small succulent rested in its earthenware pot.

Succulents like to dry out in the winter. All they need is a drop or two of water very occasionally. I touched the earth with the tip of my finger. It was sodden.

While I was away in September — a brief holiday with David in Anglesey — I had given Chris a key and asked her to look in if the weather was hot and the plants in danger of drying out. As far as I

knew she had forgotten all about it and, in any case, the weather had been cool, overcast. David had soon grown bored with looking round the island and we had started back early, stopping off for a night in Aberystwyth, then returning home the following day. It seemed an age ago.

Lifting up the plant pot I tipped the water out of the saucer, then held the succulent over the sink so that some of the moisture could drain away. My hand was shaking and my stomach had contracted into a tight aching knot.

I thought of phoning Chris to ask if she still had the key, then remembered she was going out — if she could find a baby-sitter. If she hadn't managed to find anyone, phoning her now would be a big mistake and, even if neither of us could remember her returning the key, I could hardly accuse her of prowling round my flat while I was out at work. Of course, if she had been round that would account for the coffee mug in the sink. And the peach tissue? But how could it be Chris? She had Barnaby with her all day and what possible reason would she have for wanting to spend time in my flat?

Iris. It must be Iris, looking for clues that David had been to see me. But why would she have watered the plant? The last thing she would want was for me to guess she had been checking up. If Iris had been in the flat she would have taken trouble to leave no trace of her presence. A small ripple of fear ran down my back. Whoever it was wanted me to know there had been an intruder in my home.

I switched on a ring of the electric cooker, half-filled a pan with water, and put it on to heat. Boil-in-the-bag lamb curry with a small bag of rice to accompany it. Maybe I hadn't been concentrating too well during the past few weeks but I was not in the first stage of pre-

senile dementia. It was Rob. There was no way he could have got hold of a key but no doubt he was an expert at opening front doors with a piece of plastic. That meant there was little point in having the lock changed and, in any case, if I changed the lock and the intruder stopped coming, I would never know for certain who it had been. After a time I would believe I had imagined the whole thing, dropped the tissue myself, used the coffee mug without thinking, even watered the plant automatically, forgetting it was still only March.

Walking briskly into the living room I lifted the phone, then thought about whose number to ring. Not Chris. Not David. Martin? But what was the point? He would assume I was over-tired, overwrought. Against a background of squabbling children he would reassure me there was nothing to worry about. If that failed he would suggest the police.

I could just imagine the scene at the police station.

‘A plant had been watered, madam? In your flat, while you were out at work. Yes, well, if you’d like me to take down the details ...’

I didn’t need the police. I didn’t need Martin. I could sort it all out for myself and in the mean time I would do something I had been putting off for several days.

Sitting on the arm of a chair, breathing in and out slowly, deeply, I punched out the familiar number, prepared myself to sound happy, cheerful, without a care in the world, and waited for my father to come on the line.

Chapter Eleven

When Jenny failed to turn up for her appointment I was disappointed.

It was always the same. Just when you thought you were getting somewhere, breaking through the armour plating, the client opted out. Sometimes for good, although a tactful note offering another appointment occasionally did the trick. I waited twenty minutes in case she had been held up for some reason, then decided to phone Chris and try to straighten things out between us.

As I listened to the ringing I could feel my pulse rate quicken. Surely I wasn't frightened of Chris. Maybe I was afraid of my own anger at her lack of consideration, her failure to acknowledge that it was unreasonable to expect me to rush round with only five minutes' notice. The ringing stopped but no voice came on the line.

'Chris?'

'Oh, hallo. Hang on a minute.'

She sounded just the same as usual, apart from being surprised to hear from me in the middle of the morning. I could hear voices in the distance, then after several minutes she returned.

'Sorry about all that. There's a man looking at the boiler.' She lowered her voice. 'Actually it's about all he is doing. Doesn't seem to have a clue.'

'Oh, dear, what's happened to it?'

'God knows. There's always something going wrong in this house. Anyway, what can I do for you?'

'I was just phoning to apologize for not baby-sitting.'

'Oh, don't be silly. I didn't want to go anyway. If I sounded grumpy it was because Bruce had been on and on at me.'

'You couldn't find another baby-sitter?'

'Didn't even try. He went on his own and had a really boring evening by the sound of it.'

Her words were so convincing. Was I imagining the resentment in her voice?

'Come round after work if you feel like it,' she said. 'The children will be here but I'll sit them in front of the telly and you can tell me about David.'

'Nothing to say, but I might drop round.'

'Suit yourself,' she said with mock affront. 'See you, Anna, and thanks for ringing.'

'Oh, by the way,' I said.

'Yes?'

'You know when I was away on holiday last September?'

'What about it?'

'It's just that I've lost my spare door key and I wondered if you still had —'

'The key to your flat?' Her voice was a high-pitched squeal. 'I gave it back to you the day you came back. You gave me that tin of biscuits — "A Present from Wales" — and I gave you the bloody key.'

'Oh, yes, I remember. Sorry. See you later then. Bye.' I had attached the key to a long piece of string. That way if she shoved it in her kitchen drawer along with a million other things she would still be able to find it. She sounded so certain she had returned it. Why was I unconvinced? Precisely because she was so certain? Because

Chris could never remember unimportant events like returning a key. Yet she had described the swap over — biscuits for key — as though it had happened yesterday.

Later I would search the flat, look in every drawer, every pocket. After David moved in I had given him the spare key, then had another one cut — for emergencies. If Chris had given it back, complete with its string, it shouldn't be too difficult to find. I had no recollection of having seen it but it's easy to overlook familiar objects, far easier than spotting something unfamiliar ... Heather put her head round my door.

'Anna, your client's here. I met her coming out of the cloakroom. Shall I send her up?'

'Jenny? Oh, yes. Thanks. No, hang on, I'll come down and collect her.'

I found Jenny hovering by the waiting-room door. She heard me coming but didn't turn round.

'Sorry, Jenny, I didn't realize you were here.'

She gave no explanation as to why she had arrived nearly forty minutes late, just waited for me to start back up the stairs, then followed a few yards behind.

Once inside my room she sat down and folded her hands on her lap.

'Well,' I said, 'what's been happening to you?'

She chewed her lip and I realized she thought I was complaining because she had arrived late.

'I meant since we last met. Have you been out anywhere, done anything interesting?'

It was a stupid question. I was talking too much instead of waiting to pick up her mood. All the same, we had to start somewhere and she was unlikely to begin the conversation.

She stared through the window. 'My father's not dead,' she whispered, 'he just went to live with another woman.'

'Oh, I see.'

'I thought you might tell Mum.'

'I'd never talk to her behind your back.'

She turned to face me. 'Oh, I don't care about that. I tell her everything. Only she gets upset.'

'About your father?'

'No, about me. I thought she might think I'd made it up about Dad because I wished he was dead.'

'And do you?'

She screwed up her face. 'What? Of course not.'

I had angered her again. 'Look,' I said, 'all I meant was that it's sometimes easier to accept that someone's died rather than that they chose to leave.'

She thought about this for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders. 'Actually he might as well be dead. It makes no difference to me.'

It was our longest real conversation so far. I tried to convey, without words, that I appreciated the effort it had cost her. She was watching me intently, then suddenly she blinked several times and looked away.

'It's difficult for you coming here,' I said.

'No, I don't mind, it's just that I don't know what to say.'

'Say whatever comes into your head.'

She thought about that. 'What would be the point?'

‘Well, one thing leads to another. We all have to start somewhere.’

She looked at her watch. She could only take small doses of me at a time.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘these visits are for you. Just stay as long as you want to and leave when you’ve had enough.’

I was aware that part of her wanted to do the opposite to what was expected of her. Now I had made that impossible. But she found a way out.

‘I’d prefer it if you decided.’

‘All right, I will. Stay for another five minutes or so. Just sit quietly and then, if you want to tell me about something ... ’

She looked so worried, as though every decision, no matter how small, was a matter of life and death. ‘I can’t think of anything.’

I smiled. ‘Never mind. Would you prefer it if I asked you a few questions, or shall we wait until you think of something you’d like to talk about?’

‘You can ask things if you like.’

‘Right you are. What’s your favourite food?’

‘How is telling you that going to stop me having headaches?’

‘It isn’t. I just want to get to know you.’

‘Melon. The ones that are orange inside.’

‘Right. Yes, I like those. Have you any pets? A dog or a cat?’

She shook her head.

‘What would you like to do best? If you won the football pools or your premium bond came up? Go on some exotic holiday? Buy yourself — ’

‘I’d keep the money in the bank.’

‘Oh, yes, well, I suppose that’s the sensible thing to do.’

I didn't want to sound patronizing, treat her like a child, but in some ways that was exactly what she was. I glanced at my clock and realized that her time was almost up. How typical that she should arrive so late, then start talking for the first time, and now we would have to stop. I could let her run over the hour, but that was a mistake I had made in the past and all that had happened was that the client turned up late the next time and did the same thing all over again.

'We'll have to stop now, Jenny, but I'm really glad you seem to be feeling a little better.'

Her eyes flicked sideways as though I was jumping to conclusions.

'Anyway,' I said, standing up and helping her into her coat. 'I'll see you on Friday. Take care.'

*

The sun had come out. I decided to spend my lunch hour shopping for a few odds and ends, then walk round the park and try to piece together any stray pieces of information that might help me to work out who it was that was determined to undermine my peace of mind.

The supermarket was crowded. I gathered together the six items which would allow me to go through the 'quick' cash till. Milk, bread, bananas, a packet of biscuits, some hair conditioner, and a ham roll.

The boy on the till had a name tag on his jacket. Darren Coigley. He also had spots and a stud in one ear. I smiled at him but he didn't smile back. He reminded me of Steven at about the same age, except he looked more confident, more experienced in every sense of the word.

Outside in the street I hesitated, wondering whether to drive to Broadmead. But what was the point? David's office was quite nearby, in a street up behind the Hippodrome, but he was unlikely to

be wandering round the shopping centre during his lunch hour. In any case, I had no intention of seeking him out. It was now six days since he had phoned to cancel our meeting. Did flu ever last that long? Or was it just that he needed time? Time to finish things with Iris and move back in with the osteopath. Breathing space. Then he would get in touch.

The traffic was heavy and I had to wait several minutes before it was safe to cross. Maybe I would forget about the park, go straight back to work, and sit in Heather's office having a cup of coffee.

I was walking behind a man dressed in a Russian-style fur hat and a baggy grey suit. He was carrying a battered briefcase in one hand and a paper bag in the other, and looked as though he was on his way to feed the squirrels. I decided to follow. The paper bag had brought back memories. My mother storing up stale bread and indigestible crusts. Me, aged five or six, wrapped up warm in a brown coat, blue scarf, and hat, standing by the edge of the lake hurling bread with all my strength, half afraid the ducks would come out of the water and snatch it out of my hand. My mother laughing, always laughing. 'Come on, what a long face, cheer up, life's too short.' Hers was, she was only fifty-seven.

It takes many months to move through the stages of loss. That's what the books say. First shock, numbness, disbelief. Then denial, a defence against feeling too much pain, a time when the dead person seems to be there in the room. My mother, calling to me and Steven playing the garden, her voice carried away by the wind.

Later the denial gives way to depression — and guilt that the death could have been avoided, that more time should have been given to the dead person, more kindness and consideration. Other feelings

crowd in. Anxiety about losing control, anger — with God, the gods, Fate. Finally, some kind of resolution, acceptance. The beginnings of reorganizing a life without the missing person.

Was someone mourning the death of Karen Plant, or had no one been that close to her? And my father. What feelings had he been going through? Anger, loneliness, despair. I, myself, seemed to be stuck in a stage of morbid anxiety, imagining all kinds of threats to my wellbeing. But in my heart of hearts I knew that much as I had loved my mother her death had not shattered my way of life. I was clutching at straws, trying to turn hard undeniable facts into psychological phenomena going on in my head. I was being ridiculous.

I sat down on a dampish wooden seat and peeled the clingfilm from my lunch. A crisp roll, the kind that disintegrates when you try to take a bite. I preferred soft rolls but David liked crisp ones so I had got in the habit of buying them. Anyway, I had no appetite. Lifting out the ham I ate it in one mouthful, then stood up and started walking.

The man with the fur hat had moved off, but a woman was standing very still, staring up into the branches of a chestnut tree. She was tall, big-boned, elegant in a slightly old-fashioned way. Probably in her early forties, with brown frizzy hair that stuck out like a bush and was almost certainly natural. As I walked past she looked up, smiled a little, then rested the palm of her hand on the bark of the tree.

I sighed. The park had been a stupid idea. It reminded me of Sunday afternoons with David, early on when we had known each other only a few weeks, when just being with him was so incredible that quite ordinary things had seemed greener, brighter. At the weekend we had driven out of Bristol, visiting places that until

recently had only been names on a map. Wells, Glastonbury, Bourton-on-the-Water, Stow-on-the-Wold. Sometimes over the Severn Bridge into South Wales, then on to the Forest of Dean ...

I felt a hand on my sleeve.

'Excuse me, I do hope you don't mind me introducing myself, but I'm Mrs Weir, Jenny's mother.'

It was the tall, elegant woman, who had caught up with me as I crossed the grass. I groaned inwardly. This was the last thing Jenny needed, her mother trying to muscle in on her treatment, interfere, spoil things.

'Jenny pointed you out to me. Last Saturday outside the library. Only I wanted to thank you.'

I smiled, just enough to be friendly but not so much that it would encourage her to start asking questions.

'Jenny seems so much better,' she said, 'I only wish she'd been referred to you long ago.'

'Thank you.' I was surprised but managed not to show it.

'She talks about you all the time.' She shifted from one foot to another. 'I expect she told you I work part-time at the Student Counselling Service.'

'Really?'

'Only as a receptionist, but it's very interesting, and of course it means I understand the need for absolute confidentiality.'

'Yes, of course.' I relaxed a little. She didn't want to interfere, just to let me know she too was concerned for Jenny's welfare.

'Well, I won't keep you.' She started moving away and I was afraid I had been too brusque.

‘Look, I’m glad we’ve met,’ I said, ‘especially since you know about counselling and — ’

She took a few steps back towards me. ‘Yes. As a matter of fact I’d love to train as a counsellor myself but I’m afraid it’s much too late for that.’

‘Oh, I don’t see why. What’s needed is people with experience of life, not academic qualifications.’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’ She looked a little sad. ‘Should I tell Jenny we’ve met?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have introduced myself.’

‘No, I’m glad you did. It might make things easier for Jenny in the long run. Not so formal, intimidating.’ I was putting it badly. ‘I mean, it makes a link between her home and coming to see me.’

She thought about that for a moment. ‘Yes, I see what you mean. Anyway, thank you for all you’re doing for her. Goodbye.’

I watched as she walked away in the direction of the main road. I tried to remember where Jenny lived. One of the roads up near the Prison? Mrs Weir probably visited the park most days — unless she was working at the Counselling Service. It was pure chance we had bumped into one another but not all that surprising since there were not that many open spaces close by.

Suddenly I longed for the anonymity of London. The noise, everyone in a hurry, the feeling of being carried along by a great mass of people. Kit? No, I didn’t miss Kit. At least that had been the right decision.

Retracing my path back across the grass I tried to concentrate on Jenny Weir and her mother, wondering why they both looked so sad.

When had Jenny's father left? Why hadn't Dr Ingram told me about it?

It was no good. I couldn't keep David out of my mind. Another set of questions. What had he said to Iris? What kind of a relationship did he have with her? For a moment I felt a twinge of pity for the woman — but it didn't last long. I imagined the pair of them settling back into the familiar routine. David recovering from his bout of flu, feeling sorry for himself, enjoying being looked after, mothered. The night he came round had changed nothing. He missed me, that part was probably true, but his main aim had been to test me out, make sure he still had me dangling on a string.

Ten minutes later as I passed the swimming baths I saw two figures standing together at the far end of a narrow alleyway. I recognized the man at once, the long thin legs and leather jacket, the jet-black hair. Although he was only in his twenties Rob was terrified of going grey. Once he had pulled out a hair and brought it to show me, and when I told him everyone has the occasional white hair he had shaken his head as though it was the beginning of the end.

I wanted to march up to him, ask why he kept pestering me and watch his face to see how he reacted. But now was not the right time or place; and supposing he was innocent? I would look thoroughly stupid and I might even put ideas into his head.

He was deep in conversation and far too preoccupied to notice me passing by. The other figure was small, slight. I couldn't see the face properly but it looked like a girl. I hoped it was a girl. If he had found himself a girlfriend he would soon lose interest in me. As quickly as he had started he would stop hanging about outside my flat and

following me round the town. There would be no point in pestering me with picture post cards, full of death and degradation, no point in breaking into my flat and leaving absurd reminders of his presence. At last he would leave me in peace.

Chapter Twelve

It was four o'clock, time for Mrs Hillman's weekly appointment. I flinched, not because I disliked Mrs Hillman but because she was so honest about her feelings and because her situation was painfully similar to my own. We had arranged to have six sessions with the aim of helping her to make up her mind what she wanted to do.

She arrived dead on time, smartly dressed in a navy suit and a pale blue shirt. She had come straight from her job as a buyer for one of the department stores and she was eager not to waste a moment of her session. I asked her how she was feeling and she raised her eyes to heaven, then started describing her week.

She had been having an affair with Barry for nearly five years. He had absolutely promised to leave his wife when the boys were grown up but still he prevaricated. Mrs Hillman had had enough. But she couldn't break free. She knew she was being stupid. She despised herself. She wanted to kill him.

'I know how you feel,' I said.

'Do you? The thing is I've put so much into the relationship, wasted so much time. I'm nearly forty-six, you'd think I'd have learned some common sense.'

What she meant was, at forty-six did she have any hope of finding someone else? Widowed in her late thirties she had shut herself away with her two teenage boys then, after a year or two, realized she would have to make an effort on her own behalf. She had joined

clubs, done all the right things. Wasn't it typical that the man she had fallen for was someone at work? And married — of course.

'Perhaps you could make a time limit,' I said, realizing immediately I was thinking about myself.

'Yes I know.'

'I mean, make it for yourself. You needn't tell Barry.'

She stopped herself from sighing. 'What good will that do?'

'It will give you back your self-respect. Stop you feeling humiliated.'

'Yes, I see.' Her face brightened. 'And then he'll like me better. I won't be so sorry for myself. Men always find that unattractive.'

What could I say? She started telling me again about the time he had lied to her about how he and his wife slept in different rooms. I listened with half an ear, tried to concentrate, but kept thinking about the key on a string which had failed to materialize after a rigorous search through all my cupboards and drawers. But even if Chris still had it I could think of no possible reason why she would want to spend time in my flat.

'Sorry,' I said, 'I was listening. I just —'

'Don't worry,' Mrs Hillman smiled reassuringly. 'I don't know how you stand your job. You must be as strong as a horse.'

After she left I found a note attached to the door. It was from Heather, who had gone home early to take her daughter to the orthodontist. *Bruce phoned. Please would you call him back.*

I returned to my desk, rang the Housing Department and asked for Bruce's extension. A secretary told me to hang on, he was on the other line. After two or three minutes I heard him pick up the phone and clear his throat.

'Yes.' He sounded tired, strained.

'It's Anna.'

'Oh, Anna, sorry to keep you waiting. I meant to ring you before but you know how it is.' So Chris had passed on the message after all. 'Karen Plant — you needed some information.'

'Not needed exactly, Bruce, but it might help. Someone I've been seeing at work.'

'Yes, I see. I'm not certain I'll be able to tell you anything more than you must have read in the paper.'

'Actually, Bruce, I was wondering if you knew anything about her flat-mate.'

'Flat-mate?' He was playing for time, pretending to sound surprised.

'It said in the paper her name was Fleur something. I just wondered ...'

I heard him draw in breath. 'Yes, that's right. What did you want to know? She's a student at the university. Computer Science. I remember Karen was worried about her, thought she wasn't fitting in too well.'

I felt I owed him an explanation. 'The thing is I've been seeing someone who thinks Keith Merchant was innocent.'

There was silence at the other end of the line. Only for a moment or two but phone calls always accentuate the importance of silences.

'I'm not taking it very seriously,' I said. 'It's a relative so it's understandable she'd like to clear his name.'

'Yes, I see. I don't think there was much doubt that he did it. To tell you the truth I only met Karen once or twice, although I spoke to her on the phone now and again. She was very conscientious, tended to become over-involved.'

‘Don’t we all.’

‘Yes, I know, but Karen was — well, I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, but she was pretty neurotic. You know, over-anxious, the kind of person who keeps their house ultra-tidy, doesn’t like people messing up the cushions.’

What was he trying to tell me? To leave well alone? That Karen was a born victim who had brought it on herself?

‘Yes, well thanks, Bruce.’

‘She was a strange person, not all that easy to get on with, I imagine.’ He drew in another deep breath. ‘Oh, Anna.’ He was trying to sound nonchalant while really telling me something rather important. ‘D’you mind not talking to Chris about it, only she was pretty upset when it happened.’

‘Really?’

‘I suppose she thought it could’ve been me. Unstable clients, people holding grudges because you can’t give them what they want. She got herself in a bit of a state.’

‘That doesn’t sound like Chris.’

‘No.’ There was another silence. I decided to help him out.

‘Anyway, let’s just forget all about it, right? I’ll see you soon. Meanwhile pretend I never asked and of course I won’t mention it to Chris.’

‘Thanks. Oh, incidentally, the flat-mate moved out after it happened so it’s no good going round to where they lived. Right then. I’d better go. Bye, Anna.’

‘Bye, Bruce.’

I was thinking about what Bruce had told me when the phone rang. I assumed he was calling back with more information or another

warning not to tell Chris about our conversation.

'Yes. Hallo.'

'Is that Anna McColl?'

'Speaking.'

'This is Owen Hughes. Psych. Unit. There's a seminar next Tuesday, four fifteen. Visiting speaker coming to talk about Munchausen's Syndrome. I just thought you might be interested.'

'Oh, yes. Yes, I would. Thanks very much.'

I wanted to ask where the seminar would be held but he rang off before I could ask. Still, presumably I would find out if I turned up in plenty of time.

Munchausen's Syndrome. A condition describing a small group of people who like having operations. Some of them travel round the country, feigning violent stomach pains. They're taken into hospital, opened up for investigation, and it's only when the scars on their abdomen start to mount up that doctors become suspicious and start checking round. Some people think they're crazy but I've always had a certain amount of sympathy. Maybe it's only in hospital that anyone pays them any attention.

Owen Hughes' call had cheered me up. I was humming to myself as I ran down the stairs and out into the car park.

'You're cheerful,' said Beth, easing herself into the driving seat of her Fiat as though she was eight months pregnant instead of eight weeks.

I grinned. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fantastic.'

'Not being sick?'

'A bit, but that's all part of the fun.'

During the short drive home my good mood began to evaporate. The flat always felt so empty and it even occurred to me that my secret intruder might be an invention in my mind. I was missing David. The intruder was a substitute. For a moment or two I almost convinced myself the theory was a plausible one.

Picking up a couple of letters that had come in the second post I carried them into the kitchen and put them on the table while I filled the kettle.

One was a telephone bill, the other a post card covered in familiar block capitals. YESTERDAY YOU VISITED THE CHEMIST'S. THEN YOU BOUGHT A NEWSPAPER, A BIRTHDAY CARD, AND A TUBE OF MINTS.

I swallowed hard. It was true. Whoever had sent the post card must have been standing quite close by. I had no recollection whatever of any of the other shoppers but surely I would have noticed him. I tried to recreate the situation in my mind. In the chemist's, handing over bath oil and a green sponge, looking in my purse for change. There was a girl behind the counter. Young with dyed blonde hair. Or was I thinking of the girl in the newsagent's? I had been in a hurry, worried about being late back after spending my lunch hour at the hairdresser's.

I turned the card over and found a reproduction of Picasso's *Woman in an Armchair*. She lay head thrown back, mouth gaping. Her rubbery elongated limbs entwined the chair, a mane of hair stuck out from the back of her distorted head. I thought I knew what Picasso had been getting at but the sender of the card probably saw it quite differently. It was a picture of me, naked, vulnerable. Just the

kind of thing that would appeal to Rob Starkey. Just his idea of a funny joke.

I carried the card to a drawer and put it with its companions. Then left the flat, slamming the door behind me.

I had no idea if he still lived in the same place, but at least it would be a starting point. The house was the other side of the river, part of a terrace of dilapidated properties, most of them rented out as bedsits.

I had been there once before, during the time Rob had been coming to see me regularly. A garbled message from a payphone had alarmed me and I had gone round to his room and found him lying on his bed, snoring heavily, with an empty bottle of Southern Comfort on the floor beside him. At the time I had been annoyed. What had been the point of phoning when the only thing wrong with him was that he needed to sleep off a hang-over? But seeing him in his home environment had shocked me, not because the room was so untidy — smelling of unwashed clothes and alcohol — but because it brought home to me what a distorted view I acquired when I only saw clients in my room at work.

The experience had made a strong impression, and since then it had been a regular topic of discussion at our weekly case conference. Martin and Beth were all for keeping things separate. We saw the clients on our territory. If they needed to be visited at home they should be referred to the Social Services. But Nick and I disagreed. Nick quoted an experiment in Italy when psychiatrists had decided to come out of their rarefied consulting rooms and help their patients with practical problems like finding somewhere to live. Apparently the experiment had been a huge success — as long as

the psychiatrist who had instigated it was around — but after he left the area it had petered out. As with everything else it had been the enthusiasm that mattered, the commitment.

I drove along Coronation Road, with the Avon on my left and on the other side of the river the new development that overlooked the Floating Harbour. Rob lived less than a quarter of a mile away yet his street was a world apart from the smart flats and town houses of Baltic Wharf.

Passing the iron footbridge that crossed the river I turned right, then right again, and recognized Rob's road straight away. At the end was what looked like the remains of a demolished factory. Three small boys, who looked too young to be out now the light was fading, were kicking a ball at a brick wall, laughing as it bounced back and hit one of them on the head. Rob had told me of rumours that the area was to be redeveloped. That would mean that people like him would be forced out by the increased rents, but in the meantime it suited him well enough and it was handy for the city centre.

Leaving my car a few doors down from Rob's place, I rang the bell, then realizing that it was broken knocked lightly on the front door. No sounds came from inside. No doors opening, footsteps in the hallway. I knocked again more loudly and this time I heard coughing and the sound of shuffling feet. An old woman opened the door and stared at me. She had some kind of skin disease. One side of her face was rough and greenish. She was wearing a white cotton jumper, a brown crimplene skirt, and a long shapeless cardigan.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' I said. 'I've come to see Rob Starkey.'

'Who?'

'The young man who lives on the top floor.'

'Oh, him.' She stood back to let me pass. I turned to thank her for letting me in but already she had disappeared back into her room.

The stair carpet was a death trap. Half-way up my foot slid beneath a frayed piece and I had to clutch at the wooden rail to prevent myself from falling. I continued on to the second floor, running the palm of my hand up the wall, searching in the dark for a light switch. But even if I found one it was unlikely the bulb would be working.

On the second floor I paused, trying to remember which of the two doors belonged to Rob. I called his name but there was no response. Placing my ear next to one door, then the other, I heard nothing. When I turned the knob on the right-hand door it opened with a loud creak and I peered into the darkness and recognized the layout of Rob's room. Perhaps all the rooms were much the same but when I lifted back a corner of the drawn curtain enough light came in for me to see the pictures stuck on his wall. They were Rob's all right. Fantasy figures, drawn with felt pens. Red and yellow and acid-green, outlined in black. Some of them were dressed in futuristic suits of armour, all of them carried weapons. Broadswords, laser guns, spiked balls on chains.

The bedclothes were piled up at the pillow end of the bed and for a moment I expected Rob to emerge from under the jumble of blankets and greyish sheets. But the room was empty. I was trespassing in private property.

'Rob?' I said quietly, as though to make certain he wasn't hiding in the rickety wardrobe or under the bed.

In the room below someone had switched on the radio. More than likely the old woman downstairs had forgotten about me. I was free to inspect Rob's room, look for clues, unearth a tell-tale pile of

picture post cards. But I couldn't do it. What was the point? I had come to talk to him, calm him down, not to try and catch him red-handed.

Above my head a woman, dressed from head to foot in black leather, stared down at me. Her hair stood out from her head in spikes and round her neck she wore a heavy crucifix with a small bleeding figure. In one hand she held a whip, in the other a man no larger than a toy soldier. The picture had been coloured in with enormous care and I remembered that Rob had spent a term at art school before he dropped out because it 'got too boring'. He could draw well, must have learned at school, or just had a natural gift.

I glanced round the room, taking in the jumble of clothes, a pair of heavy boots, numerous plastic carrier bags piled up against the wall.

The first bag seemed to contain a collection of old electric plugs and adaptors. In the second was a brand-new sweatshirt, still in its cellophane wrapping. Did Rob go shoplifting? Perhaps the sweatshirt was a present he still hadn't unwrapped. From his mother? But she had moved to Shropshire and Rob couldn't be bothered to keep in touch.

I lifted another bag off the floor and peered inside at the mass of crumpled papers, old magazines — and picture post cards. They were reproductions of paintings, mostly Pop Art — Andy Warhol's cans of tomato soup and multiple images of Marilyn Monroe — but one was a Magritte, depicting a figure, part woman, part fish, washed up on the beach with the waves lapping her naked body.

Pushing them back into the bag and leaning it against the wall, I paused for a moment, then left, closing the door behind me. As I tip-toed down the stairs, deafening vibrating music was coming from a

room on the first floor. A door opened a crack, then slammed shut again.

The ground floor was silent and there was no sign of the old woman. Would she tell Rob someone had called round to see him? It seemed unlikely since she had not even known his name. In any case, I wasn't worried. On this occasion I had failed to catch up with him but it was only a matter of time before I found him lurking about outside my flat. Sooner or later he would decide to tell me what was on his mind. In the mean time I would stop worrying about being tailed round the shops, just wait and see when the Magritte turned up on my doormat.

As I drove away an image of the black-leather woman returned. The tiny helpless man held in her fist. But I was not in the mood for clever psychological interpretations. I was wondering what David was doing, whether, if I drove up Jacob's Wells Road, then on to Kingsdown, I would see the green Citroen parked in the drive outside Iris's front door. I hesitated at the zebra crossing, trying to make up my mind, then realized that even if the car wasn't there I would be no better off. Glancing in the driving mirror, then turning sharp left, I changed gear and prepared to climb the steep hill that led up to Clifton-wood. I had done quite enough spying for one evening.

Chapter Thirteen

For some reason I had failed to tell Martin about the seminar on Munchausen's Syndrome. I wasn't sure why, but perhaps it had something to do with the way he had responded when I told him how Owen Hughes had suggested where I might find funding for my research project. I liked Martin but he could be so negative, so cynical. It was part of his personality, nothing to do with the children keeping him awake at night. That was my considered opinion, only of course I knew nothing of what it felt like to be deprived of sleep by fractious teething babies.

The seminar was at four fifteen so I would have to leave work early, not that Martin was likely to notice. If he did he would assume I had gone on one of the home visits he had warned me against. 'Don't get so involved, Anna. Accept your limitations. None of us can change the world.' He protested too much. According to Nick he had once been more committed than the rest of us put together. Then suddenly the coin had flipped. He had burned out, given up, started concentrating on organizing the service and reducing actual client contact to a minimum. Now he was trying to stop me from going the same way. It was silly to take his warnings as a criticism.

Once again Jenny was late for her appointment, but this time I made several visits to the waiting room and on the fourth occasion she was there, sitting in the furthest corner, head down, arms folded in self-protection.

'Hallo, Jenny.'

She stood up but didn't look at me.

Upstairs in my room she sat down but kept her coat on as though to signal that she didn't intend to stay very long. After a moment or two she whispered something. 'Sorry, I couldn't quite hear.'

But she wasn't going to repeat it. She seemed depressed and it was as though the progress we had made during her last visit had been wiped out.

'Want to take your coat off?' I asked.

She shook her head.

'Not feeling too good today?'

She chewed at her bottom lip. Her feet were squirming about on the carpet. I felt sorry for her but it was difficult to know how to make it easier for her to talk. I decided to try a different approach.

'Jenny, do you keep a diary?'

Her head shot up. 'What?'

'A diary. I wondered if you kept one. Sometimes people start at the beginning of a new year and — '

'What for?'

'Oh, no special reason. I just thought ... I used to keep one at your age.'

Actually it had been when I was much younger, about eleven or twelve, but I still found it difficult to remember she was nearly seventeen.

I ploughed on. 'Sometimes it's easier to write things down. Easier than talking to people I mean.'

She shrugged. 'I can't be bothered.'

'D'you mean keeping a diary or talking to people?'

'I talk to my mother.'

'Yes, I'm sure you do. I met your mother in the park. I expect she told you.'

'Yes.'

'I didn't realize she works at the Student Counselling Service. A part-time job, is it?'

'Yes.'

'You didn't mind her speaking to me?'

'What? I don't understand what you mean.'

After a short pause she spoke again in a low angry voice. 'What am I supposed to be here for, anyway? Dr Ingram used to give me tablets. Now everyone thinks I'm funny in the head.'

'No, they don't.'

'Anyway, I'm perfectly all right apart from my back.'

'Your back?'

'Everyone gets backache. It's normal.'

'Yes, I agree. What you mean is you feel cross that you've been referred to a psychologist.'

'I just don't see what you're supposed to do.'

'No, I can understand how you feel.'

There was something intimidating about her. But how could there be? It occurred to me that she felt she had given away too much during her last visit. Now she was testing me out to see if she could trust me.

'Look,' I said, 'I want to get a few things straight. About your situation, I mean. Your father left a few years ago and since then the two of you have lost touch.'

She was looking through the window. She might have nodded. It was hard to tell.

I took a risk. 'I'm sorry, you must feel upset about it. And quite angry, I expect.'

'Why?'

'Well, he's still your father.'

She stood up, then sat down again heavily. 'I prefer not to talk about it.'

'OK, that's fine. Tell me about your school. Which one did you go to?'

'The comprehensive.'

'Did you like it?'

She shrugged. 'It was all right.'

'You must have had friends. Anyone in particular?'

'Not really.'

'I wondered if you'd kept in touch with anyone — since you became ill.'

'You don't think I'm ill.' She was glaring at me but her hands were shaking. She pushed them under her thighs and sat up very straight, trying to keep her face as expressionless as possible.

'About the diary,' I said cautiously, 'd'you think you could have a go at keeping one? It might help. Just write down whatever you like. Anything you've read, seen on television. Any places you've been. You don't have to show it to me or anyone else. It's for you.'

'I haven't got a diary.'

'I could give you a notebook, if you like.'

I opened a desk drawer and took out a lined exercise book. It was one left behind by my predecessor and the first two pages contained out-of-date lists of useful addresses. Singles clubs, dating agencies, religious communities who sometimes agreed to take in unhappy

people for short weekend breaks. Recently, Nick had made a card index of such places, which he updated every few months. I tore out the first few pages and dropped them in the waste-paper basket. Then I handed the notebook to Jenny.

‘Will that do?’

She took it without looking at me. ‘Shall I go now?’

‘Do you want to?’

She nodded, rolling the notebook into a tube, then stood up and fetched her anorak from the hook on the back of the door. When she turned round her lips were pressed together and she looked angrier than I had ever seen her. She waited by the open door, gazing at me for a moment with a look of contempt — or was it desperation? Then she left without saying goodbye.

*

I reached the Research Unit just after four and this time I managed to discover an office with two secretaries seated behind a glass door. They were both busy at their word processors. When I knocked one of them looked up and waited for me to enter.

‘Excuse me. The seminar. I was wondering which room ... ’

‘Seminar? Oh, the seminar. In the seminar room — down the end of the passage. You’re not Dr Zeal are you?’

‘No.’

‘I just wondered. I don’t think she’s arrived yet. I expect her train was late.’

I left the office and walked slowly down the corridor. I had arrived in plenty of time, now I was afraid of being the first person there, in which case I wouldn’t even know if I was in the right room. I could go

and look for Owen Hughes but he hadn't suggested I meet up with him and I didn't want to interrupt his work.

When I cautiously opened what I thought was the right door the room seemed to be filled with equipment. Trailing wires, electric plugs, metal filing cabinets with their drawers half open.

I closed the door and tried the next one, which turned out to be the coffee room, still with its semi-circle of metal chairs. While I was wondering what to do next a group of students came in and started moving the furniture, lifting down more chairs that were piled up round the side of the room.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for the seminar room.'

'You've found it.' The man had short bristly hair and looked about twenty-two or three.

'Oh, good. Thanks.'

'Are you a new postgrad?'

'Me? Oh, well not exactly. I'm hoping to do some research part-time — with Dr Hughes.'

'Rather you than me.' He grinned but the remark had not been intended as a joke. 'Have a seat.'

'I'll help you if you like,' I said, preferring to arrange the chairs rather than sit on my own doing nothing.

'Right. It's always left to the last minute. Nobody's really in charge in this place. Still, I guess that's better than running it like some high-powered business.'

The room was filling up. More postgraduate students and others who I assumed must be members of staff, all men except for one woman, the one who had directed me to Owen Hughes' room the first time I visited the unit. She was dressed in a multi-coloured skirt

and a white sweater. She glanced at me but showed no sign of recognition. Owen Hughes was nowhere to be seen.

At four twenty the door creaked open and a man and a woman entered. The woman, who turned out to be the visiting speaker, had white hair and was dressed in a black skirt which reached almost to her ankles and a white blouse held at the neck by a large cameo brooch.

She was introduced by the scruffy-looking man who had escorted her into the room.

He cleared his throat, held up his hand, giggled slightly, then began.

‘We’re very grateful to Dr Zeal for coming all the way from Leeds to talk to us. Dr Zeal is on a visit from Ohio, where she has carried out an extensive study of Munchausen’s Syndrome. Some of you may know very little about this syndrome. I’m one of those — something to do with wanting to be sliced open, I believe — but I’m sure during the next hour or so Dr Zeal will put us all straight. Dr Zeal?’

There was a ripple of self-conscious laughter, then Dr Zeal stood up, placed a tidy pile of paper on the table in front of her, and started speaking without the help of her notes. I was surprised that she had no trace of American in her voice. Her accent was English with perhaps a touch of German or Austrian. She looked like the archetypal psychoanalyst but, as far as I knew, she was not a practising psychotherapist.

‘Munchausen’s Syndrome,’ she began, ‘has sometimes been thought of as a bizarre form of malingering. I see it a little differently. Most such individuals are regarded as suffering from a personality defect and it’s true that at first sight their behaviour seems

inexplicable. Who would want to present himself to a hospital, seeking admission for an unnecessary operation? But perhaps the profusion of scars on the abdomen may be seen as indicative of deeper psychological scarring.'

Someone at the back of the room yawned loudly. Others turned round and glared. Already the room had divided into two camps.

The lecture was interesting, especially the case studies, but it would be easy for the sceptics in the audience to say they had learned nothing they did not know already. Dr Zeal's tentative explanations as to how people might acquire the syndrome were fascinating but open to the usual criticism that they lacked experimental evidence to back them up.

Owen Hughes must have slipped in late. He was sitting near the door with his arm resting along a large old-fashioned radiator. He had run his fingers through his hair so that it stuck out above one ear. I tried to catch his eye but he seemed absorbed with own thoughts. Occasionally he studied the sleeve of his jacket and picked at a loose thread.

During 'questions' I glanced in his direction and noticed that he had taken off his wristwatch and was polishing the glass. Once he looked as though he was about to raise his arm, then he changed his mind and lowered it again.

Dr Zeal answered each question politely, refused to be provoked, accepting the need for evidence to back up her theories but apparently unruffled by the more facetious remarks of some members of staff.

I was enjoying myself, especially this question and answer session, but all the talk of hospitals had reminded me of my mother and my

thoughts kept wandering back to her last operation. She had coped with being in hospital, as she coped with everything else, by remaining exceptionally cheerful. Chatting with the patients on either side of her bed, taking an interest in their husbands and children, their jobs, where they lived, where they liked to go on holiday. Later, when she was feeling stronger, she had helped with the tea trolley or sat in the day room listening sympathetically to a thin ugly woman who had managed to alienate nurses and patients alike.

David never met my mother. I wondered if she would have liked him, fallen for his charm, been amused by his funny stories. Even if she had disliked him intensely she would have kept her feelings to herself. 'It's no good giving people advice, Anna. They always do exactly the opposite — especially if they're your nearest and dearest.'

I thought of my father preparing for his visit to Australia. During our phone-call my mother had not been mentioned at all. Just air fares and the fact that he was going to reach Sydney in the middle of the Australian summer and would need some lightweight clothes. I asked him to take photos of Steven and Jane and the children and he said he was hoping to take a trip to Phillip Island, where the penguins come out of the sea at dusk and waddle up the beach. We both laughed and it had seemed a suitable point at which to end the conversation, wish him *bon voyage*, and ring off ...

The questions were over and the scruffily dressed man was thanking Dr Zeal for her fascinating paper. Everyone started filing out of the room and I joined the throng by the door, passing quite close to Owen Hughes, who nodded briefly but made no attempt to start a conversation.

My car was parked some distance away. As I walked down the hill I thought about the seminar and wondered if I could integrate some of what I had heard into my research into frequent attenders. Munchausen's Syndrome seemed like the logical end to a person's attempt to gain care and attention by presenting their unhappiness as medical symptoms.

Was that what Jenny had done; and if so why hadn't Dr Ingram referred her to the Psychology Service long ago? I felt depressed that the morning session with her had gone badly. I had asked her to tell me about her father before she was ready to talk about it, put too much pressure, forced her back into her shell. But perhaps I was being too hard on myself. After all it was common for clients to start talking, then panic a little and retreat into their former wary state. Next time I saw her there might be a genuine breakthrough.

I passed a map of the university painted on a large wooden board and lit by an overhead bulb. Pausing to get my breath back, I studied the map, looking for the Research Unit in order to get my bearings. As I traced my finger along the network of connecting roads and cul-de-sacs I noticed a large building which seemed to be further down the hill from where I was standing, and up one of the turnings on the left. In brackets after the name of the building were the departments it housed. Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research, Computer Science.

It was raining again, cold sleet that stung my face. Earlier when I arrived for the seminar the temperature had felt reasonably mild and I had left my coat in the car.

I paused, shivering a little. It would be far more sensible to go straight home but having got this far it seemed a waste not to carry

on.

The first road on the right had a notice painted on the wall with an arrow pointing to 'Student Counselling Service'. Outside the building I could just make out a figure climbing into a white car. I wondered if Martin had ever had any contact with the Counselling Service. Surely some of their clients were referred to us, or did they send the difficult cases to a psychiatrist?

Taking the second turning on the left I found myself staring up at a tower block that was far taller than any of the other buildings on the campus, about twelve storeys high. I checked the noticeboard to make sure I had reached the right place, then walked quickly up a dozen concrete steps and tried to push open one of the swing doors. It was locked. As I stood there wondering what to do next two middle-aged men came through the foyer of the building and let themselves out. One of them glanced at me suspiciously.

'Can I help?'

'I was looking for one of the students.'

'They'll have left by now, apart from one or two postgrads. Who is it you wanted?'

'Her name's Fleur Peythieu. She's doing Computer Science.'

The second man stepped forward. 'Are you a relative?'

'A friend,' I said confidently, 'but it's important I find her.'

The man hesitated. 'You're not a journalist? Not that you'd admit it even if you were.'

'Do I look like a journalist?'

'Who knows?' He laughed and turned to his companion. 'D'you know where Fleur moved to? She's one of yours, isn't she?'

The other man made an effort to remember. 'One of the halls of residence,' he said, and then, when my face looked blank, 'They're dotted all over the place but I've a feeling she's in the one up near the Downs.'

Chapter Fourteen

When I thought about Fleur Peythieu I imagined a sensitive, anxious kind of person, someone who would have been totally traumatized by the murder — but who wouldn't have been? Someone who would run a mile if she was asked to go over it in detail yet again. And besides, what right did I have to question her?

I approached the entrance to the Hall of Residence, a grey concrete building with six floors and a mass of small windows. If I stepped inside I might be asked to prove my identity. Hundreds of students must go in and out every day but perhaps the hall porter could spot a stranger. Odd people hang about student lodgings. Flashers. Voyeurs.

As it turned out the entrance hall was thronged with people but there was no porter in sight.

I approached a small thin girl, dressed in baggy trousers and a striped jacket. 'Excuse me. Do you know a student called Fleur Peythieu?'

'No, sorry.' She started walking away but I called after her.

'Is there a list of students who live here?'

'I don't know. I suppose so.' And she disappeared down a corridor.

A noticeboard, screwed to the wall at the opposite end of the entrance hall, proved to be no help at all. Fire regulations. A forthcoming pop concert. A curled-up poster advertising the Student Counselling Service.

I stood in the corridor wondering what to do next, wondering why I was taking so much trouble over what would almost certainly turn out to be a wild-goose chase. Diane Easby seemed to have lost interest in her brother's fate and if it hadn't been for Bruce's phone-call I would have let the whole thing drop. His suggestion that Chris worried about his safety seemed a little implausible. On the other hand, it was true that social workers were attacked far more often than most people realized, and perhaps Housing Officers fell into the same high-risk bracket.

As I climbed the stairs to the first floor I was aware that I was trying to justify what amounted to interference in other people's business. A tall, lanky student with his hair tied back in a pony-tail approached from the other end of the long corridor. I decided to have one last try, then give up and forget all about the murder.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for a student called Fleur Peythieu.'

He stopped abruptly, almost losing his balance. 'Sorry?'

'Fleur Peythieu, I wondered —'

'Last door on the left. I don't know if she's there.'

'Thanks.'

He hesitated for a moment as though I might have more questions for him, then shook his head and loped off, his shoes squeaking loudly on the shiny linoleum floor.

I knocked on Fleur's door but there was no answer. I was just about to walk away when a head appeared.

'What d'you want?' She spoke with a strong Lancashire accent.

'Fleur Peythieu?'

'If that's how you want to pronounce it.' She was large and plain, quite unlike the image of her I had created in my head.

'My name's Anna McColl. I'm sorry to interrupt your work but — '

'You're not, I was eating.'

'Oh.' Perhaps I should arrange to come back another time. Perhaps I should forget the whole thing.

'Come in if you're coming.' She had opened the door just wide enough for me to squeeze through, then she closed it firmly behind me.

The room was tiny, only just big enough to contain a narrow bed, a fitted cupboard, a hand basin, a desk with an upright chair pushed under it, and two shelves of books.

Fleur sat on the bed finishing off her low fat Fruits of the Forest yogurt. She was wearing red and green flowered trousers, a thick maroon sweater that reached almost to her knees, and black lace-up boots.

I pulled out the hard chair and introduced myself properly.

'It's about Karen Plant.'

'Oh, aye, you don't look much like a cop.'

'I'm not. Actually I'm a psychologist.'

'One of them.' She was scraping out the last drops of yogurt. I almost expected her to stick her tongue in the empty pot. 'I'll tell you something for nothing, you're bloody soaked to the skin.'

'Oh, yes. Sorry.'

'Don't apologize. I should take off your shoes, put them by the radiator. It cracks the leather so they say but I've never had any bother.'

I did as I was told, then sat down again and pulled my sweater over my head. Fleur draped it over the hand basin.

'What happened to your coat?'

'I left it in the car.'

'Oh, aye.'

It was ridiculous, I hadn't even explained why I'd come but Fleur seemed to think nothing of a total stranger knocking on her door and making themselves at home in her room.

'Look,' I said, 'the reason I wanted to talk to you — ' I broke off. I hadn't even planned what I was going to say. It would be quite inappropriate to tell her about Diane Easby but, on the other hand, she deserved some explanation. For all she knew I could be a journalist or just someone with an unhealthy interest in violent crime.

She was watching me, smiling at my discomfort.

'You want to know if Keith did it.' It was a statement, not a question.

'Yes. I mean, I have a client — a friend of Keith's.'

'Oh, you have, have you?' She tossed the empty pot into a metal wastepaper bin. 'Of course he didn't kill Karen.'

'Why do you say that?'

'You never met him?'

'No.'

'If you had you'd know. He was nuts about her. Pathetic it was.'

She stared at me, willing me to make the obvious remark. That Keith might have misunderstood Karen's interest in him, reacted badly to what seemed like a rejection, then attacked her, going too far, losing control.

'Go on,' I said.

'What is there to say? Poor bloke's dead and buried, won't make any difference what happens now. He came from up North, same as me although he'd left when he was a small kid. You're probably

wondering about my name. My mother's French, born in Rouen. We took her name after my dad buggered off.'

'Yes, I see.'

'Just thought you'd like to know. People usually do.'

I smiled but she didn't smile back.

'Look,' I said, 'I'm sorry to call round on you like this. I'm sure you told the police everything you knew.'

'I told them he couldn't have done it but they had their own ideas.'

'Just one last question. Why d'you think he hanged himself? If he was innocent, I mean.'

'Who knows? Scared of going to prison? He wouldn't have lasted ten minutes. Like a little kid, he was. I'd say he had a mental age of about seven or eight.'

'But surely the police — '

'He wasn't with them that long. Hadn't been questioned in detail. Couldn't have been in the short time they had him locked up. Want a cup of tea, do you?'

'Oh. Well, thanks.'

When I knocked on the door I had expected her to tell me to mind my own business. Now she seemed more inclined to settle down for a good long chat. Perhaps she was curious to find out why I had come. Perhaps she was just bored and talking to me was preferable to starting work on an assignment from her tutor in the Computer Science Department.

'The thing is,' I said, 'if it wasn't Keith it was someone else.'

She laughed. 'That figures.'

I wondered how upset she had been about Karen Plant. After all it was only a couple of months since the murder but she seemed able

to talk about it in a perfectly relaxed kind of way.

'It must have been dreadful for you.'

'Wearing your psychologist's hat now, are you?'

'I just feel a bit guilty raking it all up again.'

'The people at the counselling service wanted me to go over and over what happened. Every detail from start to finish. I couldn't see the point. What's done's done.'

But she had been the one who found the body. Surely it wasn't that easy to forget. It occurred to me, with a slight feeling of coldness down my back, that if Keith Merchant was innocent the next most likely suspect was

Fleur herself. She looked quite strong enough to overpower a slightly built woman. But what possible motive could she have had? An argument that got out of hand? A lovers' quarrel?

She had opened a cupboard and taken out an electric kettle and two mugs. She filled the kettle at the hand basin and plugged it in, then she sat down and felt under the bed, pulling out a cardboard box. I wondered what she was going to show me but she was only searching for a packet of biscuits.

'Look,' she said, straightening up and tearing at the cellophane wrapping, 'If you want my opinion it was one of her clients. God-awful job she had. All those people wanting something done about their lives, then accusing her of interfering.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Same with your job, is it? More fool you. That's why I'm going to stick with computers. They're awkward bastards but they don't make impossible emotional demands.'

She passed me two halves of a broken chocolate digestive biscuit, took another for herself and held it poised a few inches away from her mouth.

'I was the one who had to pick up the pieces. Such a state she'd get herself into. Head reeling with all the problems she was supposed to be dealing with. Old ladies being moved into homes, not allowed to take their pussy cats. Women wanting their kids taken into care, then changing their minds and accusing poor Karen of calling them inadequate mothers. Look, I'd say, you can't save the whole world. Just do the best you can and don't be so hard on yourself.'

She sounded like Martin. She had placed her biscuit on the bed and was standing in front of the two metal shelves, reaching up to the top one for a teaspoon. I glanced at the books, expecting to see computer manuals, books on logic, mathematics, but they were all paperback fiction. American blockbusters, tales of the ultra-rich, whose life styles forced them into intrigue and infidelity.

'You read this one?' she asked. 'Identical twins separated at birth. One went to a posh family, the other ended up in the slums.'

I shook my head. 'No, I don't think I have.'

'You look tired,' she said, 'want to ease up a bit or you'll end up like Karen. I'll tell you something for nothing. She had something bothering her and it wasn't Keith Merchant.'

'What kind of thing?'

'Search me. I haven't a clue.'

'Something about one of her clients?'

'Could've been. She'd never betray a confidence.'

'So she never told you what it was about?'

Fleur shook her head. 'I told her she ought to talk to someone at work, her supervisor or whatever, but she said it was her own fault, she'd brought in on herself.'

'Did you tell this to the police?'

'Of course I did. You sure you're not one of them, disguised as an ordinary human being?'

The kettle boiled and she dropped a tea bag in the red mug, filled it up, then fished out the bag and dropped it in the yellow one.

'I expect they've told you us from up North like our tea so strong the spoon can stand up in it.'

I smiled.

'You lot don't know you're born,' she said, passing me the red mug. 'Hope you don't take milk 'cos I haven't got any.'

'I wonder,' I said, 'could you tell me a little about Karen. What kind of a person she—'

'What d'you want to know? Well, let's think. She was very neat and tidy. Obsessional, I'd call it. A place for everything and everything in its place. And she was always making lists.'

'What kind of lists?'

'Oh, you know, bills that needed paying, people to phone, bits and pieces that wanted doing round the flat.'

'I believe Keith Merchant did some repairs for you.'

'If you can call them that. Hadn't even a proper set of tools. Said he'd strip the paint off an old chair I'd picked up in a junk shop. Ended up with paint-stripper all over the carpet and the chair looked a bloody sight worse than when he'd begun.'

'So really Karen was just being kind, giving him odd jobs to do.'

'Kind or half-witted. I warned her but she never took a blind bit of notice. Tiny little thing she was but tough as old boots underneath. D'you know the type?'

Why was she telling me so much and without even checking for certain who I was? She couldn't have cooperated more if she had been invited down to the police station. Perhaps she needed the company. She was tough, independent, but that didn't mean she wasn't lonely. All the same, it was difficult to believe, as Bruce had suggested, that Karen had been looking after her. I was inclined to think it must have been the other way round.

*

On the way home I drove past Iris's house, slowing up, then accelerating fast in case David looked through a window and recognized my car.

It occurred to me that I had visited Fleur in the hope that she would convince me once and for all of Keith Merchant's guilt. Then I could forget about the case. I had spent too much time thinking about Karen Plant. It was morbid. I had never even met her when she was alive. Dead, she was becoming more and more real. A workaholic like me, but what had she been trying to escape from? Another David? Or perhaps her relationship with Fleur had been closer than anyone realized. Perhaps it was not Keith that Karen had rebuffed. But then Fleur would have been only too happy to confirm

Keith's guilt. Of course, the most likely explanation was that Fleur had failed to understand what was going on in Keith's mind. He had seemed inadequate, incapable of holding down a proper job, so she had assumed he was harmless when all the time he was expecting far more from Karen Plant than she was prepared to give. The police

had seen him as a common thief, who had been found out by Karen and had then attacked her when she threatened to have him arrested. But from what I had learned about her Karen would have given him a second chance, then a third and a fourth.

It was my father's birthday and I had forgotten to post his card. It was a relief that he would be away for the next six weeks. One less person to worry about, a chance to sort out my own life, separate business from pleasure, reality from illusion. The post cards were from Rob, of that there was very little doubt. But I doubted if he was the intruder. Since the over-watered plant there had been no sign of anyone having been in the flat. Not that I had checked very carefully but it was impossible not to look round each room whenever I returned home.

In my mind I had eliminated David and Chris. If it wasn't Rob, that left Iris. She could have found the key in one of David's jacket pockets and had a copy made before he noticed it was missing. I considered phoning her, not just about the key, but to exchange information. But it was a crazy idea. Most likely we would both find out things we would have preferred not to know.

Then I thought about phoning the osteopath. I had forgotten what he was called but if I looked up 'osteopaths' in the Yellow Pages the name would soon come back to me. I decided against that idea too. Supposing he expressed surprise that I wanted to speak to David, told me he had no idea where he was living, that they hadn't been in touch for several months.

Rain was streaming down the windscreen. I switched on the wipers and as the screen cleared I thought I saw Rob, walking, head down, in the direction of Queen's Road. I slowed down, hoping he would

look up so I could see his face and as I drew level he turned to stare through my window. Tall, thin, with dark hair, loose-fitting jeans, and a leather jacket. He grinned at me and made a gesture which invited me to open the passenger door. One of his front teeth was missing and he had a straggly moustache that hung over his upper lip. He was nothing like Rob.

Chapter Fifteen

Diane Easby had turned up at reception, looking as though she was spoiling for a fight and demanding to see me straight away. I expected her to ask what I had done to convince the police that her brother Keith had been innocent. Why was it taking so long? Why hadn't I kept her fully informed of what was going on?

She glared at me and I waited, in silence, knowing I would discover the purpose of the visit sooner if I left her to tell me in her own time.

'You fitted me in then. I suppose you thought you'd better in the circumstances.'

'I usually try to keep one or two spaces free. For emergencies,' I added.

'It's an emergency, all right.'

'What's happened?'

'What's happened? They sent round some bloke to check up on me, didn't they? Banged on the door, he did, hoping to catch us red-handed.'

'How d'you mean?'

'Oh, don't you sit there looking all innocent.'

I tried again. 'Who was it who came round to your house?'

'Don't ask me. You're the one should know.' She hesitated. Had she made a mistake? 'It was your idea, must have been.'

'Look, I'm sorry, Diane, but I've no idea what you're talking about.'

'Oh, pull the other one. I was fool enough to tell you about me and Alan and you got in touch with the bloody social workers.'

'No, I didn't.'

She could tell I was speaking the truth.

'Who did then?' She wanted to apologize but that would mean losing face. And, besides, now the adrenalin was flowing she needed someone to attack.

'Tell me what happened,' I said. 'I expect it was just a routine call. You saw a social worker before and —'

'I told you, didn't I, that Karen Plant. You found out any more about who done her in?'

'Not yet. I'm working on it.'

Better not to tell her about my meeting with Fleur Peythieu. Not at this stage.

She relaxed a little, then launched into a lengthy description of the new social worker, 'a long streak of piss', who she could swear was barely out of school, knew nothing about kids, and left with his tail between his legs after she'd given him a good going over.

'What was his name?' I asked.

'Search me. Damian? Duncan? He did say but I never took it in.' She leaned forward and patted me on the knee. 'Sorry, love, only the reason I lost my cool, that Karen Plant threatened to have my Lisa taken away.'

'Your daughter?'

'Bloody nerve, who did she think she was?'

'But why? What did she say exactly?'

'Oh, nothing straight out, just hinting. That's all they think of these days. As if he would. Just the thought of it'd make him sick.'

I was beginning to understand.

'Karen Plant thought your husband ... thought Alan ...'

'All because of something she told her teacher.'

'Lisa? What did she say?'

'God knows. Jealous of the baby, she is. Always has been. I thought, being ten when the baby was born she'd be pleased, help with the bathing and that, like having a real live doll. Like hell, she was, wanted to drown her more like.'

'Let's get this straight. Lisa was jealous of Siobhan. Then later on she told her teacher Alan had ... '

'It was all lies. She admitted it later.'

'Lisa did?'

'Only by then the damage had been done.'

'D'you know what she actually said to her teacher?'

Diane shrugged. 'If you ask me she never said nothing. It was just that busybody woman seeing perverts all round her 'cos she was one herself.' She grinned at me. 'Anyway, Alan gave Lisa a good hiding. Well, he threatened to. Wouldn't let her watch *Top of the Pops*. Shut her in her bedroom and took no notice when she said she'd rip the paper off the walls.'

'Did she?'

'Eh?'

'Nothing. Then what happened?'

'How d'you mean? Oh, well I suppose they forgot all about it. Anyway it was the end of that week Karen Plant was done in.'

I was thinking fast, wondering if I should have been in touch with Social Services before, found out more about the children. But it was Diane I was supposed to be helping. It was one of those no-win situations. If you contacted other agencies the client quite rightly started to wonder whose side you were on. If you kept things to

yourself the social workers accused you of failing to cooperate and started holding forth on the need to coordinate the different services.

‘Look, Diane, no social worker would just go on what a child might or might not have said to her teacher.’

‘Eh? Are you accusing me — ’

‘No, of course not.’

‘No smoke without fire, that’s what they think. I know how their filthy minds work. They’re the ones that ought to be taken into care. She could’ve insisted we had her examined. Then they can say what they like and you haven’t a leg to stand on.’

‘And all this happened just before Karen Plant ... ’

‘Alan told her to clear off or he’d be seeing a solicitor — or worse.’

She suddenly realized what I might be thinking.

‘Oh, Alan’s all right, just a big softie underneath, wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

Like Keith? She had used the same expression before. Keith wouldn’t hurt a fly. Now Alan was the same. But most likely it was simply a reflection of Diane’s general attitude towards men. She had never told me much about her first marriage and early life, only that during much of her childhood she had lived with her grandparents, that the family had often been split up, sometimes for months at a time. I had tried to find out more but always she was vague, didn’t want to talk about it, couldn’t see the point. It was fair enough, after all she seemed to have enough to contend with in the present without worrying about what was dead and buried.

‘What d’you think?’ she asked. ‘No, tell me honest.’

‘About Lisa and — ’

‘No, everything, the whole bloody mess.’

'I think you've had a tough time. First the trouble with Lisa, then what happened to Keith.'

'Ah, you're ever so kind.' She took a tube of mints out of her pocket, peeled back the paper, and offered me one.

'No, thanks.'

'Helps stop me thinking about the cigs. Well, it doesn't really, but at least it's something to stick in your mouth.'

'Yes, it's a good idea.'

'Rots your teeth instead, eh?'

I smiled. I was thinking about what she had just told me. Surely if there had been any question of sexual abuse it would have been in a file. Or had Diane and Alan jumped to conclusions when Karen Plant made a few harmless enquiries about Lisa?

'You should have told me all this before,' I said.

'You mightn't have believed me.'

There was no answer to that.

'What did this new social worker say to you?'

'Eh? Nothing much. I thought he'd come about the washing machine. Just introduced himself, asked if there was something he could do to help. Anyway, Alan's got a thing about do-gooders.'

'Yes, so you said. That's how you see me, is it?'

'I didn't say that. I know you're all right — but Alan, that's a different story.'

'Tell me exactly what Karen Plant said about Lisa.'

'I forget. Just that the school thought she was looking a bit peaky. Stupid, she's always been pale. Takes after her father.' She leaned forward till her face was only a few inches from mine. 'I told Keith

about it but he didn't understand. That was one of the things about Keith, you had to spell everything out, go over it again and again.'

'You told him Karen Plant had suggested — '

'He wasn't too bright, see. You know me, I blow my top, then it's all over. But Keith, it took time for him to take things in, then when he did, whatever it was would go round and round in his head.'

'Look,' I said, 'about this social worker, who came to your house. I expect he just found your name on Karen Plant's file and wondered if you wanted any help.'

'Yes, well I don't, do I, and even if I did they'd be the last to hear about it.' She touched my knee again. 'I've got you now, haven't I? If I have any more bother I'll know where to come.'

*

I had lunch with Martin and Beth. A cheese and pickle roll in the pub, washed down with a half of bitter after Martin had persuaded me it was for medicinal purposes.

'You remember Elizabeth Barrett. Her father made her drink a glass of porter every day — to build up her strength.'

'Oh, yeah,' laughed Beth, 'and then Robert Browning came and rescued her and she never touched another drop for as long as she lived.'

I wanted to tell them about Diane, but not while we were in the pub. It would have to wait for the weekly case conference. Then Martin would say I had no choice, I would have to get in touch with Social Services, and I would wish I hadn't mentioned the case in the first place.

Beth was talking about the best diet for a pregnant woman and how the book she was reading made you feel you should live

exclusively off fruit and vegetables.

‘Anna’s dreaming again,’ said Martin, pushing against me good-naturedly. ‘If I’ve told her once I’ve told her million times. Don’t get so involved. It’s bad for your health.’

‘Not that easy, is it?’ said Beth, taking my side. ‘Better to be over-involved than completely detached, clinical.’

Martin pulled a face. ‘Best of all to strike a happy medium.’

Beth stood up and stretched. ‘Love you and leave you, I have to buy something for Dominic’s supper. I ought to make him do the shopping but he’s so extravagant and we’re going to need every penny we’ve got. Have you any idea what prams cost these days?’

I had never seen her so happy. I envied her. Not because of the baby, just because...

‘Anna?’ Martin had squeezed up in order to let Beth past and was now sitting too close to me. ‘If there’s anything I can do.’

‘How d’you mean?’

‘It’s tough ending a relationship, knowing you’ll have to start all over again from scratch.’

‘I’ll survive.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Look,’ I said, ‘there is something I’d like to talk to you about.’

‘Fire away.’

‘Someone’s been sending me post cards. Reproductions of paintings. Fairly harmless in themselves but the last two have described my movements, what I was doing the previous day.’

‘Any postmark?’

‘No, they’re delivered by hand.’

‘One of your clients?’

I shrugged. 'I suppose so. I've a feeling it's that young man I used to see. The one who kept turning up high on drugs.'

He made a pretence of trying to remember but he wasn't really concentrating on what I was saying. His hand was on my knee and moving slowly up my leg. To remove it would have been to make too much of the situation. I shifted my position but the hand remained.

'D'you think I should go to the police?' I said.

'Could do, I suppose, if you think it'll set your mind at rest. I used to get these ten-page letters from a man who wanted the entrance to the car park made into the exit and vice versa.'

'What had that got to do with you?'

'Exactly. Anyway, I answered the first couple of them, then realized what I was letting myself in for and chucked the rest in the wastepaper basket.'

'I don't have that problem,' I said crossly. 'The whole point is I don't even know who they're from.'

'Sorry.' His hand was still on my skirt. He squeezed a little, then began stroking me with his thumb. 'I didn't realize you were so upset. Bring the cards in and let me have a look. I could have a word with Howard Fry — inspector at the local nick — but I'm sure his advice would be the same as mine. Just ignore them, think of it as an irritating but harmless occupational hazard.'

'Yes, I expect you're right. Actually, there was something else.'

'Oh, yes.' He smiled and stared hard into my eyes. 'You know I'm very fond of you.'

'Thanks.'

'You knew that already, didn't you?'

I was silent but inside I was seething. He had offered to help, now he couldn't be bothered to listen properly when I tried to explain what was on my mind.

Sensing that I was still upset he changed the subject quickly, removing his hand and placing it round his glass. 'How's the research?'

'It's not. I'm still struggling to get a proper proposal down on paper.'

'Ask Owen Hughes to give you a hand.'

'He can't till there's something concrete to discuss. Anyway, I keep putting off getting in touch with him. He's such a dry stick. Typical bachelor, I'd say, probably one of those misogynists who think there are far too many women in higher education.'

Martin looked away. He was angry with me, disappointed. 'Actually his wife died five or six years ago,' he said. 'Leukaemia, I think it was.'

*

My car was being serviced. Nick was away on a course but I could have asked Martin or Beth to give me a lift. Instead I decided to walk. The sky was cloudy but every so often the sun came out and for a few minutes the small front gardens, mostly a patch of grass surrounded by a privet hedge, looked fresh and green.

As I passed the comprehensive school a few of the older children were still hanging about by the gates, snatching each other's bags of books and sports equipment, laughing and swearing.

I glanced at them then turned away just as a familiar car drove by. It pulled up fifty yards ahead on the double yellow lines outside the entrance to the playing fields and I slowed down to give myself a few

extra moments. It was important to decide what I was going to do, how I was going to be.

‘Jump in.’ David held open the door and patted the passenger seat.

The whole car was pulsating with sound. *Carmen Jones*, one of his favourites. He liked to sing along as he drove. ‘One man gives me a diamond ring and I won’t give him a cigarette. One man treats me like I was mud and all I got that man can get.’ As far as David was concerned that was a pretty fair description of how things worked. Maybe if I had treated him badly everything would have been fine. But that wasn’t the kind of relationship I wanted with anyone.

‘Where are you off to?’ he shouted. ‘Not your usual neck of the woods.’

‘My car’s being serviced.’

‘I’ll take you to the garage.’

As soon as I climbed in he switched off the engine and moved closer.

‘I waited round the corner from your office, then when I realized you were minus your car I decided to trail you.’

‘Why?’

‘Why what? Why didn’t I pick you up in the car park or why did I want to see you? The first question has no answer. I just enjoy watching you walking along. The second needs no answer.’ He leaned across to kiss me but I jerked my head out of reach.

‘Oh, come on, it’s hardly my fault if I picked up a bug.’

‘You’re better then, are you?’

‘Fighting fit. What about you?’

‘Oh, I’m all right.’ His proximity was having the usual effect but this time I was going to use my head.

His voice was penitent. 'Look, I should have been in touch before but you know how it is. Anyway, last time ... it was so ... I was so knocked out ... I needed time. Time to think, make important decisions.'

I kept quiet. He wanted me to ask questions, which he might or might not decide to answer. Why hadn't he phoned? Why did he need more time? What important decisions did he have to make? Last time we were together he had told me it was just a question of the two of us getting together to work out when he could move back in.

He patted me on the thigh. 'Don't you want to hear about it?'

'Go on.'

'Not if you're in one of your moods.'

'I'm not in a mood.'

'Yes you are. I could tell just watching you walk along the road.'

'Martin made a pass at me.'

'Really? Has he done it before?'

'It was nothing. I don't know why I told you about it.'

'Yes, you do, it was to make me jealous. I am. What did you do? Where did it happen? In your office, between clients? Seduction at the Psychology Service. Sounds like a good title for a — '

'Forget it, I was only explaining why I seemed in what you call "one of my moods".'

'No, you weren't, you were telling me in your usual indirect way that I should have phoned ages ago, that you've been wondering what's been going on.'

I sighed. He sighed too, imitating, mocking. We had only been together a couple of minutes and already it was a battle, a battle he

always won. I thought about Jenny Weir, using her anger as a defence, opening her mouth to speak, then closing it again. Taunting me. Why couldn't people just say what they wanted to say? Because they liked to stay on top? Because they enjoyed the feeling of power? Because they were afraid?

'David, you know that social worker who was suffocated in her flat?'

'What? What about her? You asked me before.'

'I asked if you knew her.'

'And I said I didn't. Some odd-job man did it, didn't he. Later he topped himself rather than be put inside for the next twenty years.' He paused. 'As a matter of fact I did meet her once — at a party.'

'What party? You said —'

'What you mean is what was I doing at a party without you? Anyway it wasn't a party, it was some boring function at the Housing Department. I was invited along because we'd just set up a new computer system. Bruce was there too. Well, he would be, wouldn't he?'

'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'I didn't want you to tell Chris about it. Bruce seemed fairly taken with Karen. Not that I blamed him. She had that helpless quality all men find attractive. Waif-like but tough as nails underneath. The combination is irresistible.'

'There's something else I wanted to ask you.'

'What?'

'No, it doesn't matter.' I wanted to know if he was still living with Iris, if Iris knew he had been round to see me. Most of all I wanted to ask if Iris could have 'borrowed' the key to my flat.

He switched on the engine and the music came on like a blow in the face.

‘Off we go then,’ he shouted. ‘I can tell I’ve caught you on an off day but I’ll be touch again sooner than you think.’

He pulled out to pass a motorcycle, then twisted round to kiss me on the mouth.

‘I love it when you’re angry. It really turns me on.’

Chapter Sixteen

Jenny Weir had failed to turn up for her last two appointments. When I realized she was going to miss yet another I wondered if I should phone to find out if she was unwell. But supposing her mother knew nothing of the missed appointments? Then I would be breaking a confidence.

It was nearly eleven. I decided to ring Dr Ingram and try to catch him between morning surgery and home visits. Perhaps he could give me some background information that might help me decide how to handle the situation.

The receptionist who answered my call was laughing when she picked up the phone. She wanted to know who was calling, wasn't sure if the doctor was free but asked me to hang on. A few minutes later Dr Ingram came on the line.

'Yes?'

'Oh, good morning. It's Anna McColl, Psychology Service. I wanted to have a quick work with you about Jenny Weir.'

'Coming up against a brick wall? I did warn you.'

I had a picture in my mind of his smug, self-satisfied face. 'I wondered if there was anything you could tell me about the family that might —'

He coughed, blew hard into a handkerchief, and ended up with a kind of snort. 'I doubt it. What did you have in mind?'

'Well, Jenny's father. When did he leave? What happened exactly —'

‘Oh, the usual hoo-ha. Must be four or five years back. More. Went off with another woman, moved to a different part of the country. I only met him once — when he needed a medical for an insurance policy.’

‘Jenny doesn’t seem to see him at all. I don’t think he even writes.’

‘Sounds typical of the man. Of course it’s been hard for Val — Mrs Weir — but she’s a strong character and if you want my opinion she’s better off without him. Apparently it wasn’t the first time he’d gone off the rails. Never much of a family man as far as I could tell.’

‘No, I see.’

‘Is that it then? I expect Jenny’s told you about the bit of bother a few months back.’ And then, when I made no response. ‘Ah, well, no doubt she will, all in her own good time.’

I waited for him to elaborate, at least give a clue as to what had happened ‘a few months back’, but all I got was a muttered goodbye followed by another bout of coughing.

I was still seething at Dr Ingram’s high-handed attitude when the phone rang and Heather told me Mrs Weir was on the line.

‘Oh. Right. Good. Put her through.’

‘Is that you? It’s me — Val Weir.’ She sounded like someone who hardly ever used the telephone. But that couldn’t be right. Answering the phone must be part of her job.

‘Hallo, how can I help?’

‘It’s about Jenny. I’m ringing from work so I can’t talk for long and in any case I know how busy you must be. I told your secretary I didn’t want to interrupt if you —’

‘No, that’s all right.’

I almost mentioned the fact that Jenny had missed three appointments. Then I realized that if Val Weir was phoning from work she might think Jenny had just been to see me.

She lowered her voice, probably because she was afraid someone at the Counselling Service might disapprove of her making a personal call during working hours.

'She's been so strange lately. Locking herself away in her room, picking at her food, hardly saying a word. Obviously I don't want you to break a confidence but I wondered if you knew ... Well, really I suppose I need some advice. Should I leave her alone or should I ask what's the matter, if there's anything I can do?'

So she didn't know about the missed appointments. 'I'm sure whatever you're doing is fine, Mrs Weir. I should just try to be patient —'

'Oh, I'm that all right.'

'Yes, and it's not always easy, is it?'

I could sense that she had relaxed a little. 'So you don't think it's something I've done?'

'I expect there's a great deal going on in Jenny's head at the moment. She needs time on her own to sort it all out.'

'Yes, of course. Thank you so much. I feel better now I've spoken to you. I hope you didn't mind —'

'No, that's fine. Just don't expect things to get better straight away.'

I sounded defensive, as though she were blaming me for Jenny's behaviour.

'Oh, I don't, and in a way she is better. We've heard nothing about muscle pains for nearly a fortnight.'

'Really?'

'I wondered if the symptoms are a kind of defence. If she's unwell she doesn't have to think about her other problems.'

'Yes, that right.' I was impressed. On the other hand, anyone who worked for a counselling service was bound to pick up a few psychological theories.

'Only the trouble is I can't understand what those other problems are.'

'Don't worry, I'm sure it's nothing serious. People Jenny's age have plenty to contend with at the best of times.'

'Yes of course, and if there is a particular problem it's sure to come out sooner or later, isn't it?'

Did she mean I should have made more progress or was she just feeling a little left out?

'It's difficult for you, Mrs Weir, I know —'

'Oh, don't worry about me. These things take time, don't they? That's one of the problems with the students. The university thinks the counsellors should be able to solve all their difficulties in an hour or two. It's quite ridiculous.'

'Yes, I can imagine.'

'Anyway, I won't keep you. Thank you so much for listening. Goodbye.'

After thinking about it for a few minutes I picked up the phone again and rang Jenny's home number. It rang twelve times. I gave up and replaced the receiver. Either she was out or she was refusing to answer. I was worried, but perhaps I worried about Jenny too much. Apart from the aches and pains she probably had no more problems than the average teenager. It was true she was nearly seventeen but missing school and losing contact with her friends had

interrupted her emotional development. Failing to turn up for her appointments and refusing to talk to me or her mother might be simply a way of asserting herself, rebelling against authority figures, growing up.

It was a plausible explanation of the situation and I almost convinced myself that it was the correct one. But something bothered me. Were my own problems starting to make me lose judgement, to look for complications where none existed? What was it about Jenny that resulted in my having so many conflicting feelings about her? Compassion, frustration, curiosity, guilt. I was sorry for Val Weir too and it occurred to me that my wish to help them both arose from feelings of regret about my relationship with my own mother. Not that we had ever got on badly — I couldn't remember a single major disagreement — but we had never really confided in each other, always been careful to avoid saying anything that might cause the slightest pain.

*

It was ten days since I had spoken to Chris on the phone. Even longer since we had seen each other. David's remarks about Bruce and Karen Plant had gone some way towards explaining Chris's reluctance to talk about the murder. Not that I had taken David's suggestion very seriously — he saw intrigue and infidelity all around him, thrived on it — but if Chris had even suspected something had been going on then Karen would be the last person she wanted to discuss.

My last client of the day had changed his appointment to later in the week. I decided to leave work a little early, call round at Chris's house, and suggest a walk in the park. That way the children could

come too, although Jack and Rosie often had after-school activities. Gym Club or Scottish Dancing. Judo or Brownies. Chris was the perfect mother, encouraging all their interests but not being too pushy. There when they needed her but careful not to give the suffocating attention some parents inflict on their children.

The first time we met she had been pregnant with Barnaby. The other two were both at school and she couldn't bear it without a baby. She had admitted this freely and with no pretence that the pregnancy had been an accident. 'That's what I'm good at, Anna. Getting pregnant and giving birth. Some people find the whole thing traumatic. I'm in my element, it's just the way I was made.'

The front door was locked and several empty milk bottles had rolled across the path and were lying on their sides in a pile of dead leaves. I picked them up, then rang the bell and peered through the front window for any signs of life. After a few moments the door was pushed open a crack and Jack's round freckled appeared.

'Hallo, is your mum in?'

He disappeared and I waited for what seemed like several minutes until Chris's voice called from the kitchen.

'Anna?'

Normally I would have followed Jack into the house. I'm not sure why I didn't. Some warning signal? Something in Jack's expression? Something he had overheard? Chris was standing by the sink with her back to me and she didn't turn round.

'Hi. You're just in time for a cup of tea.' Her voice was brittle, tense.

'That'd be nice. Not interrupting anything, am I?'

'Don't be silly. Did you ring the bell? I was upstairs. Anyway, sometimes it doesn't work.'

It had worked. A long peal, loud and clear.

She started making tea and I sat down and took off my coat. I felt tired, irritable, wished I hadn't come, then realized I was being unreasonable. Why shouldn't Chris be tired too? I expected her to be permanently cheerful, amusing, good company.

'The rain's stopped,' I said, 'I wondered if you'd like to go for a walk.'

'Now? Bit late, isn't it? It'll be dark soon.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

Jack had disappeared upstairs. Rosie was in the garden kicking a football against the shed. I looked round for Barnaby.

Chris read my mind. 'Bruce has taken him out in the buggy.'

'Oh, Bruce's home already?'

'He got back early for once. Lately he's been working longer and longer hours. All in aid of promotion, I know, but some days I hardly see him.'

I took my cup of tea. 'Look, I should have phoned first —'

'Oh, for goodness' sake.' But she couldn't disguise her hostility.

Surely she wasn't still cross about the baby-sitting although, come to think of it, it was the first time I had ever said no. Not that she and Bruce went out in the evenings very often, but always in the past I had been more than willing to come round. David had come too and insisted on playing wild games with Rosie and Jack until they were over-excited and reluctant to go upstairs to bed.

Why, this last time, had I turned down her request? Because it was such short notice, because I was only just back after a hard day at work, or was it because I sensed that she was angry with me and not even prepared to discuss what it was all about? If I asked her she

would say she had no idea what I was talking about and accuse me of being oversensitive.

'Rosie's grown,' I said, gazing through the window at the long strip of beaten down grass and scrubby shrubs. It was one of those stupid remarks designed to fill the silence, reduce the tension.

'Yes, I know, she's getting quite lanky. Shame really, I like them when they're plump and cuddly.'

I smiled but she wasn't looking at me. I wished Rosie would come in from the garden. I would like to have joined her, kicking hell out of the orange plastic ball, running up and down, dribbling and shooting.

Chris cleared her throat and starting straightening the farm animals that littered the kitchen table. Four saddleback pigs, a milkmaid seated on a three-legged stool, something with one of its ears missing that might have been a baby goat.

After a moment or two she glanced at me then back at the table.

'Did Bruce phone you?'

'Bruce?' I said, unable to stop myself feigning surprise. 'Oh, yes. Yes he did. Sometime last week. I forget.'

'He told you what you wanted to know?'

'Well, it was nothing really. Just this woman I've been seeing. It wasn't important.'

'That's all right, then.' She scooped two heaped spoonful's of sugar into her cup and starting stirring slowly, rhythmically as though the action was helping her to keep control of her anger.

So it wasn't the baby-sitting. It was Karen Plant. I wanted to have it out with her. Had there really been something between Bruce and Karen, or was Bruce right that the murder had frightened her? Somehow the last explanation didn't ring true. Independent, self-

sufficient Chris terrified something would happen to Bruce and she would be left on her own with three young children. In any case, most of Bruce's work took place in his office. I seemed to remember a time when a woman had 'attacked' him because he wouldn't force her common-law husband to move out of her flat. But the attack had amounted to nothing more than a small scratch on the side of his nose.

I thought about David's remark. The reception at County Hall. Then I looked at Chris's hands gripping her cup of tea and decided it was better not to raise the matter, better to talk about something entirely different.

'You know the post cards I told you about?'

She nodded. 'Have you had any more?'

'Three so far.'

'What did you do with them? Have you put them on the mantelpiece?'

'What? No, of course not.'

I wanted to tell her about the gruesome pictures, and the descriptions of my movements round the town, but there was nothing worse than talking about something important to someone who wasn't really listening. If I mentioned my suspicion that someone had been in the flat she would connect it with my query about the spare key.

'Oh, by the way,' I said, 'I found that key.'

'What key?'

'You know, the one I gave you when I was away on holiday.' I was watching her face. If she still had the key she would know I was lying.

She looked slightly puzzled, as though she couldn't remember anything about a key. Then she lifted a hair out of her tea and draped it over the back of her hand, studying it to see if she could identify the colour.

'Oh, yes, the key. Well, that's all right then.'

I felt depressed. I needed someone to talk to but nobody wanted to listen. Not Martin, certainly not David. Now Chris was freezing me out.

She lifted her cup to her lips and tried to smile but it was too much effort. 'Sorry, love, I've got this awful headache. Had it ever since I woke up.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Why didn't you tell me? Have you taken something?'

'Yes, but it didn't do any good.'

'When Bruce comes back you must let him take over, have a rest, go to bed early.'

'Yes, I might do that.'

I hesitated a moment, then stood up and carried my half-full cup to the sink. I would have rinsed it out but it seemed absurd to wash one cup when the whole draining board was piled high with dirty crockery.

Chris followed me to the front door. I touched her on the arm. 'Sorry you're feeling so rotten. I hope you'll be better soon.'

'Thanks.'

I could see Bruce coming up the road with Barnaby. Chris saw him too, but she went back into the house and closed the front door.

It would be better to get straight into the car and drive off but Bruce would have recognized me in the distance and it would seem odd if I didn't have a few words with him.

I waited, leaning against the wall, humming under my breath. As Bruce drew nearer I could see that he was trying to look pleased to see me.

‘Hi. How are you?’

‘Fine, thanks, how about you?’

‘Oh, not so bad.’

Barnaby was struggling to get out of the buggy. Bruce put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

‘He’s lovely,’ I said, ‘and he looks so like you.’

Bruce shrugged. ‘Really? I’m not very good at seeing likenesses.’

‘Right,’ I said, ‘well, I won’t hold you up.’

‘Nice to see you, Anna. Bye for now.’

Neither of us had mentioned the phone-call. Bruce looked pale and I could have sworn he had lost weight. But maybe he was thinking the same thing about me.

Chapter Seventeen

The vacuum cleaner was refusing to pick up dust. Instead it seemed to be scattering grit all over the carpet. I gave it a kick, then pulled out the plug, sat on the floor, unscrewed its base and began poking my fingers in all the crevices to try and find what was causing the blockage.

Saturdays were always the worst. The long hours stretching ahead. Time that should have been spent relaxing, enjoying a break from work, but was often wasted in morbid introspection. I would have to organize myself better, join a club, take up badminton, go for long exhausting walks.

I thought about walks with David. The first time we met had been on a train going to London. David was sitting opposite, reading the *Financial Times* and eating chocolate peanuts. After an hour or so he folded up his newspaper and started to talk.

He asked where I lived and what I did, and after a fairly short time we discovered we both knew Chris and Bruce, although he had only met them quite recently — during the months since he and his wife split up.

He liked Chris, mainly because she didn't take life too seriously. Bruce, he said, was harmless enough but too much of a worrier, which tended to make him a bit of a bore.

The rest of the journey he talked about his work. He was on his way to visit a packaging company in Surrey.

I listened, giving him my full attention, mainly because I knew that would encourage him to keep talking about himself instead of asking questions about me. When the train reached London I expected him to ask for my phone number and was slightly disappointed when he just said it had been nice talking to me.

Then a week later he phoned. He had got my number from Chris — and found out a fair bit about me at the same time. After that things moved fast and during the next few months we saw each other four or five times a week. I was living in a rented place but thinking of buying my own flat. David was all in favour of this. He assumed we were going to live together but said there was no point in rushing things. If I bought the flat, then later, when his financial situation improved, he would contribute to the mortgage.

It was not until we had been living in the new flat for six or seven weeks that things started to go wrong. By now David's divorce was through and, as he explained, that meant the pressure was off and he and his ex-wife, Iris, could be on better terms. Now and again he went to see his daughter. It was a much better arrangement than taking her out to the zoo or, worse still, bringing her back to the flat and inflicting her on me.

Then one evening he stayed at Iris's house until quite late. Of course he had a very good explanation. Her water tank had sprung a leak and she had forgotten where the stopcock was located so the water had brought down part of the bedroom ceiling. Did that really mean he had to stay there until nearly half past ten? Well, it was all a question of finding someone to give an estimate for repairs.

'At that time of night?'

'Oh, don't go on about it, Anna. Surely one evening on your own's not such a hardship.'

He knew that wasn't what I meant ...

I felt up the vacuum-cleaner tube and pulled out a ball of dust and hairs. Then I unwound threads of carpet from the roller, determined to do the job properly now I had the wretched machine in pieces.

The incident with Iris's water tank should have cleared the air. Instead things went from bad to worse until one evening I decided to have it out with him and was horrified when he confessed that he and Iris had been to bed together. Only once, he said, it was one of those things that happen on the spur of the moment but it wouldn't happen again. From now on he would take his daughter out to tea, or to look round the shops, wherever you were supposed to take a twelve-year-old girl. There would be no more contact with her mother.

I believed him, I needed to believe him, although later I admitted to myself that I had known all along that I was heading for disaster ...

The pieces of vacuum cleaner lay all over the carpet and one of the four screws seemed to be missing. It was only two years since I had bought the thing but it would be better to chuck it out, buy another. I started to cry and the silent tears turned to loud painful sobs that continued for quite a long time and left with me with a sore throat and aching head.

I stood up and went to find a black polythene bag that would hold the discarded sections of vacuum cleaner and anything else I could find. The clothes I never wore, the books I would never read again. I would throw the whole lot in the car and take them to the refuse dump. It would be symbolic of a new start. It was worth a try.

An hour later I tossed two bags into the boot of the car and set off. The ruthless clearing-out had been more difficult than I anticipated. Drawers full of old photos that I couldn't bring myself to throw away. A picture of my parents on their wedding day, my mother with a hairstyle similar to the one I had at present, as though things had come full circle. Then I found one of me and Steven in a bumper car at the fair, and another which must have been taken by a stranger, with all four of us in swimming costumes, screwing up our eyes against the sun.

In the end the amount of stuff I unearthed was hardly enough to warrant a visit to the tip — old notes from my degree course, some second-hand curtains I had bought which turned out to be several inches shorter than the bedroom window, a broken cuckoo clock — but I decided to go all the same. It was nearly one o'clock. I might reach the place and discover it closed at midday on Saturdays. If the gates were locked I would leave the rubbish in the car and drive somewhere, anywhere, round and round until I was so tired that nothing really mattered.

When I reached the tip it was deserted but the gates were still open. Out on the edge of the city the wind was stronger than it had been when I left home. Paper sacks were being lifted in the air. A rusty piece of corrugated iron flapped up and down on the edge of a skip.

I drove slowly, carefully, looking out for broken glass or sharp pieces of metal, winding down the window to get a better look, and letting in the rancid, rotten smell that all rubbish dumps have in common.

The place was not quite empty. As I dragged the polythene bags out of the boot I noticed a man in the far corner poking about with a piece of wood, peering at a pile of cardboard boxes. A newly painted noticeboard warned of dire penalties awaiting anyone who removed anything from the skip. I drew closer and the man looked up, surprised that he no longer had the place to himself. Hurling my bags into a metal skip I walked slowly towards him, rather as someone might approach a large unpredictable dog. Then I called his name.

‘Rob?’

He didn’t jump. He had known who I was all along. I watched him stroll towards me, carrying a couple of old aluminium pans, grinning nervously.

We stared at each other for a moment, then he started giggling.

‘How are you?’ I asked.

‘All right. Could be worse. Might be going on a course in Electronics.’

‘Good. When does it start?’

He shrugged. ‘In a week or two.’

He was dressed in his usual black leather jacket and grey jeans. Under the jacket was a white T-shirt with a design in red and black depicting a woman with a knife in her hand standing over the body of what looked like a hare.

His eyes followed my gaze but he made no comment. I noticed that his shoes were new. Expensive top-quality leather of the kind that cost seventy or eighty pounds. He had told me in the past how easy it was to shoplift, how it wasn’t really stealing since the profit margins themselves were a form of theft.

‘How are you, then?’ he asked.

‘I’m fine, thank you.’

He stared at me. His hair had grown since we last met. It hung over his shoulders and he had dyed it a deep blue-black. He flicked it back, muttering some remark about the wind and how it was getting him down.

I had expected a certain amount of hostility — we had not parted on the best of terms — but he seemed quite pleased to see me. Perhaps the resentment he had felt in the past had been replaced by guilt about the way he had been plaguing me during the last few weeks.

‘I tried to find you,’ I said. ‘About ten days ago it was. I went to your house but you were out. An old woman on the ground floor let me in.’

He nodded. ‘That’s Gladys. She smells a bit funny but she’s OK when you get to know her and she’s got this little dog that pees if you pick it up.’

He giggled, lifting one of his blackened hands to his mouth, then wiping his lips on the sleeve of his jacket.

‘You knew I’d been round, did you?’

‘Thought it might be you,’ he said. ‘One of the other blokes described you. Got it about right, apart from your hair.’

I put my hand up to my head self-consciously.

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ I said. ‘I tried the door to the room — in case you were in there asleep. I’m sorry. I should have left a note.’

He giggled again. ‘Bit of a tip, my room. Doesn’t seem a lot of point cleaning it up, not with the state of the ceiling and bits of plaster falling into everything.’

‘Look, Rob, the reason I wanted to see you. I know you felt bad about not coming to see me anymore.’

'Asked for it, didn't I?'

'Well, yes, in a way, but — '

'You knew it was me.'

'You mean the post cards?'

He looked puzzled. 'Eh?'

'The picture post cards you sent.'

'Not me, mate.' He bent down to inspect a box of broken china.

'I saw you several times, near my flat.'

He relaxed a little, put down his stick, and started rolling a cigarette.

'Yeah, but I don't know anything about post cards.'

'You're sure.'

'Sure I'm sure.' He hesitated, then starting talking fast, not looking at me, concentrating on his cigarette. 'Thing is, after you said I wasn't to see you any more I got this kind of obsession. Crazy. Madness. Couldn't think of anything else. I don't mean dirty stuff. I mean, you were like some sort of ideal woman. I thought about you all the time, had to see you, watch where you went. It was like I hadn't a life of my own. You were my life, d'you know what I mean?'

'Yes, I know what you mean. But you didn't send any cards?'

He shook his head. It was starting to rain, just a light drizzle, but I would have preferred to have the conversation sitting in the warmth of the car. I decided against it.

'And you haven't been up to my flat?'

'Eh?'

'If you wanted to see me I wish you'd just walked up to me and — '

'Yeah, but that would've spoiled it.'

He looked at me, narrowing his eyes until they were like dark slits. He had wanted me to remain a fantasy. Now, face to face, he had been forced back to reality.

‘Your job,’ he said, ‘it’s not right. The way you sit there, you lot, like giant spiders catching poor little flies in their webs.’

‘You should have told me before — when you were coming to see me.’

‘What’s the point? Anyway, I only thought of it after. It’s not your fault, just the whole set up. I read a book about it. Transference, it’s called.’ He put on a high-pitched upper-class accent. ‘Feelings from early childhood are transformed to the new object of — ’

‘Yes, well perhaps if you come and see me some time, then we could talk about it, and about the course you’re going on and — ’

He laughed. ‘Didn’t know I was allowed in your office. One day maybe.’ And he turned and strolled away, searching for a suitable box to hold his pans. ‘Get money for these,’ he called, looking back over his shoulder, grinning.

I was almost out of earshot when he raised his head and shouted against the wind.

‘Watch out for yourself. I said — watch out for yourself, there’s funny people around. I could tell you about one I know that’s right out of order.’

*

On the way home I drove past the police station, turned left by the Greek restaurant, then looped back searching for somewhere to park. The shoppers had thinned out and I found a space without too much difficulty and sat staring at the steering-wheel, trying to make up my mind what to do next.

As long as I thought the intruder was Rob I had managed, more or less, to keep my anxiety under control. In any case, I had no wish to get him into trouble. Or perhaps I thought that when the police found out he was an ex-client they would raise their eyebrows and imply I had only myself to blame. But Rob had convinced me — well, I was ninety-five per cent certain — that he wasn't the intruder. The post cards I was not so sure about, but in any case it would be better not to mention them to the police. If I did they would assume that they came from a disturbed client and were something I should take in my stride if I wanted to do that kind of a job.

I climbed out of the car, checked both doors, and started walking before I could change my mind. Then, remembering it was Saturday, I hesitated. But that was ridiculous. Police stations, like hospitals, stay open twenty-four hours, three hundred and sixty-five days of the year. Of course, weekends might be their busiest time, in which case it would be better to put off the visit and return on Monday.

I was looking for excuses. Having got this far it would be stupid to turn back.

I ran up the stone steps two at a time and pushed open the swing door. The desk sergeant, a heavily built man with grey hair and a pale complexion, looked up and put a hand over his mouth to cover a yawn.

'Yes, madam, what can I do for you?'

'Inspector Fry, I wondered ... Is he here this afternoon?'

'Did you have an appointment?'

'No, but a friend — Martin Wheeler — he knows Inspector Fry and he suggested I come and talk to him about — well, it's all rather complicated.'

'If you could let me have your name.'

'Anna McColl.'

'I'll see what I can do.'

The sergeant disappeared and I waited, leaning on the desk. The place was quieter than I had expected. A policewoman was attending to a youngish man, who seemed to be out on bail, and had come to sign his name in a book. In a dark corner a tramp with matted hair and a long black coat encrusted with filth sat by himself inspecting an empty lemonade bottle, holding it up to the light. The youngish man left and the policewoman glanced at me and smiled.

'Rain held off, has it?'

'More or less. It's windy though and quite cold.'

She nodded, glanced at the tramp, who seemed to be a familiar fixture, then returned to her work. A few moments later the sergeant came back and invited me to follow him down the corridor. Walking carefully, afraid of losing my balance on the highly polished linoleum, I began working out what I was going to say. Explain that I was only there because Martin had suggested it, apologize for reporting something so trivial but ...

The sergeant knocked on a door, then held it open for me to enter.

'Ms McColl, sir.'

Inspector Fry stepped forward holding out his hand. He was tall and looked more like an accountant than a policeman. Thick reddish-brown hair, parted on the left. Grey suit, white shirt, blue and red tie.

'Hallo. You're a friend of Martin Wheeler?'

'We work together.'

'Another psychologist?'

I nodded.

‘Good. Right then, how can I help?’

He pointed to a chair but didn’t ask if I wanted to take off my coat.

‘Martin suggested I came and saw you,’ I said. ‘It’s about — well, I think someone may have been in my flat.’

‘And you live ... ’

‘Cliftonwood.’ I told him the name of my road. ‘Number twenty-eight, the first-floor flat.’

‘Anything been stolen?’

‘No. Just a coffee mug not in its usual place. And a plant — someone watered it. The earth was completely sodden.’

It sounded absurd. Wasn’t it common folklore that only slightly crazy people become psychiatrists and psychologists? But Inspector Fry was writing on a pad and there was no hint of scepticism in his expression.

He raised his head, waiting for me to elaborate and I looked away, painfully aware that I was in more or less the same situation as one of my clients wondering how to put her problem into words.

‘That’s about it really. Oh, there was a pink tissue pushed down behind my bed. Not one of mine. Actually that was the first thing I found but I just assumed I must have dropped it there myself. I mean someone must have given it to me and I hadn’t noticed the colour.’

‘And all this was fairly recent, was it?’

‘Yes, during the last few weeks. Look, I don’t actually expect you to do anything about it.’

He smiled, just a slight movement at the corners of his mouth. ‘Best to let us know, then if you have any further trouble ... ’

‘It’s the kind of thing where you’re not sure if it’s all in your imagination or — ’

'Is there anyone you have in mind? Someone who might have a key? I assume there was no sign of a break-in.'

'No, nothing. No, I can't think of anyone. That's why it all seems so peculiar.'

'Any domestic trouble? An ex-husband — '

'I'm not married. I mean, no, nothing like that.'

'Money owing? I'm sorry, but we have to check.'

I shook my head.

Inspector Fry put down his pen and rested his chin on his hand. His little finger moved backwards and forwards across his lips. Then he undid the leather strap on his watch and started rubbing at his wrist.

'An allergic reaction. Or maybe you'd interpret it as something psychological.'

'I wouldn't.'

He laughed, laid his watch on the desk and sat up straight.

'Could it have been one of your patients? Someone with a grievance — or just curious to see where you live.'

'Yes, I suppose so. I don't know.'

'Anyway, I'll make a note of what you've told me and you'll let me know if you find anything else disturbed.' He stood up and held out his hand once again. I was wasting his time but he was too polite to say so. After I left he would phone Martin to enquire if I was under some particular strain. Then he would put a few notes on files and forget all about it.

The desk sergeant glanced at me as I was leaving the building. I called out to thank him and he raised an arm. An old woman was telling him about a parcel she'd left on the bus and he was trying to

calm her down so he could give her directions to the Lost Property office.

I walked slowly back to the car, feeling slightly guilty that I had told Inspector Fry nothing about Rob Starkey. But then if I had I would have felt guilty on Rob's behalf and it wasn't as though I expected anyone to take any action. Lies of omission. I hadn't mentioned David or Iris either. Or Diane Easby and Karen Plant. Was it because I was afraid Inspector Fry would lose interest in the intruder and start accusing me of withholding information about a murder case? But there was no information. Nothing that would be of interest to the police.

I relaxed and started humming under my breath. I felt better, light-hearted, almost euphoric. Perhaps, in some illogical way, just by visiting the police station I had got rid of the intruder, persuaded him to leave me in peace. To celebrate I would drive out to the hypermarket on the by-pass and buy myself a new vacuum cleaner.

Chapter Eighteen

I had sent Owen Hughes the research proposal and he had phoned to ask if I could drop by at the end of the week to discuss a few points. Why had I thought research into hypochondria was such a good idea? I remembered discussing it with David, who was all for the project and had promised to help with the analysis of the data. Had I suggested it as a way of flattering his ego, of uniting us in a common activity?

I began creating an imaginary scenario in my head. Owen Hughes, polite, apologetic, explaining that unfortunately he would be going abroad in a few months' time. An exchange with another academic or a lecture tour of America. He could ask someone else to supervise my work but perhaps in the circumstances it would be better to put it off for a year. In the meantime I could always do some preliminary reading. Gradually, the whole project would sink without trace.

I was so absorbed in my daydream that when the phone rang I was sure it would be Owen Hughes cancelling our meeting. It was Val Weir.

'I know you're expecting Jenny in half an hour but I'm afraid she's got one of her heads.'

'Oh, I'm sorry about that.'

I had assumed that the times of Jenny's appointments coincided with her mother being out at work. Otherwise surely Val would have known she was staying at home.

But perhaps Jenny left the house, as though she were coming to see me, then went somewhere entirely different.

‘The thing is,’ said Val, ‘I hate to ask you but could you possibly come round to the house?’

I hesitated.

‘Just for ten minutes or so,’ she urged, ‘only it seems such a shame for her to miss one of her sessions.’

‘Yes. Well, yes, all right.’ I had no wish to go to the house. On the other hand, seeing Jenny in her home environment would be a chance to re-establish contact. Also, she would be afraid I had told her mother about the missed appointments. When she discovered I had kept her secret she might feel more well-disposed towards me.

‘I’ll drop round at lunch-time,’ I said, ‘only I won’t be able to stay very long I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, that is kind. I hate putting you to all this trouble.’

‘No trouble, Mrs Weir. I’ll see you at one o’clock.’

In the meantime Mr and Mrs Sherrin were coming to see me, a retired couple with a familiar problem. On giving up his business Mr Sherrin had turned his hand to reorganizing the household that Mrs Sherrin had been running single-handed for the last forty years.

On their first visit Enid Sherrin had been at breaking point. ‘He stands over me when I’m clearing away the breakfast things. He says there’s no method in the way I go about things.’

But last time I saw them they had found a way of working towards some kind of compromise and so pleased were they with their new way of living that they had ganged up against me and accused me of finding problems where none existed. This week would probably mean more of the same.

I walked slowly down the stairs and opened the waiting-room door. They were sitting side by side, holding hands.

When they saw me they stood up, both beaming. Mrs Sherrin had a small parcel in her hand, gift wrapped in white tissue paper with a large pale blue bow.

‘We’ll just come up for a minute,’ she said. ‘Come on, Gerard.’

Inside my room they stood together by the window. The parcel was pushed into my hands.

‘Just a small token of our thanks,’ said Gerard. ‘I never thought much of you people before but you’ve proved me wrong, worked a miracle, I’d say.’

It’s embarrassing opening a present in front of the giver but that’s what I was expected to do. I undid the ribbon, then lifted out a small circular wooden box, highly polished and inlaid with a darker pattern.

‘Open it,’ said Gerard, ‘it’s an apprentice’s sample, made by my uncle when he was a lad. Here, let me show you.’

He lifted the lid to reveal another circular box, then another and another down to one that was barely an inch in diameter.

‘Like your work,’ said Enid. ‘Each time you solve one problem you find another one.’

She had her hand on my arm. It wasn’t a criticism. It was meant to be a compliment. I thanked them profusely, then said goodbye to them at the top of the stairs and wished them well. After that I returned to my room and started putting all the boxes together again. Then I burst into tears.

*

When I reached the house Val was waiting just inside the open front door. She came hurrying down the path.

'I feel dreadful dragging you out like this.'

'No problem,' I said, taking in the bow windows, glass porch, and the small white car in the parking bay.

I stepped into the spotless hallway and Val took my coat and hung it next to her own. On a small oval table stood a bowl of pot-pourri and a large china cat. The scent of the dried flower-heads blended with other smells coming from the kitchen at the end of the passage. Warm bread and celery soup?

Val was dressed in brown wool trousers and a heather-mixture sweater. Her hair was held back from her face by a wide beige band but in spite of this she looked softer, less severe than when I had seen her in the park. She led me into the front room, then asked me to excuse her for a moment.

I sat down on the nearest chair and gazed round the room. My first impression was of how incredibly clean and tidy everything looked. Val hadn't tidied up specially because of my visit. It was always like this. I could tell.

On the wall above the living-flame gas fire was a reproduction of Monet's *Water Lilies*. Several photographs in expensive frames stood on the mantelpiece. Two were of Jenny as a small baby. In another she look about six or seven, dressed in a bottle-green school uniform, her hair neatly parted and held in place by a butterfly slide.

The room was beautifully furnished but it had a lonely feel to it. I imagined Val and Jenny sitting side by side on the large cushioned sofa. Or perhaps Jenny lay full-length, wrapped in a duvet, and her mother sat in the matching armchair. What did they talk about? Val's work as a receptionist? Jenny's visits to the doctor or to see me?

Val returned with a tray. She looked concerned.

'You're tired, I can see it in your eyes, and there's me making even more work for you. You haven't eaten, have you? Just soup, I'm afraid, but it'll keep out the cold.'

'Oh.' I had no appetite but didn't want to seem rude. 'Thanks.'

On the tray were two grey earthenware bowls and two willow-pattern plates, each with a large slice of wholemeal bread. Jenny must be having hers in bed.

'Jenny's upstairs, is she?' I asked.

Val flinched slightly. 'She was. I feel awful after you've come all this way. I'm afraid she went out to the shops five minutes ago.'

'She knew I was coming?'

Val nodded. 'I told her you were but I couldn't hear what she said.'

I laughed. 'It was probably unrepeatable.'

'Oh, no, she likes coming to see you. It's just that she's so terribly sensitive. The slightest thing can upset her for hours. I expect it was something I said. I have to be so careful.'

'Don't be.'

'Really? You think it's best to treat her just like anyone else?'

She moved a coffee-table closer to my chair, then started spreading out my lunch. She was nervous, afraid I would blame her for Jenny's departure, afraid she had made things worse for Jenny. I tried to reduce her anxiety.

'Look, don't worry. The thing is, everything that happens is part of helping Jenny. Not just her coming to see me, but all of this. I mean, perhaps it was a mistake me coming here, but perhaps not. Sometimes doing something the client doesn't like has a good effect,

indirectly. It changes things, provides an opportunity to develop the relationship.'

Who was I trying to reassure? But Val looked relieved.

'Yes, I think I know what you mean. One of the counsellors at the university forgot an appointment but the student just said it was a relief the counsellor wasn't superhuman. After that they got on like a house on fire.'

'Exactly.' I picked up my spoon and took a sip of the celery soup. It was very hot, probably home-made, and rather comforting.

Val sat on a seat which had been specially made to fit the large bow window. She glanced at the front garden, then lowered her voice as though she thought Jenny might be listening from behind a bush.

'Has she told you about the television?'

'Television?'

'I'm afraid she's quite hooked on all the soap operas. Once the picture had interference — it was low pressure or something — and she became quite hysterical. She sees the characters as real people, like friends. I wonder sometimes if it's quite normal.'

'Oh, I wouldn't worry. She's spent a lot of time at home during the last few years. People use soap operas to create a kind of social life for themselves.'

'Yes, I see. So you don't think it matters, just for the time being until she's well again?'

'Does Jenny see any of her old school friends?'

'Never. She's completely lost touch. I've tried to persuade her to invite people round but she says they wouldn't want to come.'

Perhaps now's the time to try again. I know she needs to see people of her own age.'

I bit into the chunk of bread, trying not to drop crumbs on the carpet.

'Where d'you think Jenny will have gone?' I asked.

'Oh, not far — she likes looking round the shops — not long ago she stayed out till nearly six-fifteen. I was quite worried. She didn't mention it to you, did she?'

I shook my head. 'I expect she'll come home as soon as she thinks I'm safely out of the way.'

Val was silent. She hadn't touched her soup and in fact there had been very little in her bowl to start with.

In contrast, my appetite had improved and I was rather enjoying having lunch provided for me. It made a change from a snatched sandwich or sitting in a noisy pub with Martin, Nick, and Beth.

'Jenny's father,' I said cautiously, expecting Val to bristle, 'I don't think she's kept in contact.'

She sighed but she seemed sad rather than defensive.

'He moved to the Midlands, made a new life for himself. Oh, I know he cares about Jenny but ...

'Things must have been difficult for you.'

'Well, yes in a way, but I wouldn't want you to think it was all his fault. Six of one and half a dozen of the other. Jenny tends to blame her father, not that I've ever said anything against him, but I suppose she feels she has to take sides.'

'Perhaps she worries about you.'

'Yes, I'm afraid you may be right. That's one of my main regrets.'

I felt uneasy talking about Jenny behind her back. On the other hand, it had been her choice to leave me alone with her mother. Perhaps I hadn't scared her off, perhaps she just wanted the two of us to get to know each other better.

Val was watching me, wondering what I was thinking. She pushed a butter dish in my direction but I smiled and shook my head.

'This soup's delicious.'

'Thank you.'

'It's a lovely house.' I looked round at the blue and white wallpaper, the blue fitted carpet and fluffy white hearth rug.

'We like it. Of course it's rather large now there's just the two of us but I'd hate to move. Staying on here provides a feeling of continuity.'

'Yes, of course.'

I pictured Jenny and Val sitting by the fire in the evening watching soap operas, speculating about who was going to have a baby, embark on an illicit affair, get in trouble with the police. Just for a moment I felt quite envious.

'I don't know if it's the same when she sees you,' said Val, 'but when Jenny's at home she never says very much.'

'I think she finds it difficult to express how she feels.'

'So you haven't got much out of her either?'

I thought fast, not wanting to tell her anything that Jenny hadn't told her already.

'Oh, it's early days yet. She'll talk when she wants to.'

Now that I was here I was determined to make the most of the opportunity. Dr Ingram had told me so little, even implied I had no right to ask him for information. Val, on the other hand, seemed quite happy to talk.

'The headaches,' I said, 'can you remember when they began?'

I smiled at her but she didn't seem to have heard what I said. Her eyes conveyed the same sadness I had noticed in the park. Then her shoulders moved as though a shudder had run down her back, and she came back to life.

'Oh, sorry, you asked me a question. Jenny's headaches. It's hard to think. Of course Jenny was always delicate. I didn't have her until I was in my late twenties and she was born three weeks premature and at first they weren't sure she was going to live.'

'How awful for you.'

'Yes. Of course, it took her a while to catch up. I sometimes wonder if that's why she's so thin.'

'Yes, I see.' I wanted to find out about the 'bit of bother' a few months back, but maybe in this respect Dr Ingram had been right. I should wait until Jenny was ready to tell me. If she ever returned to see me, which I was now beginning to doubt.

'Do you live in this part of the city?' asked Val.

'No, Cliftonwood.'

'Oh yes, I know. I had a friend who played the organ at that church up by the primary school.'

She started telling me about her own church and how the vicar had some rather unusual ideas but was a wonderful parish priest all the same. I wasn't really listening. Since seeing Rob the post cards had been constantly on my mind. If he hadn't sent them it could be any one of a dozen ex-clients — or even one I was still seeing. It even occurred to me that David might be responsible. One of his elaborate games designed to tease, keep me guessing. The last one — the woman with gaping mouth and bushy hair — did that represent his

general view of women? Not really, he would confess with a laugh. Only a joke. I could hear his voice, smell his skin, his hair ...

Val had stopped talking and was watching me intently. I jumped slightly. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're worn out, I'm not surprised, and there's me rambling on. The counsellors at the university get more and more exhausted as the term goes on, but then there's the vacations, time for them to get their breath back, whereas for you — '

'We do have the occasional holiday.'

'Yes, of course, and I'm sure you need it. It's strange, isn't it, nowadays there's all these therapists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, whereas when I was a girl we never talked about anything much, just fashions and hair-styles, all that kind of thing.'

'You think there's too much psychology about?'

'Oh, no, I wouldn't say that, I think it's a big improvement, only I sometimes find it strange — all those television programmes discussing topics that were quite unmentionable only ten or fifteen years ago.'

She began collecting up the soup bowls and plates. Then she asked if I would like some coffee.

'Jenny and I usually drink decaffeinated but I think there's — '

'No coffee thanks. But the lunch was delicious.'

She sat down again, leaving the tray on a mahogany sideboard. 'Oh, you do look tired. I hope you have someone you can confide in. Care for the carers, they call it, don't they?'

It was the first time for ages that someone had been concerned for my wellbeing. Martin, of course, but his words always sounded like a

criticism of my inability to take a sensible professional attitude to my work.

Just for moment I wanted to tell her about Rob, and the cards, and the intruder in my flat. Instead I stood up, smiling, and my voice when I spoke had the cheery tone I would have picked up at once as a defence if one of my clients had spoken that way.

‘Yes, there’s always someone we can talk to. It’s an exhausting job but it can be very rewarding.’

I sounded so false, but Val smiled sympathetically. ‘Before you go, I wondered, would you like to see Jenny’s bedroom?’

‘Well, yes, if you think she wouldn’t mind.’

‘Oh, no, I’m sure she’d like you to.’

She ran up the stairs ahead of me. She was exceptionally light on her feet for someone so tall.

I allowed a moment for her to tidy up if necessary, then followed her into what must have been the smallest bedroom in the house.

Everything was pink. Pink walls, pink and white curtains with matching duvet cover, pink carpet. My eyes were drawn to the windowsill, which was covered in china animals but without the usual dust that collects on rows of ornaments. Two tabby kittens playing with a ball of wool, a white duck with five ducklings, a chestnut foal, a black and white spaniel. I walked across and lifted up the kittens.

‘Have you got a cat?’

She shook her head. ‘Poor old Muffin, she died just a few months ago.’ Her voice was a croaky whisper. She looked distraught, as though the cat’s death had been a shattering blow.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘losing an animal can be terribly upsetting. People who’ve never had a pet don’t understand.’

Someone was putting a key in the front door. Val looked slightly startled.

‘That’ll be Jenny. We’d better go down.’

Jenny stood in the hallway, smiling. She looked happier than I had ever seen her, but perhaps she kept the gloomy face for her appointments with me.

‘Hallo, Jenny.’

‘Hallo.’ She glanced at me with a strange, almost triumphant expression on her face, then ran upstairs.

She was angry with me for coming round. She assumed I had told her mother about the missed appointments but she didn’t care.

Val touched me lightly on the arm. ‘Thank you so much. Jenny’s next appointment’s on Friday, isn’t it? Not that I ever say anything but she has all the dates marked on her calendar. She likes everything to be properly organized. She’s always been the same, so methodical, so conscientious.’

Chapter Nineteen

Owen Hughes was reading through my proposal — ‘to reacquaint himself with the details’ — although I suspected it was the first time he had looked at it properly.

I waited, shivering. An ancient radiator at the far end of the room made occasionally glugging sounds but seemed to be producing very little heat. I wished I had kept my coat on but it seemed rude to go and fetch it from the hook on the back of the door.

He was dressed in the same grey jacket as before but under it he wore a black sweater over his dark blue shirt. After a few minutes he leaned back in his chair and raised his arms above his head.

‘Well then, what’s the hypothesis?’

‘Hypothesis,’ I repeated stupidly, ‘well, the way I see it, I think there may be a particular type of personality who channels all his or her anxieties into their body ... their bodily functions.’

‘So you’ve defined hypochondria, now what?’

‘I want to find out if this is learned behaviour or something innate, inherited.’

He raised his eyebrows a little. ‘Go on.’

‘And I also want to find the best way to help these people.’

‘That sounds more promising.’

He stood up and walked towards the window. With the light behind him all I could see was the dark shape of his body. His face had become a blur.

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I’ve been wondering if it might not be better to look at frequent attenders, people who have far above the average number of consultations with their GP every year.’

‘Aren’t they the same group, more or less?’

‘Not necessarily. Some of the frequent attenders may just want someone to talk to. They may admit they’re not physically ill, just anxious or depressed.’

‘Do you know a doctor who would co-operate? Several doctors would be better.’

‘Yes, I think I could arrange it.’

‘Good.’ He sat down again, pulled a clean sheet of paper from a drawer and started making notes. ‘You’ll need to compare two groups. A group of — what is it you call them?’

‘Frequent attenders.’

‘And a control group, picked randomly from the whole list of registered patients.’

He was talking to me as though I was a complete idiot but it was my own fault, I had encouraged him to treat me that way.

‘Right,’ I said, standing up, preparing to leave.

‘You have to go somewhere?’

‘No. Not really.’ I sat down again.

‘How long have you been working here, or did I ask you that before?’

He didn’t wait for an answer. Someone was knocking on the door. Crossing the room he opened it a crack and told whoever it was to go away and come back another time. Then he returned to his swivel chair and seemed to be trying to remember what we had been talking about.

‘What did you think of the seminar?’

So he had seen me after all.

‘It was interesting.’

‘Not too bad. At least we were spared the overhead projector and she seemed to know what she was talking about even if she had very little in the way of a coherent theory to explain the phenomenon.’

‘I agreed with most of it,’ I said a little sharply. ‘Some of the other people there seemed pretty sceptical, but nobody had a good alternative theory.’

He swung round to face me and it was as though it was the first time he had really looked at me.

‘I’ve been in Psychology for donkeys’ years, you know. You grow stale, cynical. It’s bad for the students.’

‘I didn’t mean you. I meant — ’

‘No, you’re perfectly right. Incidentally, your colleague, Martin — we bump into each other now and again. Somewhat disillusioned with clinical psychology, isn’t he?’

‘I think the job tends to wear you out.’

‘What job doesn’t?’ His chair looked unsteady and I was afraid it might tip over but presumably he knew its limitations.

‘You’re married I expect. Children?’

That threw me for a moment. ‘No, no I’m not married.’

He nodded vaguely. Did he want me to fill him in on my personal life? Perhaps he was wondering if I was going to start the research then give up half-way through having wasted several hours of his valuable time.

'I'll have plenty of time at the weekends,' I said, 'and I could probably come in one afternoon a week when I need to use the computer.'

He wasn't listening. A pen in his inside pocket seemed to have leaked on to the lining of his jacket. He dabbed at it with a disintegrating tissue, then placed the pen on his desk, along with a collection of pencils, paperclips, and pieces of crumpled paper.

'D'you know anyone in the Psychology Department?' he asked.

'No.'

'You clinical people stay well clear I expect. Can't say I blame you. Where did you do your training?'

'London.'

'Miss it?'

'Sometimes. Not often. I lived quite a long way out, couldn't afford the rents near the centre.'

'Who can?' He picked up my proposal and handed it to me. 'Frequent attenders — see what you can come up with. Try to describe your methodology in detail. Bit of a bore but worth it in the long run.'

He stood up and opened the door. I held out my hand but he didn't seem to notice. He was staring down the corridor, where a student, dressed in black Lycra tights and a scarlet sweatshirt, was reaching up to pin something on to a noticeboard.

'Thank you,' I said.

'What? Oh, that's all right. Give me a ring if you need any help.' And he disappeared back into his room and closed the door.

*

As soon as I stepped into my office the phone started ringing. I picked it up and a gruff North Country voice spoke immediately.

'Oh, you're there, are you? I tried earlier but you must have been having a long lunch hour.'

It was Fleur Peythieu. I recognized the voice at once. 'Oh, hallo, how can I help?'

'Look, I'm calling from a pay-phone in the student union and the noise here's bloody deafening so you'll have to speak up. The thing is, after you left I remembered something about this person I told you about, the one Karen was dead scared of.'

'Oh, I see. Good.' It was nearly a week since I had called round to see her. Surely she could have phoned before.

'Still interested, are you?'

'Yes, of course.' In the background I could hear the sound of crockery, metal trays being slammed down on formica tables, laughter, chairs scraping on the ground.

'She'd get herself right worked up about him. I'd never seen her in such a state.'

She was exaggerating her Lancashire accent on purpose, yelling into the phone as a way of registering her disapproval of the noise going on all round her.

'It was definitely a man, was it? D'you mean she was frightened he was going to harm her?'

'Not exactly. I couldn't really say. She kept starting to tell me about it, then she'd give up before she'd said what she wanted to. She was like that. I never pushed her and if I had it wouldn't have done a blind bit of good. Only once she let this name slip out.'

'The man's name?'

'I've been thinking. Something beginning with D, I thought. A foreign name. Then I remembered, it weren't foreign, it was Australian. Anyway, that's all I can remember.'

'Thanks, Fleur. Thanks very much. If the actual name comes back to you — '

'It won't.'

'No, well, anyway I'm grateful to you for taking the trouble to — '

'You think I don't care,' she said angrily.

'No.'

'Yes, you do, but we don't all wear our hearts on our sleeves, you know.'

'I understand.'

She laughed, a short bitter snort.

'The money's running out and I've no more change. Anyway, there's nothing else to tell. See you.'

She didn't mean she would see me. She meant her call had put an end to the matter and she hoped I wouldn't bother her again.

I thought about Karen Plant, struggling to keep her job and her personal life under control. Overworking to escape from an unhappy love affair? I wished I had known her and I wished I had met Keith Merchant. I had nothing to go on, nothing the police would take seriously, but I was starting to think that Keith really might have confessed to a murder he had not committed. What a relief his confession must have been to the real killer. It had closed the case, there would be no more questions, he was safe, could almost convince himself it had never happened.

My next client wasn't due for fifteen minutes. I went downstairs to look for Martin. I wanted to reassure him that everything was back to

normal between us, that the incident in the pub wouldn't make any difference.

Why did I have this absurd compulsion to make everyone else feel all right? I was the same with Chris. She was the one who had been cool, almost hostile, yet I was the one who felt guilty. I decided to call round again and try to sort things out between us. Thursday straight after work would be best, while Rosie and Jack were at their Children's Theatre Group. Chris and Barnaby and I could go for a walk. I would say very little, just listen, accept her anger, whether it was about the baby-sitting or whatever, say nothing about Bruce and certainly nothing about the murder of Karen Plant.

For once Martin was busy seeing a client. Heather obviously felt like a chat, but I made an excuse and went next door to the bathroom, where I put down the lid on the lavatory seat and sat leaning against the cold cistern. On the back of the door someone had scratched a drawing of a pin man with a trilby hat and a gun in his hand. I wondered if one of my clients was responsible but couldn't think of a likely candidate — apart from Rob and the drawing wasn't up to his usual standard.

I thought about Jenny, sitting in her bedroom surrounded by her china animals. When had she learned to 'escape into illness'? What would I have done in Val's position? Treated her like a fragile flower or told her to pull herself together?

I began to wonder if my work with Jenny was doing more harm than good. Perhaps it just allowed her to continue to see herself as 'a case'. On the other hand, any intervention led to some kind of change and Val seemed to think she was making progress of a sort. If she missed her next appointment I would write her a letter, try to

reassure her, put no pressure but make it clear that she could come back and see me without fear of being criticized for staying away for nearly a fortnight.

I thought about Val and wondered if she had been on duty when Fleur Peythieu visited the counselling service. As far as I could tell Fleur had only been once, and then only to please other people. After that she had felt able to come to terms with her friend's murder without the aid of professional helpers. I tried to picture Karen and Fleur sharing a flat together. From what I knew of Fleur it seemed a highly unlikely friendship. On the other hand, I knew next to nothing about Karen Plant and my image of her could be quite wrong, a combination of false impressions — from the newspaper, from Bruce, David, Diane Easby.

It was several days since Diane had been in touch. In fact no official appointment had been made, although that wouldn't stop her from coming to see me if something cropped up. Another visit from the Social Services, a row with her husband, or a set to with the Gas or Electricity Board.

I was doing it again, escaping into worrying about my clients when I should have been trying to sort out my own life. It was time I took the initiative with David, issued some kind of ultimatum, made a time limit for myself, just as I had advised poor Mrs Hillman to do. She and I had so much in common. We burned with anger, yet another emotion — fear — was even stronger. What were we both so afraid of? Being alone? Giving up an illusion? But Mrs Hillman was fifteen, getting on for twenty, years older than I was. She had some excuse for clinging on, whereas I was beginning to despise myself.

I stood up, ran ice-cold water in the basin and splashed it on my face and neck. Then I pulled out the plug and watched it slowly gurgle down the hole.

Wiping the face of my watch, which was covered with droplets of water, I realized that it was already past the hour. I drew in several deep breaths, then strode down the corridor to collect my next client, Mr Gooch, an elderly man with sexual problems which he liked to describe in minute detail. After that a woman in her thirties, who had been referred for help with her obsessive compulsion to rid her house of hidden germs, but was now starting to come to terms with her real anxieties.

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Later, as I drove past the flat looking for somewhere to park, my anger returned. An ancient pink Chevrolet, parked half on the pavement, had taken most of the space in front of my house and the one next door. I cursed it, made an awkward three-point turn and drove back down the road, turning into the cul-de-sac and stopping opposite the graveyard. A dilapidated sign said parking in front of the entrance was strictly forbidden but none of the local residents took any notice. The main gates were covered in straggly creeper. Nobody had opened them for years or taken a car — let alone a hearse — up the narrow gravel driveway.

While I was leaning over the back seat to reach for a book on psychosomatic illness that I had brought home with me I saw a movement behind the trees. Branches swaying in the wind. But there was no wind. Then I saw them, two figures, one tall, the other much smaller, her face barely visible because of the anorak hood drawn up tight.

Sitting perfectly still I watched them as they stood staring at something, not speaking to each other, just looking straight ahead. Then the taller of the two bent down and seemed to be touching something on the ground.

After several more minutes they turned and started walking back towards me.

My instinct was to jump out of the car and confront them. What was Rob doing hanging around near my flat yet again? But the graveyard was not my territory. He had as much right as anyone else to walk among the stones, reading the inscriptions with their quaint sentimental messages. Wasn't that just what David and I had liked to do, on warm summer evenings, on our way back from the pub?

'Asleep at last in Jesus.'

'The sailor home from the Sea.'

And the one that David liked best of all, a quotation from a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose,
With my lost saints — I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and if God choose I shall but love
thee better after death.

It was the kind of thing that brought tears to David's eyes and it had been one of the reasons I had fallen in love with him. Now ...

The two figures were drawing nearer. I stayed put in the car, pretending to search for something in the glove compartment but watching them out of the corner of my eye. They walked side by side but with several feet between them. When they reached the iron gates they paused. Rob whispered something to the girl and she pushed back her hood and ran her fingers through her short brown

hair. Perhaps I had known who she was as soon as I saw her in the distance. But watching her standing there under the street-lamp with Rob still came as a shock. More than that, she was doing something I had never seen her do before. Her body was perfectly still and her face expressionless. Silently, the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Chapter Twenty

The post cards had disappeared from the drawer in my kitchen table. So they had been from Rob after all. Not only had he sent the cards but he was also the intruder. Running into me at the refuse tip had alarmed him. After he had admitted hanging about outside my flat he had been afraid I might contact the police. But with the cards gone there would be no evidence of what had been going on. They would only have my word for it.

And another thing, how had he met up with Jenny and what kind of an influence would he be on such a vulnerable kind of girl? In a way it was none of my business. In another way, it was difficult to believe that their friendship had nothing to do with the fact that I had been seeing both of them. I wondered if it was because of Rob that Jenny had missed all those appointments. He had told her to stay away, that anything I did for her would cause her more harm than good, that, in any case, since I sent people away when the going got hard I would be certain to let her down sooner or later.

After they had left the graveyard I waited until they were out of sight then locked the car and went through the gap between the railings and the iron gates, trying to retrace their footsteps. It had not been difficult. Their shoes had flattened the long damp grass and I soon found the spot where they must have been standing.

I looked about for anything out of the ordinary, but there was nothing. Just the familiar cracked and crumbling stones, one with a cross leaning at an angle of forty-five degrees, another with its

inscription entirely obliterated by bright green moss. Then I noticed what looked like a new stone. Small and white and spotlessly clean, not a typical gravestone, more like a painted breeze-block. There was nothing written on it but beside it someone had placed a white bowl of purple crocuses and a few tiny wilting snowdrops. I shivered a little, aware that I might be intruding on private grief. I remembered Jenny's tears. Rob whispering in her ear. She had been showing him the improvised headstone and he had been comforting her. Had she put the stone there herself? Or perhaps Rob had carried it there for her and when I saw them they had come back with the vase of flowers.

Just before I left work a phone-call came through for me in reception. Chris, wanting me to call round.

'You must have read my mind,' I said.

This was not entirely true since I had forgotten my decision to have things out with her. Part of me wanted to go straight home, then set out again looking for Rob. Also, I would have liked it to be me who had offered to make things up between us, although it was possible that Chris wanted to see me for some entirely different reason.

'I'll be with you in about ten minutes,' I said.

'Yes, all right. If you come straight away, we could go for a walk before it gets dark.'

*

We strolled round the park, a different one from the park where Val Weir had introduced herself. The nearest open space to where Chris lived was more of a recreation ground, with swings and slides at one end, a few scruffy flowerbeds, and a large amount of muddy-looking grass surrounded by a concrete path. On a clear day if you climbed

to the top of a grassy bank you could see the Brecon Beacons across the other side of the Severn Estuary. Today all that was visible was the haze of smoke hanging over the docks and the distant chimneys of the huge chemical works at Avonmouth.

We talked of this and that, putting off the moment when we would have to admit the real purpose of the walk. I had decided to let Chris raise the subject. Sometimes — she always said it laughingly — she accused me of talking to her like a psychologist. She didn't mean it as a joke.

'Well,' she said at last, giving the buggy a push so it ran ahead of us, veering to the right until I was afraid it was going to tip over and deposit Barnaby on the path, 'I suppose I shall have to apologize.'

'It's all right,' I said, regretting the remark at once since it made it sound as though I was an innocent victim of her anger. 'I mean, I know I've upset you in some way. Is it about the baby-sitting or —'

'Karen Plant,' she said, 'you think she and Bruce had something going.'

'What? No, I don't. I just needed some information about the murder — for a client.'

'I wish you wouldn't keep lying to me, treating me as though I'm half-witted. David knew about it, didn't he?'

'No. Yes. I don't know what he knew.'

'What did he say? No, I'd rather hear it word for word.'

I turned to face her. 'Actually David did mention something. Last week, when he gave me a lift in his car.'

'You knew about it before last week.'

'No I didn't, and since he'd never mentioned it before I didn't take much notice. You know what he's like.'

'Oh, it happened all right. Bruce was totally besotted. The only thing that prevented a full-blown affair was that she didn't reciprocate.'

'How d'you know? I mean ... '

'Because he told me. Because he's an even more hopeless liar than you are. Anyway, even if he didn't actually go to bed with her what difference does it make?'

'Quite a lot, I'd say.'

'Sartre once said — '

'Sartre said a lot of things.'

'Do stop interrupting all the time. Sartre thought love decreased every time you had sex with someone.'

'Lust maybe, that's not love.'

'Isn't it?'

I had a feeling there was something else she wanted to tell me but just at that moment Barnaby suddenly let out a piercing shriek. Bored with the walk and fiddling about with whatever he could reach, he had caught his finger in part of the buggy and couldn't pull it free.

He wasn't hurt but Chris had to undo the harness and lift him out. Then he refused to get back in again. Eventually, with the help of half a chocolate button in Chris's coat pocket, we managed to calm him down.

'I'll push,' I said. 'My mother used to tell me she became so used to wheeling a pram she could hardly keep her balance without one.'

Chris laughed. 'I wish I'd known your mother.' Then she relapsed into silence, holding her breath, then suddenly speaking in a rush.

'Anna, I have to say this. I always feel you despise me. No, not despise. You humour me, pretending to take an interest in my

humdrum life, the children — ’

‘How can you say that? I’m not pretending.’

‘Oh, it’s not your fault.’ She was almost in tears.

‘But how can you possibly think that?’

‘I’m a bore. No don’t say anything. Staying at home all day, talking about teething and nappy rash.’

‘That’s not like you at all. Anyway, what’s brought all this on? Is it because of Bruce?’

‘I expect you earn as much as he does.’

‘I doubt it, but what’s that got to do — ’

‘Bruce didn’t want another baby. I went on and on at him until he gave in, but he’s resented it ever since.’

‘Of course he hasn’t. I’ve seen him with Barnaby. He adores him.’

‘He thought once the other two were at school I could go on a training course, find a job. Then we wouldn’t have such a struggle to pay the mortgage. We could have proper holidays and a decent car.’

‘If you want my opinion holidays are greatly overrated.’

She rubbed at her eyes. ‘It’s easy for you to say that.’

Suddenly I felt angry, upset. ‘Look, I enjoy my job and I like being independent, but you know perfectly well it’s not that simple. How d’you think it makes me feel, both of us more or less the same age, you with a husband and three children, me with — ’

I broke off, feeling ridiculous, as though I had given away my innermost secret.

‘But there’s plenty of time,’ said Chris calmly. ‘You could have a baby, find someone to look after it, and return to work. By the time Barnaby’s started school I’ll be too old to do anything.’

'Oh, rubbish, there's all kinds of things you could do.' But she was right in a way. All those training courses for mature women returning to work, that promised so much and led to so little. Who wanted to start at the bottom of the ladder when they were already approaching their forties? How many people even got the chance to try?

'We can't win,' I said.

'Women in general or us in particular?'

'Both.'

She brushed a fast-food container off a wooden seat and sat down heavily.

'Envy,' she said, 'I suppose everyone feels it whatever they've got.'

'You can't envy me getting involved with David.'

She managed a feeble grin. 'Idiot, that's what I envy most of all.'

I stared at her. She knew what had happened between me and David. She knew how unhappy he had made me. Yet here she was making out it was all a bit of fun.

I watched her lift Barnaby out of his buggy and sit him on her knees. She used him as protection, bounced him up and down, turned him round to face her so he hid the expression on her face. I had never thought of her as self-absorbed, she was the one person who really understood, yet when it came to the crunch all she could think about was her own frustration.

'Anyway,' I said, refusing to smile at her but trying to sound as though the tension between us had been resolved, 'I wish you'd told me all this before. I thought you were cross about the baby-sitting. And I'm sorry about the other business. If I'd known I would never have mentioned Karen Plant.'

'I haven't told you all of it,' she said, letting Barnaby grab hold of her hair and twist it in his fist. 'Karen threatened to report Bruce for sexual harassment. If she had he'd have lost his job.'

'But she didn't, not when it came to it?'

'No.'

'So it wasn't a serious threat.'

'She couldn't report him, could she?' said Chris quietly. 'Somebody smothered her the very next day.'

*

It was dark when I arrived home and David was waiting outside the front door.

'You've got a key,' I said flatly, 'why stand in the cold?'

He pulled a face. 'You don't honestly expect me to let myself in?'

'No, I suppose not.'

He followed me into the flat. Instead of his usual suit he was wearing shapeless jeans, a check shirt, and a rather unpleasant bomber jacket made out of some shiny brown material. He looked different, his hair had bits of dust in it, and he smelled of kitchen cleaner.

'Haven't you been to work today?' I said.

'Yes.'

'I was wondering about the clothes.'

He didn't answer for a moment. 'Oh, you think I've been repairing Iris's water tank. As a matter of fact I moved out the day after I gave you a lift to the garage. I've been helping Oliver with some decorating.'

'Oliver, the osteopath?'

'The very same.'

I made no comment. It was an effort. My heart was beating faster and my skin felt cold and shaky.

'Where've you been?' he asked. 'Martin lured you into the pub, did he? You never really told me what happened. Mind you, I bet you encouraged him. You've always had this special technique, a way of taking an interest in people so they think it's a subtle form of seduction.'

'Oh, for God's sake, David.'

But wasn't that what Rob had meant. 'You sit there like a giant spider luring people into your web.' But Rob had not been describing me, personally. He meant all psychologists, psychotherapist, social workers ...

'You're angry,' said David, sitting down at the kitchen table, pulling open the drawer, which had once housed my picture post cards, and fiddling about with the corkscrew.

'No, I'm tired.'

'Same difference. Anyway, how's everything going?' It was a ridiculous question. He didn't expect an answer. 'You didn't think I'd move out of Iris's place, did you?'

I shrugged. 'It's Iris's place now, is it?'

'All right,' he said, 'I'd better go. If you're in one of those moods it's a waste of time trying to talk.'

He wanted me to ask what it was he had come to discuss. I was silent. The battle had begun. When he stood up to leave I told him to sit down again, offered him a drink. He smiled, satisfied that I had relented because I couldn't stand the thought of him leaving so soon.

He caught hold of my hand as I walked past him and I almost weakened. I had made the mistake so many times before, wanting to

believe him, playing into his hands.

'Any beer?' he said.

'Yes, I should think so.'

I looked him in the eyes and I could see, although I must have seen it many times before, that winning, staying on top was more important to him than anything. More important than love, attachment, companionship.

'Go on, then,' I said, taking a can of lager from the fridge and handing him a glass, 'let's hear what you've decided.'

'It's not just up to me.'

'No, I suppose not.' For the first time I felt in control, almost high. 'But we've got to start somewhere.'

'I told you in the letter. The trouble is you're always so impatient. All I needed was some time. Time to think, to let Iris down lightly. After all you wouldn't have wanted me to do the same thing all over again, dithering about trying to keep everyone happy, ending up pleasing nobody.'

'Oh, no, I wouldn't have wanted that.'

He sighed and gave me his woebegone look. 'If you're going to be sarcastic I might as well go.'

But he didn't. He stayed sitting at the table, still fiddling with the contents of the drawer.

'David,' I said, 'did you know Karen Plant accused Bruce of sexual harassment?'

'What?' His eyes lit up. This was a far more promising topic of conversation. 'Did she go ahead with it? It doesn't matter what really happened, they always believe the woman. Poor old Bruce.'

'She didn't have a chance to go ahead with it. She was murdered.'

'What? You're not suggesting ... '

'No, of course not.'

'I wouldn't put it past him, not if his job was under threat. After all, he's got all those kids to support. Did Chris tell you about it?'

'Yes.' I wished I hadn't told him but I was curious to find out if he had known about it all along. He hadn't. I could tell. It was time to return to the real business in hand.

'So,' I said, 'you told Iris you were moving out. What did she say?'

'Does it matter?'

'Yes.'

'She asked if we could give it another try.'

'But you were adamant.'

He nodded. He was lying. I don't know how I knew but there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that he was still incapable of telling me the truth.

I sat down at the other end of the table. 'She kicked you out, didn't she.'

'Shows how little you know about Iris.'

'I know nothing about Iris but I can tell when you're trying to pull the wool over my eyes.'

'You never used to be able to.' The moment he'd spoken he realized it had been a mistake. 'Only joking, only quoting back what you always said. You were right, you know, about trusting people. If you haven't got trust you've got nothing.'

He looked genuinely depressed. All the time we had been talking I had been standing, out of his reach, leaning against the fridge. I moved towards him and he stretched out his hand.

‘Oh, God, Anna, I’m so tired. Yes, I know it’s my own fault, but I don’t think I can take much more. All I want is some peace and quiet. Is that what you want? No more bickering, picking each other up on every other word. We ought to be kind, take care of each other.’

My eyes and ears were aching, rather like the start of a cold. I stepped forward and kissed him on the forehead.

‘Oh, Anna, how could we have been so stupid?’

His voice was a whisper. He had his arms round my body and his head leaning against my stomach. Then he raised his eyes to look at me and I saw the familiar victorious expression.

‘No!’ I shouted, pulling away from him and moving to the other end of the room. Then I started laughing.

It was something to do with the shiny brown bomber jacket. For the first time I saw him through Iris’s eyes, or imagined I did. David, the great love of my life, but if Iris didn’t want him neither did I. For weeks, months I had hung on to the fantasy of how it might have been, of how I had thought it would be. Bending over backwards to find complicated psychological reasons why he felt unable to commit himself, why he was afraid of close relationships, afraid of being rejected. He had told me about his mother — at length. Her inconsistent behaviour, her preference for his younger brother. And I had believed him. Because I wanted to.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I don’t blame you. You want revenge. The fact that I’m here with you now means nothing compared with — ’

‘I don’t want revenge, David.’

‘Yes you do. That’s all that matters to you. Everything we had is unimportant compared — ’

‘Stop it!’

I sat down and leaned against the hard uncomfortable bars on the back of the chair. I felt exhausted, but it was the kind of exhaustion that comes from a feeling of relief. Mixed with the relief, of course, was an awareness of loss. Not of the real David, but of the mythical person I had created.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

He didn’t ask what about. He knew. He stood up. ‘I’d better go. Thanks for the beer.’

Just for a moment I wanted to ask him to stay. After he left my false euphoria would evaporate. I would come down to earth and part of me would long for him to come back. But I would have to live with those feelings until eventually — it might take months, even years — they began to fade.

He walked towards the door and I knew he wasn’t even going to kiss me goodbye.

‘Try to remember the good times,’ he said quietly, sadly. He could keep up his play-acting right to the bitter end.

Chapter Twenty-One

I sat quite still for four or five minutes, staring at the pattern of mock parquet-tiling on the kitchen lino, then I took my coat off the back of 'David's' chair and went out to look for Rob.

It was nearly eight. I could try his lodgings but I doubted if he spent many evenings at home and it was much more likely I would find him in one of the local pubs. The Old Globe? The Star? I decided to start Rob's side of the river, then work my way round the area surrounding the floating harbour. I would find him eventually, it was just a question of going about it patiently, methodically. Besides, it was better than staying in the flat.

As I walked I thought about the small white headstone. I had made such a mystery out of it but probably there was a simple explanation. The stone marked the grave of a much-loved pet. The cat Val had told me about? Jenny was just the kind of girl who would have become deeply attached to a cat — or a hamster, guinea-pig, or rabbit. She must have told Rob about it, then taken him to see the grave. But why hadn't the pet been buried in her garden at home? And why, after several months, did the thought of the cat's death cause tears to pour down her face?

Cat or no cat I still had no idea how Rob and Jenny could have got to know each other.

Standing outside the Bear I caught a glimpse of Diane Easby. She was talking to a large grey-haired man and when she saw me approach she let out a high-pitched squeal.

'Fancy seeing you. We were just talking about you, weren't we, Al? Oh sorry, love, but it wasn't anything bad.'

She was dressed up in her best clothes, just like she had been the very first time she came to see me. Fun-fur coat, black high-heeled shoes. But this time under the coat she wore a bright red dress, nipped in at the waist and with a plunging neckline so that her breasts were clearly visible, pressed together by the tightness of the material.

She put her hand on my arm and gestured with her head towards the grey-haired man. 'This is Alan. Alan, this is Miss McColl who I've told you about.'

I held out my hand. Alan took hold of it firmly. 'Pleased to meet you.'

He didn't look it. He was wearing a dark suit and an open-necked shirt, which could have been lilac or pink. It was hard to tell under the glare of the street-lamp.

'Having an evening out?' I said.

'That's it, love. Al's got a mate in this band. Jazz. That kind of stuff.' She pulled a face and put her hands over her ears. 'I've been meaning to come and see you but we've been ever so busy. We're moving see. Alan's got a job in Redditch. In the Midlands, isn't it, Al?'

'Near Birmingham,' said Alan. He looked impatient to get away, but Diane wanted to talk.

She came closer and lowered her voice. 'I'd never have left without saying goodbye. You were right about Keith all along. You always thought he'd done it, I could tell. Anyway, I reckon when I told him what that Karen Plant had said about Lisa and ... Well, I reckon he turned against her, don't you, Al?'

Alan had moved a few paces away. 'Something like that. I'll wait for you in the pub, shall I?'

'No, hang on,' said Diane. 'Listen, the thing is, I blame myself. I should never have told him, not with the way his mind worked. If you told him things he assumed you wanted him to do something about it otherwise why would you have said.'

'I should forget about it,' I said. 'I don't suppose we'll ever know for sure, but I certainly don't think you should blame yourself.'

'Ah, you're ever so kind.'

'I must go,' I said. 'Come and see me if you want to. If not, good luck with the move.'

'It'll get us away from that social worker bloke, won't it?'

'Yes, he hasn't been back, has he?'

'No, thanks to you. See you then and thanks for everything.'

She leaned forward to kiss me on the cheek, then she turned and ran after Alan. I felt a mixture of relief and uneasiness. Relief that she was moving so it would be unlikely there would be any trouble with Social Services, but a certain amount of anxiety that Karen Plant might have known something about Lisa and her stepfather that she had failed to put on file.

I turned the corner and walked towards the Rose of Denmark to see if Rob was in the bar. He wasn't. Returning along Hotwell Road, on my way to the Crown and Anchor, I thought about what Diane had said and it occurred to me that her acceptance of Keith's guilt might be a way of quelling any fear she had that Alan was responsible for attacking Karen Plant. He looked quite capable of such an attack, but perhaps I was just indulging in a common prejudice. He was

large, broad-shouldered, and a touch morose, but that didn't mean he was violent.

Diane seemed to think I had contacted Social Services and got rid of her unwelcome visitor. Presumably Social Services thought I was dealing with the case, but this seemed unlikely since it was their responsibility, not mine, to look after the welfare of the children. Had Diane imagined that she was being persecuted by social workers, that Karen Plant suspected sexual abuse when really Karen had just been doing her best to help? And what was it she had once said about Alan's temper, how he threatened her now and again but really he was as soft as butter?

Tomorrow I would have a long hard think about the case and decide if I needed to take any action. In the mean time I had enough to concentrate on, continuing what would most likely turn out to be a futile search for Rob Starkey.

Half an hour later, just as I had almost decided to give up and return home, I remembered a small pub near the cathedral, a dark gloomy place I had only been inside once though I could remember the decor. Nets trailed across the ceiling, plastic crabs and lobsters, a collection of dusty tropical shells.

It had started to rain and the wind was blowing through the bare branches of the elm trees. A group of teenage boys were coming towards me. They were shouting and one of them jumped up at a tree, trying to catch hold of a branch and tear it off. As they passed me they let out piercing shrieks and started running across the road. But the shrieks had nothing to do with me. I was imagining things, expecting to meet malevolent strangers round every corner.

David would be back home now. Talking to Iris? Or had he really moved back in with the osteopath? What difference did it make? It was over. Finally ended. I was free, let out of a self-imposed prison; but like many newly released prisoners part of me wanted to return to captivity. Still, I had known it would be like that.

The street that led down to the pub was deserted, apart from a large dog with a black curly coat that bounded up to me then swerved and started sniffing among the empty fast-food containers that littered the pavement. A moment later, its owner appeared. A man in his early twenties with a shaved head, brown boots with no laces, and jeans and a denim jacket, caked in dirt. He stared at me, then whistled at the dog who returned obediently to his ankle.

I paused in the entrance to the pub, peering through the glass into the public bar, where a game of darts was in progress. Six or seven men and a couple of young women, dressed up for an evening out. I watched them for a moment, wishing I was part of a large cheerful group, then I pushed open the other door and entered the relative quiet of the lounge bar.

As soon as I stepped inside I could see him, standing by the bar counting out small change and chatting to the landlord. He had his back to me and when I spoke his name he jumped.

'Eh? Oh, it's you. I didn't expect to see you in here.' He paid for his drinks, then picked them up, his hands cupped round the three glasses.

'Hang on a minute,' I said, 'I want to talk to you.'

'Come and join us.' He gestured with his head towards a dark corner at the back of the room. 'No, wait, I'll buy you a drink. What would you like?'

'Put those down a moment, Rob. It won't take long.'

He replaced the glasses on the bar. The landlord asked if he could serve me and I ordered a half of bitter, then turned to face Rob.

'Have you been in my flat?'

'Eh?'

'I believed you when you said it wasn't you sending the post cards.'

'I told you, I hadn't clue what you were on about.' He kept looking at me and his face never moved a muscle. Usually he was clean-shaven but today he had the beginnings of what might be going to be a beard and moustache.

'They've gone,' I said. 'The cards have gone.'

'Nothing to do with me.' He wasn't angry, more intrigued. 'Some bloke's sent you picture post cards, then broke into your flat and stolen them back? When was this, then?'

'I don't know. Yesterday. Maybe before.'

'And all he took was some post cards?' His hands had returned to the glasses. 'Look, I don't know about any cards but there's someone I want you to meet. Come on. Over here.'

'No, hang on.' But he was moving away.

I paid for my drink and followed him across the room. He wasn't lying. I was pretty certain of that. He hadn't been in the flat and he knew nothing about the cards. I had wanted it to be Rob because that was the simplest explanation and because I wasn't frightened of him.

At a table near the empty fireplace sat a middle-aged man and a girl. I was surprised the landlord had agreed to allow the girl in, she looked so young. I suppose I had known, as soon as Rob said he had someone he wanted me to meet, that it would be Jenny. The

middle-aged man had a thin sensitive face and light brown receding hair. He was wearing a fawn raincoat, and under it a dark sports jacket and a grey roll-neck sweater. He looked so like Jenny that there could be no doubt about who he was.

‘Right,’ said Rob, placing the drinks on the table and fetching another chair. ‘This is Lewis, Jenny’s dad. Lewis, this is Anna McColl, the lady Jen’s been going to see for help with her headaches and that.’

Lewis Weir stood up and held out his hand.

‘How d’you do.’ His voice was almost as quiet as Jenny’s. His hand was long and narrow, and slightly damp. He looked nervous, a little bewildered, but extremely happy.

Jenny seemed wildly excited. Her eyes darted from side to side but she avoided looking at me directly. On the wall above her head a picture of two sailing ships and a lurid orange sunset had started to slip out of its plastic frame.

‘I suppose you’re wondering what’s going on,’ said Rob, enjoying taking charge of the situation.

‘It’s not really any of my business.’

‘Oh, come on, that’s crap talk. Stop acting like a bloody psychologist, you’re part of all this. If it wasn’t for you — ’

‘Jenny,’ I said, leaning towards her, ‘does your mother know where you are?’

I realized I was treating her like a child, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Rob opened his mouth to explain, but Jenny spoke first. ‘Mum’s in hospital.’

‘Hospital?’

'Stomach pains,' said Rob. 'Appendicitis.' His voice was cold, cruel. He stood up and took off his leather jacket.

Jenny was making patterns with her finger in a small pool of beer. I touched her hand.

'When was your mother taken ill?'

She looked at her father, then at Rob.

'It was when you got back home, wasn't it?' said Rob.

'Yes,' whispered Jenny. 'Mum was lying down. She said she had a terrible pain. And it's not her appendix, she had it out when she was only eight years old.'

'You sent for an ambulance, did you?' It was the first time Lewis had spoken. 'I wasn't there,' he explained, 'it didn't seem wise to go round to the house.'

'Yes,' said Jenny, 'but it took ages to arrive.'

'They always do.' Rob turned to me, anxious to explain his part in things. 'I got in touch with Jen's dad. I mean I wrote to him a couple of weeks ago. Jen said she wanted to see him but she never thought he'd come.'

'Perhaps Jenny should have told her mother first.' I sounded like a strict school teacher, a killjoy who was spoiling the fun. But I felt sorry for poor Val.

Rob gave me a pitying look. 'Did Jen tell you about the headstone?'

'No!' It was the first time I had heard Jenny speak above a whisper. Now she was shouting. 'Don't talk about it. Be quiet.'

People were turning round. Jenny stood up but her father put out an arm to restrain her.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘I don’t think this is the best place to discuss any of this. I’ll leave it up to you, Jenny — I don’t want to interfere — but if you want to see me, come to my office. And bring your father if you’d like to.’

I stood up and started walking away, but Rob came after me.

‘Listen, I wanted to tell you before, but Jenny wouldn’t let me.’ He broke off, breathing hard. ‘It’s sick, really sick.’

‘What is?’

‘The headstone. Jenny had an abortion. Last year it was. Some bloke she met at a disco.’

‘Oh, come on, she’s been telling you some fairy story. Jenny never goes to discos.’

‘A friend persuaded her. Someone from her old school. Then some guy put vodka in her Coke. You can guess the rest.’

‘I find it hard to believe, but even if it’s true what’s the headstone got to do — ’

‘Jenny can tell you tomorrow when she comes to your office.’

He looked sullen, as though he felt he had been left out, as though he should have been invited to come and see me, as well as Jenny and her father.

I thought of Val in hospital. Poor lonely Val. Why hadn’t she told me about the abortion? She had left it up to Jenny. It was the ‘bit of bother’ that Dr Ingram had referred to. Surely he could have told me about it. Surely it was his duty to tell me.

‘I must go,’ I said.

‘Right.’ Rob steadied himself against a table but he wasn’t drunk. Jenny had squeezed past him and was pushing something into my hand. Then she disappeared into the Ladies’ Room.

I nodded to Rob, then pushed open the door, shoving Jenny's exercise book, the one I had given her, inside my coat. Did it mean I had seen her for the last time? What was in the notebook or had she returned it to me without writing a single word?

Within moments the rain was running down my neck. I turned up my collar but it made no difference. Water spurted up from between broken paving stones. The smoke from inside the pub still clung to my hair. My mouth felt dry and I remembered that I had eaten nothing since breakfast and even then it had only been half a piece of toast and a cup of coffee.

Back on the main road I paused to look at the lights reflected in the floating harbour. In the Royal Infirmary, less than a mile away, Val would be lying in one of the wards. Or even now she might be on the operating table, anaesthetized, dead to the world, oblivious of the little celebration that was going on inside the pub.

Tomorrow I would call round and see if she was allowed visitors. Someone would have to tell her about Lewis's visit and, later, she would want to know all about Jenny's friendship with Rob. Somehow I had a feeling, during the next few weeks, it was going to be Val, not Jenny, who needed all the help and support.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I was home just after nine. I hung my coat over a chair, kicked off my wet shoes, and picked up Jenny's exercise book which had fallen on the kitchen floor. It was slightly damp and when I opened it up the first page was blank. I was just about to toss it aside when I noticed writing which was just visible through the thin paper. It was large and spidery, written with a blue ballpoint pen, and when I flicked through the pages I discovered that she had filled up the notebook right through to the bottom of the final page. There were no dates, just line after line, almost as though it had been completed at one sitting.

I left it lying on the kitchen table while I did my usual check of the flat. Bathroom. Everything the same as usual apart from a slightly dripping cold tap which I could easily have overlooked first thing in the morning. Bedroom. Unmade bed, but with no stray tissues wedged between headboard and mattress. Windows firmly closed, dressing-gown lying exactly where I had left it, muddle of bottles and jars the same as I remembered it. Next, the living room. The curtains were still drawn but recently I had left for work on several occasions without remembering to pull them back.

When I switched on the light I noticed a paperback book lying half under the armchair. It was one I should have taken with me to the rubbish dump. A collection of Canadian short stories that David had bought off a stall in the market but never read. It could have been under the chair for ages and worked its way out. Or perhaps David had taken it off the shelf last time he came round. I picked it up and

tossed it into the waste-paper basket, glancing at the title but barely taking it in. *The Uninvited Guest* by H. G. Wheal.

Back in the kitchen I switched on the kettle, then the radio, then sat down with Jenny's diary and started reading.

'I don't know what to put,' it began. This had been crossed out several times and a couple of lines had been left empty before she had another try.

A. says I have to keep a diary. I suppose it's the treatment for people who don't talk enough. I'm in my bedroom where there is a bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a chair, and a mirror. In the drawers there are eight pairs of pants, three bras, two vests I never wear, four pairs of woollen tights, six jumpers (four of them knitted by Mum), four shirts, and my school tie. In the wardrobe is my school skirt and blazer, two corduroy skirts, a dress I wore to my cousin's wedding when I was fourteen, and an old anorak that's too small. My duvet is pink with white roses. There is a matching pillow case and the curtains are made out of the same material. They all came from a place in the new shopping galleries at Broadmead. I had them for my sixteenth birthday.

I paused to squeeze the rain out of my hair. I felt damp and chilled. I should have changed my clothes, got out the hair dryer, but I wanted to read on.

Mum is downstairs. She thinks I'm resting. She says I've always been delicate. If I get better I may go to the college and study for my exams but Mum says you can study at home through the post and that might be better because then she could help me with the work.

We get up at a quarter to eight. Then we have breakfast. Cereal with milk and sugar, then some toast and honey. Then I tidy my room and Mum does dusting or puts washing in the washing-machine. Then at ten o'clock we watch a television programme. People sit in the audience and a man says there's going to be a discussion about domestic violence or bereavement or something. Mum thinks it's really good. She only switched it off twice. Once when it was about abortion and another time when it was about dating agencies and finding a husband. Then when the commercials come on I make two cups of coffee and we drink it during the next programme which lasts about an hour and a half and has lots of different items about cooking and fashion and television personalities. We only have a light lunch. Soup or cheese and biscuits. After lunch there is a quiz programme and then two serials set in Australia. If Mum has to go to work I watch television on my own and I have to tell her what happened when she gets back. The children's programmes are mostly quite boring but they have quizzes on the other channels and a programme from America which is a bit like the one after breakfast except the audience is bigger and people cry a lot.

It was warm in the kitchen. I stood up and removed my tights and skirt. The tights felt itchy and my skirt was damp round the hem. Someone on the radio was talking about transvestism and whether small boys should be discouraged from dressing up in their mothers' clothes. I switched it off and returned to Jenny's diary. Her writing was untidy and didn't stay on the lines of the exercise book but it was easy enough to read.

I saw Rob today while Mum was at work. If she found out about him she would kill me. Rob has written a letter to Dad but it won't get there because I couldn't remember the address properly. Anyway he won't answer it because he hates me and Mum. Rob says that can't be right. He's never met Mum but he says he knows her type only that's not really fair because he doesn't understand what she's been through. I met Rob when I was coming back from my appointment with A. He asked me if I knew what the time was and it made me jump. Then he walked along with me and asked if I saw A. or one of the other ones. He used to see her but she got fed up with him. He wanted to know why I had to see her and I said it was because of my aches and pains. He said she wasn't a doctor and I said I knew that but the doctor thought she might be able to help.

I laid the notebook face down on the table. I wondered if Val had read it or if Jenny had kept it in a secret hiding place. The answer was on the next page.

Rob keeps asking me about A. although he knows I've missed my last two appointments. He wants to know what she was wearing when I saw her. I can't remember her clothes but he says I must try harder. Think. Think. Think! He asked if Dad's got another bird and I said yes she's someone he met at a conference but Mum doesn't like talking about it. Mum says it's better to think of him as dead. We don't need him, me and Mum, we're all right just the two of us. Rob says that's bollocks. Poor Mum. I shall hide this notebook in the shed at the bottom of the garden because she hardly ever goes there in the winter although she might if she got suspicious and I expect she'll find it like when she found the packet of sanitary towels and guessed what had happened.

After Dad went Mum said it had affected me badly and I was disturbed because I was the child of a broken marriage. If I ever felt at all unwell it would be better if I stayed at home until I got my strength back. When I had headaches or a bad back Dr Ingram gave me a sick certificate. I don't like him much. He has cold floppy hands and dandruff on his shoulders but Mum says he's the best doctor in the area especially if you suffer from recurrent symptoms.

Dr Ingram had a lot to answer for, I thought grimly. On the other hand, overbearing as he might be he was clearly no match for Val Weir.

I turned the page.

After Muffin was run over Mum cried for hours and hours. She said he'd been our last link with the past. Then later she said it would be all right as long as we had each other. She keeps asking me what A. says when I go to see her. I told her she doesn't say very much and Mum said that was probably just as well and it would be best if I did the same thing. If I told her about the baby she would think I was wicked. She wouldn't understand it had all been because of that interfering busybody social worker.

At this point Jenny had paused, or stopped for that particular day, but a few lines further down the page she started again, this time in pencil.

I wanted to tell A. about the baby but if Mum found out I'd told her she'd get one of her moods and refuse to speak to me for days and days. I showed Rob the headstone and he said it was sick. It's not a proper headstone, just a slab of something that the workmen next door left behind. Mum wanted to put it down the end of the garden but when I made a fuss she said we could take it to an old

graveyard in Clifton then we could visit it and nobody would think anything of it. We took it in the car in the evening.

It was raining but Mum said it had to be done straight away. I only went to the disco because Mum's friend at work's got this daughter and she thought we could be friends. If you have an abortion can they see a real baby? Karen said whatever I decided there was no need to feel guilty but Mum said the baby had been murdered and it would have been a girl and we would have called her Melanie. She wanted to write MELANIE on the headstone but I screamed so she said there was no need and anyway we would never forget who it was in memory of.

There were still three or four pages left. The cover of the notebook had come away from the staples. I put it on one side and continued reading.

I feel sorry for Mum because I'm all she's got and although she smiles a lot and sings pop songs I don't think she's happy. She says things could be a lot worse. We've got plenty to be thankful for. A roof over our heads and enough to eat. I think I'm getting another headache. My neck aches and behind my ears. The doctor's useless and I don't see what A. can do. Mum followed her to the park and introduced herself. I expect they talked about what a problem I am. Later she asked A. round to the house because she wanted to know why I hadn't come back from the shops until after six o'clock.

Suddenly I felt starving hungry. It was far too late to cook anything so I stuck a piece of bread in the toaster. It didn't work. A piece of burnt crust had jammed against the wire. I unplugged the toaster, turned it upside down and banged the bottom of it till it slipped from

my hand and a shower of crumbs fell to the ground, crunching under my feet as I moved away. It was too late at night to get out the vacuum cleaner. On the other hand, it would only take a few minutes to suck up the mess and the alternative was to walk toast crumbs all over the kitchen floor.

As I vacuumed I thought about the diary. My soft, gentle approach to Jenny had been worse than useless, whereas Rob seemed to have gained her confidence almost immediately. But perhaps I was being too hard on myself. Rob was nearer in age, not an authority figure who might report back to her mother or Dr Ingram. I wondered where Jenny's father was staying. Had he gone home with Jenny, taking advantage of the fact that Val was in hospital?

The noise of the vacuum cleaner buzzed in my head. As I approached the table I turned a page of Jenny's diary with my free hand and read a few sentences.

Mum says she's found out lots of things about A. She used to live with a married man so that makes her like the whore who got her claws into Dad. Actually it's funny really but A. lives in the flat where the Knights used to live and Mum used to feed the cat while they were away on holiday.

I bent down to move some crumbs away from the skirting board and it was only then that the full implication of what I had just read penetrated my tired, befuddled brain.

At the same moment the light went off. For a split second I thought something had fallen off a shelf. The blow to the back of my head knocked me forward and I slid to the ground, catching my ribs on the handle of the cleaner, twisting round and crying out with the pain.

Through bleary eyes I caught a glimpse of a figure holding a black rubber torch. Then the figure was astride my chest. As I struggled to sit up I felt my arms being pinned to the ground. Something soft descended on my face and I began kicking violently, trying to free my arms, turn my head. I shouted but no sound came out. My chest was bursting, my ears, my throat. Then one of my knees jerked up and I heard an angry squeal of pain. My left arm came free and I snatched at whatever I could find. Clothes, hair, the soft skin of a face. My nail tore down the forehead and cheeks, and, at the same moment, the cushion slipped off my face and I rolled over on my side gasping in air as I struggled onto my knees.

I could just make out a figure backing away, then running down the passage towards the front door. A raincoat several sizes too small, a flapping nightdress, black lace-up shoes. Then I heard the door being wrenched open, shouting, the sound of voices on the steps leading down to the garden. I tried to stand but I was too dizzy and by the time I had crawled half-way towards the front door the noise had subsided.

Unable to stand I continued on my hands and knees, cutting myself on the metal frame where the doormat was sunk into the tiled floor. The outside light was still on and I could see Rob at the bottom of the steps. He was breathing hard, standing over Val, who sat slumped against the wall with a trickle of blood running down her cheek. She tried to speak but it was difficult to make out what she was saying.

‘She’s mine. Mine! They poisoned her mind. They wanted to take her away.’

I raised myself up to a sitting position and tried to call out although my throat hurt and the sound I produced was barely audible.

I could hear Rob calling, 'Are you all right? Say if you're all right.'
'I'm all right.'

I heard him let out a sigh of relief. 'Stay where you are. Try and get some help.'

I stood up, still shaky but able to remain upright provided I had the wall to lean against. Then I went back into the flat to call the police.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rob was sitting at my kitchen table, rolling a cigarette. He licked the paper, trimmed the ends, then poured out the dregs from his third can of light ale.

‘You thought I’d been nosing about this place?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘How was I supposed to have got in?’ In spite of everything that had happened the previous evening, just being in my flat was making him giggle.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘with a credit card?’

‘Like they do in the movies?’ He grinned. ‘You say Jen’s mum had a key?’

He struck a match, letting it burn almost to the end, then holding the blackened head until the whole thing had burned right through.

‘What did she do it for? Nick anything, did she?’

I shook my head. ‘I suppose she just wanted to frighten me.’

‘Nuts. Well out of order. I did warn you, that day at the tip.’

‘Yes you did, but you didn’t tell me who you were talking about. Anyway, it’s over now.’

We had spent most of the day at the police station, in separate interview rooms. Inspector Fry and Sergeant Whittle had gone over the events of the past few weeks in exhaustive detail. The post cards, the intruder into my flat, my visit to Jenny’s house, the meeting with Val in the park.

Rob, no doubt, had described things from a rather different angle.

He was staring at me, then he pushed back his hair and leaned forward on his elbows. 'When was the first time you knew someone had been in your flat?'

'Knew for certain? I'm not sure. I found a tissue pushed down between the mattress and the headboard.'

He grinned. 'So? Just a tissue?'

'It wasn't mine. I thought ... '

'And that was the first clue Val left?'

'It was before I'd met Jenny.' I paused, wondering if the tissue had been left there quite innocently, by me or David. But I knew it hadn't. 'Of course by then Val knew Jenny would be coming to see me. She'd put her off keeping the first appointment, but I suppose with Dr Ingram breathing down her neck — '

'But how did she know where you lived?'

'She was a friend of the previous owners of this flat. Fed their cat when they were away. I suppose they told her who was buying it. Later she put two and two together.'

'Right. If I bought a place I'd have the locks changed. There could be old keys going back generations. I never thought of that before.'

'Nor did I.'

'And yesterday evening she discharged herself from the hospital.'

'I imagine it's not too difficult to slip away.'

'So she'd planned it all, didn't have stomach pains or — '

I yawned. I felt exhausted but Rob wanted to talk. 'I dare say the pains were genuine enough.'

'I still don't see why she hated you so much.'

'She hated what I stood for.'

He smiled. 'Oh, sure, it was nothing personal.'

'*The Harlot's Progress*,' I said, 'the first post card — it was pushed through my front door the same day as Jenny's first appointment. I remember picking it up, thinking about Jenny ... Of course the two events never connected in my —'

'And then when she discovered you had an interest in Karen Plant ...'

'Oh, she didn't know anything about that.' I broke off, suddenly remembering the day of the seminar, the day I visited Fleur Peythieu in the hall of residence. The tall figure climbing into a white car outside the Student Counselling building.

'D'you suppose she saw me at the university, near the Computer Science building, when I was looking for Karen Plant's flat-mate?'

But Rob had stopped listening. He was rolling another cigarette. He looked up and gave me a funny look. 'Did you tell the cops about me hanging about outside this place?'

'No, of course not.'

'Why not?'

'Why should I? It wasn't relevant.'

'Thanks.' He pulled the ashtray towards him and began to rearrange the dead ends. 'Bit risky, your job, I'd say. Feel like employing a bodyguard?'

I forced a smile. 'Rob, there was something I meant to ask you. How did you know Val would come round here yesterday evening?'

'I didn't. Just happened to be passing by.'

'Bit of a coincidence, wasn't it?'

'Not really, you know me, I like taking a detour.'

'And you saw her running down the steps?'

'Didn't recognize her at first. Thought she was tucked up safe in a hospital bed. The stomach pains — I reckon she knew Jen's dad had come to see her.'

'Perhaps. You'd met Val, had you?'

'Course not. Jen pointed her out one time. She walked past when we were in a caff up the Gloucester Road.'

He emptied his glass. I opened the fridge door and handed him another can.

'D'you reckon Val sent the cards?'

'Yes.'

I thought about the harlot dead in her coffin, the dissected arm, Picasso's wild, abandoned woman.

'Then she came and took them away again.'

'Yes.'

He was enjoying himself. He wanted our debriefing session to last as long as possible.

'The police think she did in that Karen Plant? Just 'cos she made Jen have an abortion?'

'No social worker would have made Jenny do something she didn't —'

'No, it was what Jen wanted but her mum couldn't see it that way. She thought if Jenny had a kid she'd have to stay at home. Then they could live happily ever after, all three of them.'

'Val's not responsible for her actions.'

'Oh, come on that's bloody psychology talk. She's a killer, deserves to be put away for the rest of her life.'

'She was afraid. Afraid of Jenny growing up. Afraid of being on her own. I expect she thought, sooner or later, Jenny would start telling

me what had been going on.'

'And that's an excuse for killing people.'

'No, of course not. She's a sad, disturbed woman — '

'She's a weirdo, I'll give you that.'

'You know the real irony?'

'Eh?' He rubbed at the stubbly growth on his chin.

'All the time it wasn't me Jenny was confiding in, it was you.'

He thought about that for a moment. 'Ah, but if it hadn't been for you me and Jen would never have met up.'

'Thanks, Rob.'

'You're welcome.' He stood up and stretched his arms above his head. Then he sat down again and opened another can.

'I'm worried about Jenny,' I said.

'No need, she's with her dad.'

'Yes, but — '

'She'll go and live with him and his bird, I reckon.'

'Rob? You and Jenny ... '

'Eh? You must be joking. I felt sorry for her. Poor kid, she hadn't a chance.' And then, when I looked slightly sceptical. 'Oh, come on, you know me, I've got this thing, haven't I — about older women.'

The phone started ringing. I went into the next room and picked it up. I hoped it would be Jenny or her father. 'Yes?'

'Is that Anna?'

'Yes, who's — '

'Look, I've been having a think about your research. I've one or two ideas that might or might not be useful. Maybe we could discuss them some time.'

'Yes, I'd like that.'

'You're busy I know, but what about Thursday lunchtime?'

'Yes, I think that would be all right.'

'Good. I'll look forward to it. Any time after twelve-thirty. We could have a snack at the Staff Club. See how you feel.'

'Fine. Thanks.'

I replaced the receiver. Rob had followed me into the living room.

'Your boyfriend, was it? The guy with the green Citroen?'

'No.'

'Oh, a new one.' He took a comb from his pocket and started running his nail along the teeth.

'I'm sorry, Rob.'

'What about?'

'I mean, I'm sorry you got involved in all this.'

He shrugged. 'Oh, that. Didn't have much else going on. Helped to pass the time.'

'You'll be starting your course in electronics soon.'

'I might.'

'Oh, come on, give it a try. I tell you what, why don't you come and see me next week and we can talk about it.'

'In your office? Nice and safe, everything under control? By the way, how d'you like the picture? That big one, stuck on the wall over my bed. The Temptress, that's what I call her. Quite a good likeness, I thought.'

'You draw very well,' I said wearily. It was the best I could manage.

FEELING BAD

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1

They say you can have a pizza delivered to your home faster than you can summon an ambulance. In America, that is, but I dare say it's the same in this country. Still, a delay, if there was one, would have made no difference to Paula. She must have been killed almost instantly. Scooped up into the air like a heap of old clothes before she struck the road and skidded head first towards the oncoming traffic.

*

The phone rang just before midnight. Luke's landlady, Elaine, her voice controlled, almost matter of fact, but underneath the tell-tale signs of shock.

'Anna? Can you come? There's been an accident. Luke's friend.'

'What happened? Is Luke ...'

'Unharmd, but Paula — I'm afraid she's ...'

'Dead?' But I already knew from her tone of voice that the accident had been fatal.

'The police,' she said flatly. 'They wanted Luke to make a statement but ... He won't speak. Not a word.'

'Fifteen minutes,' I said. 'Tell him I'm on my way.'

Outside the air was heavy, oppressive. Petrol fumes drifted up from Hotwells Road. I could taste them on my tongue. In the grounds of the student flats at the top of the hill a cat let out a series of eerie high-pitched yowls.

Across the road a figure emerged from the basement and paused for breath, leaning against the iron railings. Janos taking his dog for its final evening outing. He saw me and called out softly.

‘Anna? Everything all right?’

‘Yes. No. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.’

Half running, half walking, I set off in the direction of Cliftonwood Road. My car was parked opposite the children’s adventure playground, or was that where I had left it the previous day? My brain buzzed with half-remembered words. Luke’s words. ‘I see people walking towards me. Ordinary people. Women and children. Supposing I ... I wanted to hurt ... I wanted to ... ’

Breathe deeply. Keep calm. But my heart continued to thump painfully. There’s been an accident. Luke’s friend, Paula. There’s been an accident. But *was* it an accident?

Forcing my hand to stay steady I fitted the key into the car door, then switched on the engine and sat quite still, staring at the lights of the town houses reflected in the floating harbour, recalling Luke’s words when he came for his Tuesday morning session. ‘But how do you know I won’t harm someone? I think about it all the time — when I pass people in the street. A boy in a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, a woman in a yellow top. Supposing I touched ... Supposing I ... ’

Luke, looking more like a seventeen-year-old than his chronological age of twenty-two, dressed in jeans and a blue and white sweater, his straight fair hair falling over his face, his long thin fingers reaching up to push it back. Had I misjudged him completely, encouraging him to bring his anxieties out into the open when he should have been receiving heavy doses of sedating drugs? ‘Supposing I touched their skin with a lighted cigarette. Supposing I

didn't know what I was doing, supposing I couldn't stop myself. Supposing ...'

And my calm, reassuring words. 'Look, it won't happen, Luke. The thoughts are just a symptom of your general anxiety. You suppress all your normal aggression — the kind everyone has. For you it's too frightening to express it in an ordinary way. Huge, overwhelming fears of the kind you're telling me about — they prevent you from becoming aware of your real anxieties. In a way they're protecting you. When you feel confident enough to talk, then it'll start to change. In the meantime ... You won't actually harm anyone, I promise you won't.'

He had looked up for a moment, then returned to staring at his feet, clenching and unclenching his fists. Winding one leg round the other, he had moved his head from side to side, unwilling to be reassured, certain I had failed to understand the strength of his violent fantasies.

*

Elaine and Doug Hargreaves lived in one of the streets off Coldharbour Road in an area of Bristol just east of the Downs. Their house was identical to its neighbour on either side. Grey pebble-dash walls, red-tiled roof, cream paint on the window frames and drainpipes. A low wall marked the boundary between the tiny front garden and the cracked, uneven pavement. A small glass porch — one of Doug's home improvements, constructed during the six months since he received his redundancy notice — obscured the green front door.

The first time Luke and I visited the house the porch had just been delivered and was still in a flat pack in the garden shed. That was where Elaine had hoped it would stay. Doug's 'early retirement' was

proving to be more than just a financial problem. I had the feeling Elaine was nearing the end of her tether and having Luke as a lodger would be a way of bringing fresh life into the house and dissipating Doug's constant demands for attention.

Ahead of me lay a long, difficult night. When Elaine phoned I had been sleepy, ready for bed. Now, standing in the porch, I was wide awake but with that odd uncomfortable alertness that adrenalin always produces.

'Come along in, Anna. We couldn't think who else to ring. He trusts you. We weren't sure what to do.'

Doug stood back to let me pass. He had taken off his glasses and was polishing them with a small piece of newspaper.

'The printer's ink,' he explained. 'Acts as a cleaning agent.' It was the kind of absurd, irrelevant remark that people often make in times of stress.

I wiped my dry shoes on the doormat, playing for time, listening for sounds of sobbing, Elaine's deep, soothing voice. There was nothing.

'What happened, Doug?'

'We don't know for sure. Crowds on the pavement. Traffic merging from Anchor Road and Park Street. The lad's in the kitchen. Hardly spoken a word. His GP — the police thought — but Luke wouldn't have it — we wondered if you'd brought any medication.'

'I'm not a doctor,' I said sharply, and then, to compensate for my defensive reaction, 'Don't worry, I'll take him up to his room, calm him down. Later, if that's all right, I'd like to talk to you and Elaine.' He nodded. His glasses were back in place and he looked more in control of himself, less vulnerable. He hadn't meant to imply that I

was incapable of dealing with the situation. It was just that he saw tablets as the answer to everything. Even though in Luke's case an overdose had nearly cost him his life.

'Right you are,' he said briskly. 'Anything we can do to help we'll be more than willing. If you ask me it's a crying shame, just when the lad was starting to get back on his feet.'

He held open the kitchen door and stood to attention with a small click of his heels.

The room smelled of cooking oil and salmon fish cakes. Elaine, who had been sitting with her arm round Luke's shoulder, rose slowly and squeezed her large bulk between his chair and the wall.

'I'll make some tea. Coffee if you prefer.'

'Tea would be fine.'

She caught my eye, then turned her back. I had expected her to look pale, shocked, but her face was flushed with anger.

Luke sat with his elbows resting on the table and his hands covering most of his face. A mug, with 'Skipper' printed on the side, had been placed in front of him but left untouched.

'Luke?' I said gently. There was no response.

'Two sugars in his tea,' said Doug. 'Drink up, lad, it'll make you feel better.'

Elaine turned round briefly to give her husband a pitying look. Then she busied herself with a drying-up cloth and a pile of cutlery.

I smiled at Doug and he smiled back, hoping to make up for his wife's coolness.

'Sit yourself down, Anna. Luke, Anna's come to see you.'

Luke buried his fingers in his hair, keeping his arms pressed together so his face remained hidden. Elaine, still standing by the

sink, turned to glance at me. She said nothing but her eyes conveyed the message perfectly. 'I told you so.' Not the accident, not what had happened to Paula Redfern, but hadn't she known all along that agreeing to have Luke for a lodger would only end in trouble.

'The police brought him back,' she said. 'Must've been around eleven fifteen, wasn't it, Doug.' She dropped a tea bag into a mug, fetched the milk jug from the fridge. 'They wanted a statement but he can make it later on. Tomorrow or whenever he feels up to it. They didn't seem bothered.'

'Thank you for phoning.'

She shrugged. 'We didn't know what else ... ' The rest of the sentence was drowned by water splashing into a plastic bowl.

With a sudden rush of movement Luke pushed back his chair, scraping it against the wall. Then he stood up and left the room.

I followed as he stumbled up the stairs, opened his bedroom door and flopped on to the divan bed, where he lay on his back with his eyes wide open.

It was the first time I had been upstairs since I had brought Luke to meet Elaine and Doug. The room was tiny, with just enough space for a single bed, a brown bentwood chair and a small chipboard chest of drawers. I wondered where Luke kept the rest of his stuff, although he never wore the kind of clothes that needed to go on hangers.

Sitting on the edge of the bed I touched him lightly on the arm. 'I'm so sorry, Luke. It's a terrible thing to have happened.'

His lips moved slightly but he made no sound. I pulled off his trainers and placed them side by side under the chair, straightening

them until they were exactly parallel, breathing in the faint scent of leather and human feet.

He was dressed in his usual jeans, but minus the blue and white sweater he wore over his T-shirt, winter and summer. His socks had been clean on this morning. Did Elaine do his washing or did he take his clothes to the launderette? Perhaps he had another pair of identical jeans, folded neatly in one of the drawers. He was so still only the faint rise and fall of his chest indicated that he was still alive. His floppy straw-coloured hair was damp with sweat, his skin a pale golden-brown. He looked like the beautiful boy doll I had longed for as a child but had been denied because it was so absurdly expensive.

I waited, hoping now we were on our own he would start to talk. The room felt stuffy. The curtains — pink and green imitation William Morris — were still drawn back but in spite of the warmth the window was firmly closed. There were few signs that anyone used the room, just a clock and a paperback lying open, face down. I picked it up and read the title. *Abnormal Psychology*. It was one I knew well, a shortened version of a huge textbook that must have been ploughed through by generations of psychology students.

Replacing it on the chest of drawers I stood up and crossed to the window, where I fiddled with the catch, then banged the frame with the palm of my hand. It was useless. Several coats of thick white gloss guaranteed that not the slightest draught could penetrate.

'Listen, Luke,' I said softly. 'I know how you must be feeling but I have to ask a few questions. You and Paula — you were crossing the road, were you?'

His leg jerked and he closed his eyes. I should have let him tell me in his own time but I was desperate to know exactly how the accident had taken place.

He gulped, as though he had something stuck in his throat, and his head moved a little. It could have been from side to side.

‘No? You hadn’t started to cross the road. So you were standing on the pavement.’

He sat up slowly and leaned against the hard wooden bedhead. His eyes were open again but he was staring at a fixed point on the opposite wall.

‘No space. No time.’

‘No space? The pavement was crowded with people?’

‘On the move. More and more.’ His voice sounded mechanical, like a doll with a tape inside its body.

‘You and Paula were waiting to cross and — ’

‘Let me go.’

‘Go where, Luke?’

‘They never let you go.’

‘Oh, you mean in the ambulance. Honestly, Luke, there was nothing you could have done.’ I eased him back into a position where he could sleep. ‘Try and get some rest. In the morning we’ll talk properly. It’ll be all right. I promise.’ What would be all right? Paula was dead. Had other witnesses come forward? Did they agree that too many people were waiting to cross the road? Paula had been jostled by the crowd, lost her balance, stumbled in front of the fast-moving traffic. That must be how it had happened. Nothing to do with Luke. The wrong place at the wrong time. Pointless, meaningless death.

I drew the curtains, pulling at the thin material that was barely wide enough to cover the window frames. Outside on the pavement a dog was sniffing at a fast-food container, scratching with its paw to try and reach whatever it could smell.

Luke's breathing was slow and even.

'I'm going downstairs now,' I said, 'to talk to Doug and Elaine. Then I'll make up a bed in the front room.'

Why? Why had I decided to stay the night? Because Elaine or Doug might call Luke's doctor? I was playing for time, keeping Luke out of the clutches of the medical profession. For whose benefit — Luke's or my own? If I had ignored the seriousness of his mental state, been seduced by his good looks and the childlike quality I had found so appealing ... His doctor would be coldly objective. If he referred Luke to a psychiatrist a formal complaint might be made about my professional judgement.

I stood up and tiptoed across the room and out on to the landing, leaving the door ajar.

Downstairs I could hear the murmur of angry voices. Elaine and Doug arguing fiercely but doing it as quietly as possible. They stopped when they heard my footsteps in the passage. When I entered the kitchen Elaine was pouring tea and Doug was looking up, smiling self-consciously and pushing his glasses up his nose. It was well past midnight.

'He's asleep,' I said.

Elaine nodded. She was wearing grey track suit bottoms and a pink sweatshirt. Since my last visit her hair had been given a chestnut rinse and it was cut shorter than I remembered, curled under at the back and round the ears. It didn't suit her. I doubted if she had ever

been pretty but once she must have looked quite striking. In a way she still did. Small hazel eyes in a large roundish face, a broad, slightly uneven nose and a mouth that seemed to give her an expression of permanent cynicism; but she stood up straight, held her head high. She was proud, determined, and it was her personality, not her physical appearance, that would have caught people's attention.

Doug, in contrast, seemed to sink into the background. Everything about him was small. His head, with its closely cropped hair, his short straight nose and sucked-in cheeks. A long thin upper lip seemed to emphasize his protruding front teeth. He was wearing beige trousers made out of some smooth synthetic material and a cream nylon shirt. The trousers were held up with a black leather belt, bunched together at the waist as though they were several sizes too big. Had he lost several pounds or had I forgotten that he was as thin as his wife was overweight?

'So,' said Elaine, pushing up her sleeves and revealing large pale arms. 'Now what?' Her cold, angry manner seemed to have been replaced by something slightly less hostile. 'Sit down, then.' She patted the shiny red seat of the chair next to her own. Then she opened a drawer in the table and took out a mat which she placed under my mug.

Doug stood up, stretching his arms self-consciously. 'Not sure I locked the shed. Won't be a moment.'

I heard him let himself out of the back door, then watched him walk slowly down the crazy paving path. In the semi-darkness the rectangle of grass surrounded by a few dingy shrubs looked quite

attractive. Light from the kitchen window reflected on the small circular pond. Doug disappeared inside the shed.

‘Photography,’ said Elaine, holding her mug with both hands and taking small, noisy sips. ‘He’s made himself a darkroom. Hoping to sell his pictures to one of the gift shops.’

‘Oh. Good.’

She gave me a funny look. ‘I haven’t the heart to disillusion him. He was out at his framing class earlier on, didn’t get back till just before the police turned up.’

‘His class goes on till eleven?’

‘Afterwards they go to the pub. Suits me nicely. Saturday evening’s the only time I’m alone in the house.’

I smiled sympathetically. ‘It must be difficult.’

‘Would be but I’ve had my hours increased.’

‘At the supermarket?’

‘They’ve made me a supervisor.’

‘Oh, good, I’m glad.’ We should have been discussing the accident but what was there to say?

Elaine smiled to herself. ‘Doug says women take away men’s jobs.’

‘Oh, that.’ I hesitated. ‘This picture framing. I didn’t know they had adult education classes at the weekend.’

She laughed. ‘Think he’s been carrying on, do you? It’s run by a man called Neil something. Doug saw a card in the newsagent’s. He teaches them in a room in his house. Well, that’s what Doug says and I’ve no reason to — ’

‘No, of course not. I was just interested.’

‘Do a bit of photography yourself, do you? You must talk to Doug. Roped in Luke to give him a hand turning the shed into a darkroom.’

‘Really? Good idea.’

She pulled a face. ‘Keeps them occupied. Stops Doug sinking into depression, although I don’t know how long it’ll last. As for Luke ... ’

‘What about him?’ I was beginning to realize that she thought I should have been round before. In her mind I was Luke’s social worker rather than someone who had introduced him to her because I had heard she was looking for a lodger. Psychologist, social worker, what was the difference?

Doug came in from the garden. He looked uneasy.

‘Right, everything safely locked away. You left your cycle out, dear.’ He sat down and turned to face me. ‘Well then, Anna, how can we help?’

‘How much did Luke tell you about the accident?’

He frowned. ‘In a nutshell, next to nothing. It was the police who provided the information, not that they told us any details, just that there’d been an accident and Paula was ... ’ His voice trailed away and he glanced at Elaine.

‘Dead.’ She spoke the word as though neither Doug nor I had the courage to say it.

‘Of course, we didn’t know her,’ said Doug. ‘Funny kind of shop where she and Luke worked. Herbal remedies, a cure for everything under the sun — if you believe in that kind of malarkey.’

‘You’ve visited the shop?’

He shook his head. ‘Heard a bit about it from Luke. Not much, like trying to get water out of a stone. There’s a cafe, he told us that much. Camomile tea, carrot juice. Put it this way, not my kind of thing at all.’

I lifted my over-full mug to my mouth. The mat beneath it had a picture of the Bishop's Palace next to Wells Cathedral. A pair of whiter than white swans floated in the moat. The sun shone, the sky was a cloudless blue.

'Luke and Paula,' I said, 'd'you know how close they were?'

Elaine rested her arms on the table. 'Oh, I don't think there was anything like that. More like brother and sister.'

Doug dipped half a Digestive biscuit in his tea. He held it in the air and Elaine pursed her lips with irritation.

'They even looked a bit alike,' he said, 'according to Luke's description, that is. Tall, thin, same fair hair, although I'd say she's a good bit older, wouldn't you, dear?' He put his hand up to his eye to try to control a nervous tic. 'What'll happen now? With the police and everything.'

'I'll take Luke to the police station in the morning,' I said, 'although I doubt if he can remember very much. Did they mention if there were any other witnesses?' Elaine shook her head. 'They'd been to the Watershed — at least that's where Luke said they were going. One of those foreign films with sub-titles. D'you think we should call the doctor?'

'No.' I reacted too fast. 'In the morning, before going to the police station. But he may be much better by then.'

'If you're sure,' said Elaine. 'You're the expert. We'll leave it to your superior — ' She broke off in mid-sentence. Luke was coming down the stairs. He paused in the hallway and I wondered if he was going to leave the house. Then he pushed open the kitchen door and stood in the doorway, swaying.

‘They’re under the bed. Hundreds of them.’ His voice was hoarse, shaky, but just for a moment I thought he was going to laugh.

‘Under the bed?’ said Doug. ‘What’s under the bed?’

‘Black — like slugs but all warm — some of them are on the walls.’

I stood up and forced his rigid body on to a chair.

‘Stop it, Luke. If you can’t sleep we’ll talk, but not this rubbish.’

‘Squeaking,’ he said. ‘The more the merrier.’

‘What’s he on about?’ Doug had removed his glasses and was tearing off a corner of the *Bristol Evening Post*.

‘He’s hallucinating,’ said Elaine. ‘That’s what they call it, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but you’re not hallucinating, are you, Luke?’

Luke smiled. ‘They know everything,’ he murmured. ‘The world, how it began. Thousands and thousands going up and down, up and down.’ And then, hugging himself as though he was freezing cold, ‘When’s the ambulance coming? When will they take me away?’

2

In the morning I gave in and rang Luke's doctor. He was off duty but one of his partners agreed to call round sometime during the next hour. The whole conversation was carried on in a tearing hurry as though she had far more important matters to attend to than visiting a young man showing all the symptoms of a schizophrenic breakdown. Perhaps she had.

She held out little hope of having Luke admitted to hospital but said, grudgingly, that she would try and contact one of the consultants to see if there were any beds. This gave Doug, who had been listening to my end of the call, an opportunity to hold forth on the shortcomings of the Health Service. Elaine, spreading honey on a third slice of wholemeal toast, cast her eyes to heaven but kept her mouth firmly closed.

My head ached from lack of sleep and my throat felt dry and sore. Upstairs Luke's furniture was being moved across his bedroom floor. Doug stood up and crossed to the door to listen.

'If you want my opinion the lad's barricading himself in.'

'I doubt it,' I said, 'after all he's the one who thinks he ought to be in hospital.'

'You've got a point there.' Returning to the breakfast table he poured himself another cup of tea, then banged on the window, shouting through the glass at a black and white cat sharpening its claws on the roof of the shed.

Tea ran down the spout of the teapot and dripped on to the polished table. Elaine sighed, licked her fingers and fetched a sponge from the cupboard below the sink.

'I dare say the lad wants to be in hospital for his own safety,' said Doug, 'so he can't do anything silly.'

Elaine glanced at me and pulled a face. Last night's irritability had disappeared. She now wanted me to collude with her in categorizing Doug as a bit of an idiot. 'Luke'd never do that again, would he, Anna? Not after last time.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'At least if they keep him in a day or two it'll give us some breathing space.'

What did I mean by 'breathing space'? What was there to do during the next few days? Tell Luke's parents what had happened, or was that none of my business? I needed to talk to Howard Fry. Road accidents were hardly the concern of the CID but a quick word with Uniformed Branch and he would be able to reassure me that the facts had been sorted out and a report written and filed. The inquest would be a formality. There was nothing to worry about except Luke's state of mind and how best to help him come to terms with what had happened. If I said this to myself enough times I might almost believe it was true.

The doctor arrived. She was young, in her late twenties, with very short hair and large dangly ear-rings. I showed her up to Luke's room, trying to explain the situation as she raced up the stairs ahead of me.

Luke sat bolt upright on the edge of the bed which he had pushed against the far wall. He was smiling to himself and gazing into his cupped hands as though they held something delicate, alive.

'Hallo, Luke. My name's Dr Overton.' Her tone of voice raised my hackles immediately but Luke gazed at her as though she was the one person in the whole world he really wanted to see.

She sat beside him on the bed. 'How are you feeling? Managed to get any sleep?'

Luke leaned across and lifted a tooth mug from the window sill, offering it to her as though it were a precious gift. Ignoring the mug she tried again.

'You've had a very unpleasant experience and it's understandable you're feeling upset. I'm going to give you something that'll calm you down.'

She rested her black attaché case on the bed, clicked open the catch and hunted through the various pockets. Eventually she found a prescription pad, took a ballpoint pen from her inside pocket and started writing at breakneck speed.

'He was awake during the night, was he?'

I nodded. 'He stayed up here most of the time but I could hear him walking about.'

'You live here, do you?'

'No, I explained on the phone. Luke's my client. I'm a psychologist. He lodges here with Mr and Mrs Hargreaves. They rang me last night after the police had brought Luke home.'

'Following a road accident.'

'Yes.'

'And you stayed the night here.'

'Yes.'

She stared at me for a moment as though what I was telling her sounded highly implausible. Then she handed me the prescription,

closed her case and stood up, ready to leave.

‘Get this made up at the chemist.’

Luke started laughing, stuffing his hand in his mouth to muffle the sound. ‘This place is on the move,’ he giggled. ‘Microbes go up and down and talk through your head. Heading south. I was there in May only I may not because the rays are absorbed in water.’

Dr Overton hesitated with her hand on the door.

‘Has he been in hospital before? I couldn’t find his notes. I came out in a rush and — ’

‘Only overnight. He took some paracetamol back in April.’

‘OD’d. Right, so someone’ll have to take charge of the tablets.’

‘Charge the earth,’ said Luke, ‘going round the sun and sky for the time being he said.’

Dr Overton’s face remained expressionless. ‘All this — when did it start?’

‘Yesterday evening. I left him up here, lying down. When he came back downstairs — ’

‘And the same when you saw him first thing this morning?’

‘Yes. Once, during the night, he came down to the lounge where I’d made up a bed but he didn’t say anything, just went round touching the walls and — ’

‘Right, I get the picture.’ She stood up and left the room. I heard her run down the stairs and ask Elaine if she could use the phone.

‘Luke,’ I said, ‘this is crazy. I know what you’re doing and there’s no point. What happened to Paula was an accident. It was terrible, a tragedy, but it wasn’t your fault.’

He stared at me, still smiling faintly.

‘The doctor’s ringing the hospital,’ I said. ‘If there’s a bed they’ll keep you in for a day or two, but there’s no need to pretend you’ve gone off your head. I’ll have a word with the consultant. He’ll understand.’

He climbed up and sat on the window sill with his knees up to his chin, rocking backwards and forwards quite gently, then increasing the speed until I was afraid he was going to lose his balance and crash on to the floor.

‘Early one morning when the ash can,’ he said. Then he held his hand to his ear. ‘There it goes again. And there’s more where that came from so they say.’

*

The sky had clouded over and as we drove through Long Ashton a few large drops of rain splashed on the windscreen. Luke sat beside me, humming under his breath, the palms of his hands pressed together, as though in prayer, his expression a parody of an unctuous priest. He was putting it on. I was certain he was. In the months I had known him there had been no sign of schizophrenia. He was terrified. His worst fear had become reality — almost as though he had predicted it. Almost as though he had made it come true.

On the back seat lay a zip-up bag containing his toothbrush and some clothes.

‘All right?’ I asked. It was a ridiculous question but I wanted to sound as relaxed as possible. That way I might trick him into a normal spontaneous response.

Some hope.

'All right. On the night.' He wound down the window and stuck out his arm.

'Don't do that,' I said angrily.

'Don't do that,' he repeated. 'Oh, no, not that.'

'For God's sake, Luke, it's a waste of time spouting all that rubbish. They'll give you drugs, sedatives, then they'll realize you're just putting on an act.'

I wanted him to say 'Yes, I know', to start crying, to shout at me. Anything. Instead he stared down at his upturned hand, writing notes on it with an imaginary pen. He was still writing when we turned into the gates of the hospital and when I parked the car and climbed out he stayed put in the passenger seat, waiting for me to open his door.

I tried one last tack. 'Luke, I want to help you, I really do. Were you very fond of Paula? Is it worse than just the shock of seeing someone you know ... '

He might not have heard. As soon as I opened his door he jumped out and started following the arrows that pointed to Reception. At each arrow he paused for a moment, placed his feet together, turned outwards like a ballet dancer, then ran on.

When I caught up with him inside the building he was sitting on a metal-framed chair, waiting politely for someone to come and attend to him.

A nurse approached us, smiling. 'Can I help?'

'Luke Jesty,' I said. 'Dr Overton rang earlier.'

'That's right. My name's Henry. Henry Anayake.' He shook hands, first with Luke, then with me.

'Anna McColl. I'm a clinical psychologist, I've been seeing Luke once a week for the last couple of months.'

‘Nice to meet you.’ He had a label pinned to his white short-sleeved shirt, with his name in red ink.

Luke’s eyes were darting from side to side. He bent down to retie his shoe lace, then scuttled down the corridor, coming to an abrupt halt and studying a notice on one of the doors with rapt attention.

‘Toilet,’ he read out, using the deadpan voice he had adopted ever since he had appeared in Elaine and Doug’s kitchen the previous evening. ‘I want a pee.’

‘Sure.’ Henry Anayake smiled at me briefly. ‘Hang on, I’d better go with him. Don’t go away.’

I waited, leaning against the wall. My headache was worse. I rested my forehead on the coldness of the white wall and wondered if one of the consultant psychiatrists would see Luke today or whether he would just be kept under observation and given a sedative if he seemed very agitated. Supposing he wasn’t faking. Perhaps Paula’s accident had ‘tipped him over the edge’. I should have referred him for a psychiatric assessment a month ago instead of thinking I could play God, instead of convincing myself I knew best.

A doctor I had never met but knew by sight was strolling down the corridor. He looked at me suspiciously.

‘Are you waiting for someone?’

‘I’ve just brought in a patient. Luke Jesty.’

‘And you’re ... ’

‘Anna McColl. Dr Overton spoke to you on the phone.’ I lowered my voice. ‘Look, I’m fairly certain Luke’s symptoms aren’t genuine but I couldn’t really expect the people where he lives to — ’

‘As long as we had a bed. Dr Overton seemed to think it was some kind of schizophrenic episode.’ He was pushing open the swing door at the end of the corridor. He had barely stopped walking.

Luke and the nurse came out of the bathroom. Luke stared at me as though I was a total stranger, then started jogging on the spot. Henry Anayake took hold of his arm and started leading him along the corridor.

‘You know Luke pretty well?’ he asked.

‘Yes. No. I thought I did.’

‘I’m from Sri Lanka,’ he said. ‘Still getting used to the place.’

‘It must feel strange. How are you liking it over here?’ It was a relief to have a snatch of normal conversation.

‘It’s OK. Good. But not so easy for my wife.’

‘No, I can imagine.’

‘She’s expecting a baby in October.’

‘Oh, lovely. Your first, is it?’

He nodded. We had reached a side ward. Henry Anayake pushed open the door and I followed, placing the zip-up bag on a chair and standing well back as Luke moved quickly round the room, inspecting everything, including the space under the bed.

‘Mr Jesty’s had a bad shock? A road accident, I believe.’

I glanced at Luke but he showed no sign that he was listening.

‘A friend of his was killed.’

‘A close friend?’

I hesitated. ‘Yes. Look, he’s pretty anxious at the best of times but ...’

‘OK, we’ll look after him, don’t you worry. Dr Stringer’s at home today, but tomorrow — well, I’m sure you’ll be getting in touch.’

‘Yes, of course. I know Dr Stringer.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll fetch you both some coffee. Won’t be long.’

After Henry Anayake had left Luke stared through the window for a moment or two, then lay on the bed and closed his eyes. His lips moved as though he was having a private conversation with a voice inside his head.

‘Luke, I’ll have to go quite soon but I’ll be back later on.’

He murmured something I couldn’t catch. I moved closer.

‘What is it, Luke? Is there something you want to tell me?’

‘Death’s a pushover,’ he whispered.

I was certain that was what he’d said.

*

The place looked clean enough but smelled of dust and unwashed bodies. Leaning on the counter, pen poised, the desk sergeant listened carefully to what I was telling him about the accident, and the witness, Luke Jesty, currently in a psychiatric hospital but likely to be out in a few days’ time.

‘Right you are, miss.’

‘I think the statement was just a formality,’ I said, ‘I expect there were other witnesses.’

‘I couldn’t say, miss. Sergeant Waters will have all the details.’

A voice behind my shoulder made me jump.

‘Anna? Didn’t expect to see you here.’

‘Sergeant Whittle.’ I recognized him at once but was surprised he remembered my face. ‘There was a road accident yesterday evening,’ I explained. ‘One of my clients. A friend of his was killed.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I was just telling the desk sergeant — ’

‘Come and tell me.’ And when I hesitated, ‘We can use Howard’s office, he’s in Cardiff today.’

I followed him down the narrow, brightly lit passage. A broad-shouldered man, slightly under six foot tall, long arms and legs, a little uncoordinated. I remembered him telling me he was fanatical about Bristol City. I couldn’t imagine him playing football himself. Perhaps he preferred to sit and watch.

Why did he want to talk to me? Did he know something about the accident? Surely it hadn’t become a matter for the CID?

‘Sit down, Anna. I could probably rustle up a cup of something.’

‘No, don’t bother. Is there something you wanted to ask?’

‘Not really.’ He sat at his superior’s desk, swivelling the chair from side to side, smiling but not speaking, waiting for me to elaborate on the reason for my visit.

Recognition is easier than recall.

Although I would have known him anywhere, until today I could never have described the way he looked. Wavy brown hair, dark, almost black, eyes — he had told me once that he had an Italian grandmother — and a slightly hooked nose. The general impression was of someone almost the complete opposite of Inspector Fry. A friendly, gregarious person, whereas Howard Fry, unlike the majority of police officers, was something of an introvert.

‘I just thought you looked a bit upset,’ he said, lifting a chain of red paper clips out of an arrangement of plastic tubes designed to hold pencils and pens. ‘All in, as a matter of fact. When did this accident take place?’

‘Last night. About ten thirty. Outside the Hippodrome, near the pedestrian crossing. At least, I think that’s where it happened.’

'Don't expect you've had much sleep.'

'No. My client — I've just returned from taking him to hospital. He took an overdose a couple of months ago and — '

'You don't want him taking another. Are you sure I can't ring for some coffee?'

I shook my head. 'The police took him home last night. Apparently they wanted him to come in today and make a statement.'

'No urgency about it, was there?'

'No.'

I noticed a small scar where part of his right eyebrow was missing. It was an old scar but the hair would never grow again. An injury received in the course of duty — or had he fallen off his bike as a child, braked too hard and pitched over the handlebars on to the road?

He seemed quite pleased to see me. I was surprised, flattered. Still, the first time we met had been in fairly dramatic circumstances and meeting someone when the two of you are in a state of high tension tends to create a lasting bond.

He moved his chair so his knees were out of the way of the desk drawers. 'Throat sweet?' he said, tearing back the paper and holding out a tube of blackcurrant and glycerine pastilles. 'I don't know about you but this summer the hay fever's really taken a hold.'

I accepted one and put it in my mouth. He smiled and I smiled back, avoiding his eyes, pretending to look round the room as though to remind myself of a previous visit.

'It's been redecorated, hasn't it? I seem to remember the walls were green before, or am I just imagining it?'

He looked at me curiously. 'Good memory you've got. Ought to join the Force or branch out on your own as a private investigator.'

He was trying to soften me up. In a moment or two he would throw out a question that caught me off guard. This client of yours, he would shout, I hear he's unstable, prone to violent thoughts. Am I right?

But he knew nothing about Luke. Tiredness was making me edgy. I wasn't thinking straight.

He replaced the packet of throat sweets in his pocket. 'How's life been treating you since we last met?'

'Oh, all right. Fine. What about you?'

'Busy. Too much overtime. Not that it bothers me that much but my wife's had plenty to say about it. We've moved. House in Knowle.'

'Your wife's still working as a nurse?'

'What did I tell you — memory like a tape-recorder. Yes, still at the Infirmary. Quite interested in your line of country at the moment. Reading a book about different personality types, that kind of thing.'

He just felt like a chat. Nobody was in any doubt that Paula Redfern's death had been an accident. Talking to me was better than writing up reports.

'It must be hard,' I said, 'with you and your wife both doing shiftwork.'

'Can be.' He stood up. 'Well, if you're sure you're all right. Let us know if there's anything we can do to help and as for the statement, just bring in the young man when he's feeling up to it, OK?'

'Yes, I will. Thanks. What will happen next? I suppose there'll be an inquest.'

He nodded. 'They were crossing the road, were they?'

‘No. I’m not sure. As far as I can tell the pavement was very crowded. People coming out of the Hippodrome and others joining them from the Watershed.’

‘And the pedestrians started pushing forward. I get the picture.’

We strolled down the passage, Graham Whittle’s shoes squeaking loudly on the shiny grey linoleum. My headache had eased. I was starting to relax.

‘Shake you up, these things,’ he said. ‘I expect you think we get immune. Maybe we do, in a way, but is that such a good thing?’

‘Essential, I should think.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘You don’t think we need you psychologists for a spot of that group therapy stuff?’

‘If you really had to face up to all the things you see you might feel you couldn’t carry on with the job.’

‘Is that right? Well, you’re the expert. Anyway, I’ll tell Howard you called in. He’ll be sorry he missed you.’ He paused. ‘Oh, by the way, there wasn’t anything particular you wanted to tell us about, was there?’

I flinched. He showed no sign of having noticed, but I knew he had.

‘No, just about Luke Jesty being in hospital.’

‘Right you are. Any time we can be of help.’

Suddenly I longed to go home. Back to the safety of my flat where I could have a bath, change into some clean clothes, be by myself, think.

Later, during the afternoon, I would drive out to the village where Luke’s parents lived. It shouldn’t be too hard to find. Their address would be in the phone book or if not I could ask around the village. I wondered if I should have asked Luke’s permission to visit, but he

was in no fit state to answer and would almost certainly have pretended not to hear. In any case his parents deserved to know what had happened.

There was another reason of course. Since I had failed to tell Sergeant Whittle, or anyone at the hospital, about Luke's fantasies, the least I could do was satisfy myself that I knew as much as possible about what had been going on in his life. He wasn't violent. I was certain of it. But what was he so afraid of?

I could hear his quiet, deadpan voice, picture the damp sheen on his sun-tanned face. 'I see someone coming towards me. Walking down the road. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt them, injure them with a knife. Only I haven't got a knife. I can't stop thinking. Supposing I couldn't control the thoughts and ...'

*

The sky had brightened and some of the people walking up and down Whiteladies Road were dressed in shorts and T-shirts, making the most of what passed for a summer's day.

I paused for a moment outside a pub recently converted to a wine bar. A blackboard leaning against the front of the building invited customers to come inside for Pizza and Salad Niçoise or Pasta and Garlic Bread. My stomach heaved. I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in the window and suddenly I understood why Graham Whittle had looked a little concerned.

3

The White Cottage was not difficult to find. It was called a cottage but by the look of it a family of five could have lived there in comfort and there would still have been rooms to spare. Long and low, built of cob and thatch with rounded corners and windows appearing at irregular intervals, it was the kind of place that features on West Country calendars, and must have been worth a fortune.

I parked in the lane, tucking the car in so the neighbours could come in and out of their gateway, but taking care not to leave tyre marks on the immaculate grass verge.

As I walked up the drive everything felt so quiet that I was afraid the Jestys must be out, visiting friends or taking the dog for a walk round the Chew Valley Lake. The state of the garden was such that it could have been opened to the public. A lawn as smooth as a bowling green, surrounded by beds of roses with flowers of the palest pink through to light coppery orange. In the bed closest to the drive each plant had been neatly labelled. I bent down to read the names. *Stanwell Perpetua, La Reine Victoria, Tuscany Superb.*

The sun had come out and felt hot on my face. I closed my eyes, breathing in the scent of warm grass and something else that might have been lemon thyme. Luke would be lying on his bed in his side ward, or perhaps by now he was in one of the main wards or sitting in the day room watching the huge television screen with the sound turned low but the colour turned up to its brightest possible setting. Was he pretending to receive messages from the screen? Had the

doctor I met in the corridor classified him as a typical schizophrenic and given him the medication he should have received months ago?

By now Howard Fry would have returned to the police station. Graham Whittle would be telling his superior about my visit. 'Oh, Howard, your friend the psychologist called in this morning. Seemed a bit overwrought. Something to do with a road accident, although I got the impression there was rather more to it than she was letting on.'

Footsteps sounded on the gravel and a woman came round the side of the house. Her eyes were hidden by dark glasses but I could see at once that she was exceptionally good looking. High cheekbones and lightly tanned skin. Shiny brown hair, swept back from her face. She was dressed in a pale orange skirt and a white silk shirt.

'Hallo.' Her voice was deeper than I had expected. 'Did you want to see my husband?'

'Mrs Jesty?'

She twisted her gold bracelet until the clasp, in the shape of a padlock, hung across the back of her hand. 'Yes, that's me.'

'My name's Anna McColl, I'm a friend of Luke's.'

'Oh!' She put her hand up to her face.

'It's all right,' I said. 'Nothing's happened to him. Only I wanted to explain.'

'You'd better come inside.'

Holding open the front door she stood back for me to go in first, then changed her mind and stepped in ahead of me.

'Excuse me a moment. I'll fetch my husband. He's working in his study.' There was no entrance hall. The front door led directly into a

large living-room with windows on three sides and a door at the back, leading out to a stone passageway. Next to the big open fireplace was what looked like an old baker's oven, and beside it polished wooden steps, almost as steep as a ladder, led up to the first floor.

I moved across the room and stood with my back to the wall, preparing myself for what might prove to be a tricky encounter. How much had Luke told his parents about the last few months? Did they know who I was? Was I breaking a confidence letting them know Luke had been coming to see me? For all I knew, they might be the kind of people who viewed a referral to a psychiatrist or psychologist as something shameful, unmentionable even.

There were no ornaments or photographs in the room, and I turned to inspect one of the few insipid watercolours on the magnolia walls. At that moment Mrs Jesty returned, signalling her approach with a small discreet cough.

She moved quickly to where I was standing and spoke close to my ear. I could smell her perfume, something light and expensive, and just for a moment it affected me like a mild aphrodisiac — or perhaps the scent conjured up some pleasant association from the past.

'Don't mention the tablets,' she whispered. 'I thought it better not to tell Peter at the time.' She broke off. 'Oh, no, Luke hasn't taken ...'

'No, nothing like that.'

Her body slumped as though she had been holding her breath and suddenly all the air had left her lungs.

'Thank God. You've no idea how much I —'

Peter Jesty came through from the back of the house, rubbing his hair and looking preoccupied, annoyed that his work had been

interrupted. A tall, thin man who had to lower his head to avoid the heavy beam across the doorway, he walked briskly towards me and held out his hand.

‘How d’you do? My wife says you’re a friend of my son.’

‘Yes. Not a friend exactly. I’ve been seeing Luke once a week for the last two months, helping him with his anxiety symptoms.’

‘Oh, you’re a psychiatrist.’ He let go of my hand and gestured towards a chair.

‘No, a psychologist. My name’s Anna McColl.’ I sat at the far end of one of the sofas.

‘A psychologist,’ he repeated, ‘now let me get this straight. You’re not a doctor but you have a degree in psychology and presumably some postgraduate training.’

‘Yes, that’s right. I work with a team of people.’

‘In Bristol?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs Jesty had taken off her dark glasses and was sitting on the arm of the other sofa, smiling. It was a fixed smile, so much so that she seemed almost incapable of changing the expression on her face.

Peter Jesty ignored her, talking to me as though we were alone together. ‘I know a chap in the Psychology Department at the university. Calls himself a cognitive scientist. You wouldn’t see yourself that way.’

‘No.’

‘What do they teach you these days? Behaviour Modification? Or there’s some new-fangled treatment I’ve read about. Rational Emotive Therapy? Have I got it right?’

I became aware that my hands were clenched into fists. Spreading out my fingers I placed both hands on my knees and tried to relax. He was trying to put me in my place, establish my position — a low one — in some hierarchy he had invented for his own purpose. He was the kind of man who took hard science seriously but despised the social sciences.

‘I’m sorry to just turn up like this,’ I said, ‘but yesterday evening Luke had a very distressing experience. A friend of his was knocked down outside the Hippodrome. He’s very shocked and — well, this morning I had to take him to hospital.’

‘Hospital?’ Peter Jesty sounded intrigued rather than worried.

‘Oh, he wasn’t injured,’ I said, ‘not physically.’

‘I see.’

Mrs Jesty’s smile had disappeared. ‘You mean a mental hospital. He’s had a nervous breakdown.’

‘No. It is a psychiatric hospital but I’m sure he’ll be perfectly all right in a day or two. It just seemed the best place. It was what he wanted. You see, this friend of his — Paula Redfern — ’

‘Killed?’ Once again Peter Jesty sounded as though he just wanted to get the record straight.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. You didn’t know her, did you?’

He turned to his wife. ‘Do we know anyone of that name?’

Brigid Jesty’s hands were twisting and untwisting. She looked as though she was desperate for a cigarette.

‘No, I’ve never heard of anyone called Paula.’

I glanced at her face. Her lips were slightly parted and her narrow eyes were almost closed. She was lying, I was sure of it.

Peter Jesty leaned back against a fat silk cushion. It was the first time I had looked at him properly and I could see now that he and Luke were very alike. The same straight fair hair, light brown eyes and slightly upturned nose. But unlike his son Peter Jesty appeared well equipped to deal with whatever came along, and that included a unknown psychologist arriving at his house to inform him that one of his family was in a psychiatric hospital.

‘So,’ he said, ‘how did it come about that Luke was referred to someone like you?’

I looked at Brigid Jesty but she was staring out of the window.

‘Well, I expect he’s always been a fairly anxious kind of person, hasn’t he? He told me how he had to leave Oxford.’

‘Had to? You mean, he has no staying power. Yes, I’ll give you that. What’s he been doing since? We never set eyes on him, do we, my dear?’

‘He’s been working in a shop,’ I said. ‘A place that sells herbal remedies. But he’s starting another degree course in the autumn. He’ll be reading biochemistry.’

‘Maths, chemistry, it won’t last. However, I admire your optimism. Which university has been foolhardy enough to offer him a place?’

‘Bristol. He wanted to stay in the area and he seems really interested in biochemistry. I think it might suit him better than pure maths.’

‘You do, do you?’

‘Yes, I do.’

My fingers were drumming on the arm of the sofa. I waited for the next question but it never came. Peter Jesty sat staring at me. His

cold, detached manner might be a well-rehearsed defence but he was making me extremely angry.

‘I think Luke found Oxford hard to cope with,’ I said. ‘Lots of students have difficulty settling in if they’ve never been away from home before.’

‘But most them manage to make a go of it.’ He leaned forward with the palms of his hands pressed together. He had beautiful hands with exceptionally long fingers. ‘As you may or may not know I run a large and moderately successful company that provides financial services, mainly to small businesses. Each year we take on a number of new graduates and apart from the obvious fact that they need to be in the top ten per cent, the key personality factor is self-confidence.’

‘Yes, I take your point, but there are other kinds of jobs that need different qualities.’

‘You think so?’

‘Yes, of course.’ It was an absurd conversation, leading nowhere. Peter Jesty obviously despised his son. Luke had failed to live up to expectations so he had washed his hands of all further responsibility.

A bee had flown in through one of the windows and started knocking against the glass. Brigid Jesty opened the window a little wider but the bee flew across the room and up to the ceiling. I turned to face her, hoping to draw her into the conversation, but the bee had caused a welcome diversion.

On a table near the fireplace a map of the area had been smoothed out and held in place by two glass paperweights. Peter Jesty followed my eyes.

‘You’re interested in geology?’ He pointed to a section circled in red ink. ‘Here, where they’re building the new bridge over the Severn. Triassic rocks consisting mainly of interbedded sandstone — and coal, of course.’

Brigid Jesty gave a small nervous laugh which she changed quickly into a fit of coughing.

‘So,’ said Peter Jesty, ‘you felt that since my son is well below his chronological age in terms of emotional maturity it was wise to keep us informed of his — ’

‘No,’ I interrupted crossly. ‘I just thought you’d want to know what had happened.’

‘Of course. It was good of you to go to so much trouble.’

I stood up, taking my car keys from my pocket.

‘I’ll be seeing Luke tomorrow,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell him I’ve been to see you and of course if you want to visit ... ’

‘But you say he’ll be back home in a couple of days.’

‘Yes, I should think so. It’s hard to tell.’

‘Good. Well, thank you for letting us know.’ He held out his hand once more. I took hold of it briefly and as our eyes met I realized that beneath the icy self-control he was very angry — and very upset.

Brigid Jesty followed me out of the front door and we walked together down the drive with the gravel crunching under our feet. I could sense her agitation and suspected she wanted to tell me something but not until she was well out of earshot of her husband.

‘Your garden’s beautiful,’ I said. ‘It must need plenty of work to keep it looking so good.’

‘Yes, I suppose it does.’ Her voice was flat, lifeless. Either she was very depressed and wanted me to go away as quickly as possible or

she was afraid my attempts at pleasant conversation would make it more difficult for her to say whatever was on her mind.

Pausing by the car door I made an effort to produce what I hoped was a warm, sympathetic smile. 'I'm sorry, this must be difficult for you.'

'My husband,' she said, 'it's just his manner. He doesn't mean to sound so ... He works terribly hard, often from eight in the morning to eight o'clock at night. Then when he's at home he works on his book.'

'He's writing a book?'

'The creatures that live on the salt marshes by the Severn Estuary.'

'Are there any?'

'Oh, yes, there seem to be.' Against her better judgement she laughed, putting her hands up to her face to conceal her expression. 'Froghoppers, leafhoppers, and a beetle with shovel-shaped legs for digging.'

Her voice trailed away. She glanced back at the house, then lowered her voice as though she thought the gateposts might be bugged.

'I didn't say anything before but Luke and I meet occasionally in Bristol. A little wine bar place in Clifton Village. My husband, it would only upset him, has Luke mentioned ... ?'

'As a matter of fact, he's told me very little about his family.'

'But you've been giving him some kind of treatment?'

'At the moment my main aim is to gain his confidence. Later, when he feels safer with me, I'm hoping to — '

'Yes, I see. He's always been quiet, secretive, but I didn't think it mattered.'

'It doesn't,' I said, 'as long as he's happy.'

'But he isn't, is he.'

'It's hard to tell. No. I'm afraid Paula Redfern's death has affected him badly. I'm not sure how well they knew each other but Luke finds it hard to make friends and — '

'Yes, I know.' Her fingers were rubbing the back of her neck, trying to relieve the tension. I wanted her to tell me as much as possible but I had a feeling that one false move on my part and she would clam up.

'Luke doesn't come home very often?' I said.

She stiffened, blinking several times in quick succession. Then the muscles in her face relaxed.

'He doesn't drive.'

'Perhaps he should buy a bicycle.'

'No! They have those cycle lanes but I always think they're worse than useless. When they come to an end the cyclists are forced back into the stream of traffic.' She paused, replacing her dark glasses, then taking a deep breath and removing them again. 'Luke's told you about his sister, I expect.'

'Sister? I know he's got an older brother.'

'Oh, yes. Michael.' She had undone one of the buttons on her shirt, revealing the pale skin round the sun-tanned V on her upper chest.

'He has a sister as well?' I said.

She stared at me for a moment, then looked away and spoke slowly, mechanically, rather as Luke had spoken the previous evening. It was as though she had used the same sentence many times before. 'Diana died a few days before her thirteenth birthday.'

I felt a chill run down my back. At the thought of losing a thirteen-year-old daughter? Or was it because Luke had failed to tell me what must certainly have been the most traumatic event in his childhood?

‘I’m terribly sorry.’ I couldn’t bring myself to look her in the eye.

‘It was a long time ago. Nearly six years.’

I wanted to say that six years was no time at all, that losing a child was the worst thing that could happen to anyone. But any words would have sounded trite. A helicopter was flying overhead. The noise of the rotor blades made conversation impossible and provided a short relief.

As the sound faded in the distance we both started talking at once.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, do go on.’

‘I just wanted to explain,’ I said. ‘Luke hasn’t talked much about himself yet. We’ve been concentrating on finding ways of reducing his symptoms. Breathing exercises, methods of diverting the thoughts that disturb — ’ I broke off. It all sounded so irrelevant, so inadequate.

She nodded vaguely, turning to inspect a climbing plant that had attached itself to the gate. ‘Thank you so much for coming to find us. And on a Sunday too.’

‘That’s all right. Anyway, I hope we’ll meet again some time. Try not to worry about Luke. He’ll be making a new start in the autumn and I’m going to carry on seeing him as long as he needs it.’

‘Yes, of course.’

She was swinging her dark glasses in her hand, screwing up her eyes against the sun. Just for a moment she looked quite panic-stricken. Was she afraid her husband might want to know what we

had been talking about? Or was there something important she hadn't yet told me? I waited a moment but she seemed miles away.

'Goodbye, then.' I held out my hand.

'Anna McColl,' she said, 'and you're a psychologist. You work at the hospital, do you?'

'No, I work in Bristol. Look, if you like, I'll give you my phone number.'

I found an old credit card receipt and scribbled my number on the back. She hesitated for a moment then took the scrap of paper and pushed it behind the waistband of her skirt.

I watched her start back up the drive. She didn't turn to wave goodbye and long before I started the engine she had disappeared into the house. Winding down the window I strained my ears, listening for the sound of raised voices. But there was nothing. Silence except for the noise of a lawn mower in one of the gardens nearer to the centre of the village. The lane was idyllic. Green, peaceful, edged with great swaths of tiny blue flowers. I couldn't wait to return to the city.

4

Ten to four on Monday afternoon and I was finding it difficult to concentrate on my client's detailed description of his symptoms. In the next street someone was digging up the road. Drains or the gas main, it had been going on all day and would probably continue for the rest of the week. I thought about Luke, then forced him out of my mind.

Mr Farrell was telling me again about the chest pains that woke him up in the early hours of the morning.

'I know it's not my heart, but I keep wondering if you can make yourself ill just by thinking about it.'

'No,' I said firmly. 'You may have psychosomatic symptoms but you won't give yourself heart disease.'

He relaxed a little, but next time he would ask me the same question all over again.

'Tell me about your father,' I said, 'did you see much of each other in the months before he died?'

'No, that was just it. It was all so sudden. He'd seemed so fit. If I'd known what was going to happen ... '

Now we were getting somewhere. Almost the end of the session but next week he might agree to stop talking about his symptoms and tell me instead about his relationship with his father, the inevitable regret that they had not been closer, spent more time together. Mr Farrell was in his early fifties and his father had been

over eighty, but it was the first time he had experienced a death in the family.

After he left I went downstairs and sat in Reception talking to Heather while she photocopied Martin's new hand-out describing the work of the Psychology Service.

She straightened up, rotating her shoulders to ease the muscles in her back. I noticed a few grey hairs near her temples and it occurred to me that I had no idea how old she was. Divorced with two daughters in their early teens. That made her anything between thirty-five and forty, perhaps a little more. She had the kind of face that must have looked older than she really was in her early twenties but had remained much the same for the next fifteen years or so. As usual her clothes were a hotch-potch of conflicting shades. I liked her. She had a healthy scepticism about many of the psychological theories we discussed during our coffee breaks, but she was kind and considerate to the clients — and to the rest of us come to that.

I jerked my head in the direction of the hand-outs.

'Who's going to get a copy?'

'Oh, local doctors,' she said, 'social workers, community nurses, psychiatrists.'

'They know about us already.'

'Very true, but Martin and Nick think we should specify which kinds of client are likely to benefit the most.'

'It's impossible to tell. It depends on the person, not the problem.'

She sighed. 'I'm sure you're right, Anna, but you must tell Martin and Nick not me.'

'Sorry. I wasn't criticizing.'

'I know you weren't. Take no notice. The copier's been on the blink and I've wasted nearly an hour fiddling about with the paper-feeder.'

Martin came through the door, yawning loudly. He was wearing a jacket, which was unusual for him, but the rest of his clothes were as scruffy as ever. Shapeless cords and a grey open-neck shirt with frayed collar and cuffs. Not the typical attire of a principal psychologist but then Martin had a horror of becoming part of the Establishment.

'I've just been visiting a hostel for ex-offenders,' he announced. 'I'll tell you something for nothing, the staff are having more difficulty getting on with each other than with the residents.'

'That figures,' said Heather, smiling at me, then busying herself with a pile of envelopes.

'Oh, come on,' said Martin, 'I reckon we make a pretty good team.' He lifted the edge of his eyelid, searching for a piece of grit. 'Something for every taste, wouldn't you say, Anna?'

Sitting down heavily he swung his mud-stained shoes on to Heather's desk and turned to face me. 'Well, then. Luke Jesty, what's the latest? Been back to the hospital, have you?'

I should have been grateful to him for taking an interest. Instead I assumed that he had picked up on my anxiety and felt it his duty to check up, just in case. Martin knew quite a bit about Luke. So did Heather, since she was the one who had told me about her neighbours, Doug and Elaine, and how they'd been looking for a lodger.

'I'm going later on,' I said, 'after I've called on the Hargreaves. Stringer's sure to think I should've referred Luke weeks ago.' I was trying to pre-empt a telephone call behind my back between Martin

and the chief consultant psychiatrist. 'He won't say straight out but I'll know what he's thinking.'

'Stringer's all right.' Martin closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. 'He's just a bit world-weary like the rest of us.'

'Speak for yourself!' I snapped.

'OK, OK.' He stood up and put a hand on my shoulder. 'What is it about this boy?'

'Luke's twenty-two. Hardly a boy.'

'All right, but what's so special about him?'

Heather laughed. 'He's the most beautiful looking young man I've ever seen.'

*

Doug answered the door. From the crumpled look I guessed he had been asleep. What hair he still had left, after the barber had been at it with an electric razor, stood up in a tuft on the top of his head. He was dressed in his usual trousers but with a thick ribbed sweater over his shirt. No wonder he was sweating.

'Come in, Anna.' He stepped into the porch and held the door open for me to pass in front of him.

'Sorry to disturb you,' I said. 'I just called round to thank you for —'

'No need. Put it this way, we just did what we could, which wasn't a great deal in the circumstances. How is the lad?'

'I shall be going to visit him later on.' He led me into the kitchen but didn't offer tea or coffee. He looked ill at ease, as though he was making an effort to appear nonchalant, relaxed.

'Elaine's out, doing an extra shift. I worry in case she overdoes things, not that she takes a blind bit of notice of anything I say. Put it in a nutshell, we can do with the extra cash.'

He laughed, then took a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and blew his nose hard.

‘I shouldn’t worry,’ I said, ‘I think she enjoys her work. Anyway, she seemed pleased about the promotion.’

It was the wrong thing to say. When he squirmed on his chair I pretended not to notice. Now was not the time for a counselling session, with Doug breaking down and admitting that Elaine’s extra hours — and extra money — only served to make him feel even more of a failure.

‘I was wondering, Doug,’ I said cautiously, ‘when the police brought Luke back — Elaine said you’d just returned from your class.’

‘Been home about ten minutes., I’d say.’ His eyes met mine, then flicked away.

‘You go every Saturday, do you?’

‘That’s about it. Framing’s a tricky business. If you don’t get the corners exactly right there’s hell to pay. Need a special saw for the mitred edges.’

He stood up and went into the next room, returning with a large portfolio under his arm.

‘Been getting these together specially. Thought they might cheer up the lad when he comes home.’ He undid the strings of the portfolio and lifted out a set of black and white photos. ‘Pictures I took when the fun fair was up on the Downs. Luke was helping me develop them. Some of them have come out rather well.’

I lifted up the first photo and studied it carefully. It seemed to be part of the big wheel. A queue of people were waiting underneath and because the shot had been taken at an angle they looked as though they were in danger of falling on their faces.

'It's good,' I said.

He nodded enthusiastically. 'If you want the real effect you can't beat black and white. That way you can control the tones. With colour you have to rely on the chemicals.'

'Yes, I see. And Luke's been helping in your darkroom.'

'I thought it might give him a new interest. Used to stay up in his room most evenings, reading. I felt he needed taking out of himself.'

'Yes, I'm sure you're right. How's he been the last few weeks? I mean, you haven't noticed anything in particular, have you?'

I wanted him to convince me that Luke was sane, normal apart from his usual anxiety which I was certain must be connected with events in the past rather than any psychiatric disorder.

He took off his glasses, breathed on each lens, then rubbed them with a corner of his handkerchief.

'Would you say a nervous disposition's something you're born with, or is it a question of upbringing?'

'Could be a combination of the two.'

He thought about this for a moment. 'I had an uncle with nerves. The War. Never got over it. Mind you, he'd been timid as a boy. Put it this way, he should never have gone into the navy.'

I nodded sympathetically. 'Luke's told you he'll be starting at the university in October?'

'But he'll carry on living here with us.'

'If that's all right with you both.'

'Course it is. Elaine thought he might be better off in one of those halls of residence but I told her what he needs is the security of a real home. Tell me if I'm wrong but I see myself as a kind of

substitute father. Oh, I know he's got a real father, but reading between the lines I'd say they've never really hit it off that well.'

'He's told you about his family?'

'Had to drag it out of him. Even then I wasn't much the wiser. Strange lad, but Elaine and I have grown quite fond of him. Like a son to us, I suppose.'

'Did he tell you much about Paula Redfern?'

It was a harmless enough question but I sensed his discomfort.

'Sorry? Paula — no, not really. Just that she'd been married but it hadn't worked out.'

'Married? She was older than Luke, then?'

'Oh, I imagine so. Looked in her early thirties.' He broke off, pushing his photographs back in the portfolio. Slowly, carefully, he tied the black ribbons that held it together, then lined up its edge against the end of the table. His hands shook a little and he kept touching his upper lip with the tip of his tongue.

'I didn't realize you'd met her,' I said.

'What?' Sweat was streaming down his face. 'Saw her once — in the shop. Best not to mention it to Elaine. She'd call it interfering. It's just that I feel the lad likes us to take a friendly interest.' He was breathing hard, in through his nose and out through his mouth. 'Elaine thinks he's been mollycoddled, needs to grow up, stand on his own two feet.' He had gained control of himself. His hands were still, his face wiped dry. 'You never met Paula yourself. No, I don't suppose you would. But he'd have told you about her.'

'Not very much.'

He smiled. 'There you are, then, can't have been very important to him, can she?' And then, in case I thought he was being

disrespectful to the dead, 'Poor woman. Terrible thing to happen, God rest her soul.'

*

The first time I met Luke he had been lying on the floor beside his unmade bed. Janos, the caretaker of the house opposite my own that had been divided into bed-sits, had run across the road to fetch me. Why he hadn't phoned for an ambulance straight away I can't imagine. Maybe he thought Luke was play-acting. Maybe he thought I was a doctor. An empty bottle of paracetamol on a bedside cabinet had been enough for me to decide to drive Luke to Casualty myself. Together, Janos and I had lifted him to his feet and forced him to stumble down the stairs between us. Janos had pushed him into the back seat of the car, then climbed in beside me.

'When you reach the hospital I come in too, Anna.'

But once inside the hospital a nurse and a porter had taken over. Janos and I had waited half an hour or so to make sure Luke was going to be all right, then driven back home.

'Silly boy.' Janos had been quite calm but I knew he felt guilty. It had never occurred to him that Luke was unhappy. Quiet, a little withdrawn, but he had gone to work each day — a store in Queen's Road where he packed china and glassware — and come home each evening at five forty-five. He paid his rent on Fridays, remembered to put out his rubbish every Wednesday evening.

'You collect the rents, do you, Janos?' We had never talked much before. Just a few words when we met in the street. All he knew about me was that I was a psychologist. All I knew about him was that he had come to England during the Hungarian Revolution. I liked his face with its deep lines and scattering of small dark moles.

His eyes were dark too, his hair thin and grey. We both liked dogs and Janos had an eight-year-old golden retriever which leaned its head on my thigh whenever we met.

‘I collect the money for Mrs Bonamy,’ he said. ‘She lives up the other side of the Downs in a big house overlooking the Gorge. I keep an eye on things, clean the stairs and passages, do a few repairs. In return I pay a reduced amount. It suits me quite well.’

‘And Luke moved in a few months ago?’

‘Only five weeks. I invited him to the basement for a chat but he didn’t enjoy it so I leave him alone except when he brings the rent.’

‘And he seemed all right last Friday?’

‘As far as I can tell. People who take all their tablets, they don’t give warning.’

‘Sometimes they do. Sometimes not. Didn’t anyone come to visit him?’

‘Never.’

‘And he didn’t make friends with any of the other tenants?’

‘No. Once a man came to the door but when I went to fetch Luke he said to say he was out.’

I remembered our conversation, almost word for word. It had taken place less than three months ago but it seemed like more.

Now, from the window of the day room at the hospital, I could see Luke walking across the lawn. When he reached a row of chestnut trees he touched each in turn, then stood up very straight with his arms stretched above his head. After a moment’s pause he set off again, back across the grass.

He had no idea I was watching him. I turned away, confused by the conflicting feelings he aroused. Compassion, anger, alarm — and

something else. Martin would have called it frustrated maternal instinct. He would have been wrong. I didn't feel in the least maternal towards Luke and in any case the relatively small gap between our ages rendered the whole notion ridiculous.

When I opened the French windows to let in some much needed air the distant whine of a chain saw was just audible above the golf commentary coming from the television. An old man seated near the window raised his head, feeling the breeze on his face. I smiled at him, then realized that he was blind.

'Hallo. You're not in a draught, are you?'

The old man turned towards me. 'Is there any bacon?'

'You want some bacon?'

'Is there any bacon?' He started to rise from his seat, then sat down again heavily, knocking his stick to the ground.

I picked it up and leaned it against the chair.

'Is there any bacon?' he asked. 'I want some bacon.'

'Not now, Arthur.' A young nurse, with a tissue pressed to her nose, came into the room, winked at me, then asked if I was looking for someone.

'I've come to see Luke Jesty.'

'Oh, Luke.' She sneezed several times, then peered through the window. 'He was out there earlier. I should have a look.'

'Is Dr Stringer here today?'

'In his room.'

Arthur was still asking for bacon but she was taking no notice. Most likely the old man made the same request a hundred times a day.

A door on the other side of the corridor opened and William Stringer came out of his office. He glanced into the day room, stared

at me for a moment, then realized who I was.

‘Anna, I was hoping to see you.’ He turned back and held open the door to his room. ‘Come along in.’

I followed him into the small carpeted room with its book-shelves, mahogany desk, and row of filing cabinets. On the lefthand wall was a reproduction of a Matisse. Clear blues and yellows. The figure of a woman, a bowl of pears on a tall, spindly table. Stringer’s desk was bare apart from a photograph of a woman aged about nineteen or twenty. He followed my eyes.

‘My daughter Miranda. Taken a few years back. She’s a trainee GP in Newcastle now, very keen on your line of country. Thinks nothing of psychotropic drugs. Prefers a counselling approach.’

I smiled but made no comment.

‘Sit yourself down.’ He lowered himself into his chair and smiled encouragingly. He was a big man, well over six foot, with thick white hair, a long, amused-looking face, and a large paunch hidden behind his loose-fitting double-breasted suit. We knew each other a little and I had always found him tolerant, broad-minded. Already in his sixties he had seen it all before, but still managed to keep an open mind about the causes and treatment of the mentally ill. He was even prepared to discuss Thomas Szasz’s thesis that there is no such thing as mental illness.

‘Well then, my dear, the Jesty boy.’

In the ordinary way I dislike being called ‘my dear’ but just at that moment I found it stupidly comforting.

‘How’s he been?’

‘Difficult to say,’ said Stringer. ‘How long has he been coming to see you?’

'Oh, not very long,' I said rather too quickly. 'He took an overdose of paracetamol about three months ago, back in April.'

'Paracetamol?' Stringer leaned back in his chair. 'Could've been the end of him.'

'Yes, I know. Luckily he brought most of it up on the way to the hospital. They kept him in overnight, then sent him home the following morning.'

He nodded, pushing a finger behind the collar of his shirt to ease the pressure on his neck.

'He was seen by a psychiatrist before he left hospital,' I said, 'and she — I've forgotten her name, I'm afraid — anyway it was agreed that he should come and see me on a regular basis.'

'You'd been seeing him before the overdose?'

'Oh, no. He was living in one of the houses opposite my flat in Cliftonwood. Janos, who lives in the basement, came and told me what had happened. I think he thought I was a doctor.'

'Fortunate you were on the spot.'

'I thought Luke was going to throw up in my car, but he jumped out when the lights turned red. Afterwards he told me he'd been worried about spoiling the seat covers. That's Luke all over. He's extremely anxious, quite obsessional, but there's never been any sign of psychosis.'

'I see.'

I was talking too much. What was William Stringer thinking? That I'd rushed in where angels feared to tread? That Luke was schizophrenic and I'd been treating him for anxiety neurosis? That my treatment had forced him into a psychotic state?

He smiled encouragingly. 'And the night before last there was a road accident?'

'Yes. Outside the Hippodrome.' I started telling him about Paula Redfern and Luke's job in the herbal remedies shop.

'You knew this poor woman?'

'No, I never met her. I don't even know how well they knew each other.'

'Does Luke have any relatives living near by?'

'Yes, his parents and a brother. I don't know where the brother lives but I've met the parents. I went to tell them about the accident.'

'Good. They haven't been to visit as far as I know.'

'I don't think they're expecting him to be in hospital more than a day or two.'

Stringer nodded, scribbled a few notes on a pad, then stood up and patted me on the shoulder. 'He's making a convincing job of passing himself off as schizophrenic. Why would he want to do that?'

'I suppose it's a kind of escape. Better than facing up to how bad he feels.'

'Perhaps.' He held open the door. 'Come back whenever you like. I'm sure Luke will want to see you. Hey, don't look so worried, I don't have to tell you how difficult a lot of diagnoses are, how the patient can change from one state — ' He broke off, glancing at his watch and picking up a file that was lying on his desk. 'Anyway, keep in touch. 'Bye for now.'

I walked down the corridor and out of the door at the far end that led out into the grounds.

*

There was no sign of Luke and for a moment it occurred to me that he might have seen me and started walking back to Bristol. Even now he could be standing on the grass verge trying to hitch a lift. But why would he do that? He was the one who had wanted to come to the hospital in the first place.

Then I spotted him, leaning against the Occupational Therapy building, his eyes closed and his head well back as though he was enjoying soaking in the sun.

'Luke?' I walked towards him but he kept quite still. 'Hallo, how are you?'

He stepped forward and held out his hand. 'Nice to meet you. Or so they say. Today if I may.'

I sighed. 'Shall we sit down for a moment.'

He walked a few paces behind, then joined me, sitting at the far end of a rickety bench with one of its wooden slats missing. His breathing was fast and shallow. I touched him on the shoulder, then withdrew my hand quickly when he jumped and a long shudder seemed to run through his body. He was scratching at a mark on his jeans. He licked his finger, rubbed at the stain, then began laughing under his breath like a child trying not to giggle while being told off.

'Have you seen the doctor yet?' It was a stupid question but I was trying to force him to give me one straight answer.

Blowing out his cheeks he started making a sound like squelching mud. Then he bent down and peered under the bench.

'They'll be here soon,' he whispered. 'Soon, about noon, in the light of the moon.'

*

Turning into the gates to Ashton Park I drove carefully over the bumps in the road, put there to discourage motorists from taking a short cut, or at the very least to slow them down. It was a route I rarely took but I needed to walk in an open space, to clear my head, think things out. All the way back to the city I had been trying to justify my decision not to tell William Stringer about Luke's violent fantasies. Luke wouldn't say anything himself. If he spoke to Stringer at all it would be a jumble of incoherent sentences, linked by the sound of the words rather than any meaning they might have.

Knowing Luke, he could keep it up almost indefinitely. No doubt he had read about a research project, quoted by first-year psychology students full of righteous indignation at the use of psychiatric labels. It had been arranged that perfectly normal people should be admitted to hospital, complaining of hearing voices, then start behaving normally. In no instance had any of the staff detected that the pseudo-patient was actually quite sane. In my opinion it was an unfair experiment. Why should the staff have seen through it? Surely normal people would have asked to go home.

I parked on the grass next to a white hatchback containing an elderly couple who appeared to be fast asleep. Closing the door carefully so as not to disturb their dreams I started up the steep hill, making for the coolness of the wooded area to the west of the parkland.

A plan was forming in my head. I would give myself seven days to look into what had been going on in Luke's life during the last few weeks and make sure nothing had happened that could have pushed him into actual violence. As well as that I would find out as much as I could about the accident. If at the end of a week I still had

doubts I would go back to Stringer, and then to the police, and tell them about the fantasies. That way I was being fair to Luke, respecting the confidentiality of what he had told me, but acknowledging that in certain circumstances I was equally responsible for making sure that other people were protected. From Luke? Paula's death was an accident, of course it was, and even if — I forced myself to face the possibility without my thoughts shifting to a safer topic — even if my worst fears proved correct Luke was now under close supervision, no danger to himself or to anyone else.

I needed to know more about Paula Redfern. Apart from the small amount of information passed on by Doug — that once, probably several years ago, she had been married — all I knew was that she and Luke had worked in the shop and, now and again, been to the cinema together. The shop — that was where I would have to start. Not today, it was far too late. Tomorrow, after my three o'clock client. I just prayed to God I wouldn't find a CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE sign stuck on the door.

5

It looked dark inside but when I pushed the door it swung open with a tinkle of Chinese bells. Behind the counter a young man with spiky black hair like a bottle brush was sitting on a tall stool, reading the latest issue of *Venue*. He looked up briefly then continued running his fingers down the list of entertainments on in Bristol during July.

I had passed the shop scores of times but never been inside in case Luke thought I was checking up on him. Already I had involved myself in his life far too much, helping him to find new lodgings and change jobs, and he had gone along with what were really my decisions, not his. It was true he had an obstinate streak in him. Even so I was inclined to agree with Elaine who felt that usually in the past Luke had waited for someone else to organize his life.

The shop was smaller than I expected with a short counter on the right and behind it three pine shelves stacked with glass jars filled with herbs. There were scales for weighing two- or four-ounce packets and, at one end of the counter, a selection of books labelled FOR REFERENCE ONLY invited customers to look up the remedies for their ailments. I picked one up at random and flicked through the pages, coming to a stop at *Nervous Debility*. A quick look indicated that there were several suggestions for dealing with the problem. Camomile, lime flower, or a recipe which included dock root, juniper berries and red wine. It sounded fairly disgusting — unless the wine was strong enough to disguise all the other flavours — but perhaps it did the trick.

I wondered if Luke had returned from his sessions with me, pessimistic, jaded, to be greeted by Paula with a herbal remedy she considered far superior to any treatment the Psychology Service could provide.

The young man behind the counter was whistling an old David Bowie song.

On a noticeboard on the wall opposite the door, cards advertising a variety of alternative therapies and treatments had been pinned at random. Iridology, Reflexology, Dream Analysis, Body Toning. I approached the man, clearing my throat in the hope of gaining his attention.

‘I didn’t expect to find you open.’

He hesitated a moment, then spoke looking down at his magazine. ‘Oh, you know about the accident. I’m just filling in for a couple of days.’

‘I’m a friend of Luke’s.’

‘Luke? Oh, the blond guy. Pretty cut up about it, is he? I heard he was with Paula when it happened.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Pedestrians don’t stand much of a chance in this City.’ He glanced at me, then shrugged. ‘I only met her a couple of times.’

He was dressed in a pink sleeveless T-shirt and baggy white dungarees. He looked about twenty-three or four but the spots round his mouth were the kind boys usually grow out of in their late teens. ‘You knew Luke, did you?’

He shook his head. ‘Only by sight.’

‘Yes, I see.’ I thought fast. ‘Look, the reason I’m here, I didn’t know Paula either, but Luke’s taken it very badly and I need to find out how

well he and Paula ... ’

He didn't look up. 'Search me.'

'Well, d'you know of anyone who could help? Someone I could talk to?'

'You could try Carl. Paula's ex-husband. He's an actor, used to be in that television series about the psychiatrist.'

'Carl Redfern? Paula was married to — '

'The guy who owns this shop's a friend of Carl's. I guess Carl told Paula they needed someone to work in the shop.'

'D'you know where Carl Redfern lives? I don't suppose his number's in the book.'

He shook his head. 'Ex-directory, doesn't want all his fans ringing him up.' He grinned. His teeth were so white I wondered if they were his own. 'Hang on.' Tearing a corner off one of the herb bags he wrote down an address.

*

The house was in Redland. It was an old coach house that looked as if it had been converted during the last couple of years. Along the top of the garden wall a wisteria, which must have been planted years before the conversion took place, was in full bloom. The long mauve flowers hung almost to pavement level. You could tell it was an up-market area. Nobody had wrenched them off and thrown them in the gutter.

There was no doorbell, just a heavy iron knocker in the shape of a monkey's head. I lifted it, then let it fall with a dull thud that might or might not have been audible inside the house. While I waited I wondered if Heather had remembered to tell Martin I might not be back in time for his meeting to discuss the setting-up of more self-

help groups. He would be annoyed about it but by tomorrow he would have calmed down. In any case, meeting Carl Redfern was far more important.

The door to the coach house swung open and a man stood in the entrance hall, rubbing his hair with a towel.

‘Yes?’

‘Carl Redfern?’

‘Yes.’

‘My name’s Anna McColl. I’m a friend of Luke Testy.’

‘Who?’

‘He worked in the shop with Paula.’ With a sinking feeling I realized it was possible Carl Redfern had not heard about the accident.

‘Oh, I see.’ The edge to his voice had disappeared. He knew what had happened. For a moment his face assumed a mournful expression, then he flicked back his hair and held out his hand.

‘I do apologize. You’re ... I didn’t quite catch ... ’

‘Anna McColl.’

‘Scottish?’

‘My father’s father.’

He grinned. Now that he had removed the towel I could see that his hair was thick and iron grey, cut short at the sides and longer on top.

He followed my eyes, then laughed. ‘I dyed it for the show, a rather tasteful shade of rosewood brown, but it never really suited my complexion.’

I looked away, irritated that he had cast me in the role of one of his fans. It was true that his face was familiar but if the boy in the herb shop hadn’t mentioned the television series I think I might have mistaken him for the jolly father in a commercial for vegetable soup.

Light blue eyes, a straight broadish nose, a deep cleft in his chin and a mouth that turned up slightly at the corners. He was very attractive, there was no doubt about that, but perhaps not quite so devastating as he imagined.

‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ I said, ‘but I wondered if I could have a quick word.’

‘Well, yes, I suppose.’ He had adjusted his voice again so that he sounded more like the recently bereaved. ‘As you can imagine I’m feeling fairly shattered.’ Dabbing at his bare chest with the sopping wet towel he waited for me to elaborate.

‘Luke Jesty’s one of my clients,’ I said. ‘I’m a psychologist.’

‘Are you indeed? A real live clinical psychologist? So this is a professional call. I don’t know if I could be much help. Paula and I were divorced two years ago. Obviously if you lived with someone for five years it’s a shock to hear ... Well, I don’t have to explain to someone like you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I had no right to turn up like this.’

‘You had every right if it’s part of your job. What time is it? Four thirty. Can you be gone by five? Sure? Right you are. Come along in.’

He was dressed in a pair of green denim shorts. He must have had to breathe in hard to pull up the zip. He was older than I had expected. If he and Paula had been married for five years and they had divorced two years ago, that probably meant she had been in her early thirties, as Doug had suggested. Carl was nearer forty-five.

‘Sit wherever you like.’ He offered a choice of chairs, perching himself on a window seat that ran along most of one wall. Behind I noticed a small conservatory and behind that a narrow garden, filled

with tall broad-leaved plants. A red-brick wall separated the coach house from a larger, three-storey building.

‘Drink?’ He stood up, took a T-shirt from the back of a chair, and pulled it over his head.

‘No thanks. Look, I’m really sorry about Paula. I didn’t actually know her myself but I know she was very kind to Luke.’

‘Having it off, were they?’ The T-shirt had an Escher print on the front: a hand drawing the cuff of another wrist, which in turn was drawing the wrist of the first hand.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘They were friends.’

‘Just good friends. Impossible. Oh, your patient’s gay, is he?’

‘Not as far as I know.’

‘How old?’

Just for a moment I thought he was asking my age. ‘Oh, Luke. He’s twenty-two.’

‘Right. Bit of a hard luck case, is he? That would’ve suited Paula down to the ground. Abandoned pussy cats were her real speciality.’ He sighed deeply. ‘Poor old thing, the last person she ever needed was someone like me.’

People react to death in all kinds of different ways. For Carl Redfern the death of his former wife was just another instalment in an on-going soap opera. But perhaps I was being unfair. Why should he express his real feelings to a total stranger?

He read my mind. ‘You think I don’t care.’ Picking up the towel he dabbed at his face and neck. ‘As a matter of fact I do but I can put a brave face on things when it’s required.’

I made no comment.

He smiled. 'Now you're going to draw me out of myself, give me some psychotherapy. Fair enough, but you'll find I'm quite well up on the techniques. You saw the series, I expect. If you remember I played the shrink's husband, a bit of a bastard but with a heart of gold when the chips were down.'

'I think I saw one or two episodes.'

'But you don't remember me.'

'I'm not sure.'

He laughed. 'Why should you? The show folded eighteen months ago. Actually filming stopped six months before that. Since then I've been enjoying a well-deserved rest. Ah well, if they want me they'll send for me. Now, how can I help?'

I wondered how much to tell him about Luke. If I mentioned the hospital I would be breaking a confidence. On the other hand, I could hardly expect him to co-operate if I kept him in the dark.

'Luke's in hospital,' I said. 'He's a very anxious kind of person at the best of times and the accident has affected him badly. He's in a state of, well ...'

'Sure.' He glanced at a clock on the mantelpiece. 'Right, I'll tell you everything I know about Paula on the understanding you're out of here by five o'clock sharp.'

'That's what I agreed.'

'I know, but it must have sounded a little odd. I'd better explain. Liz, the person I live with, she's the love of my life but ... She can't help it, I imagine there's a name for people so insanely jealous they have to check up on your every move.'

'I can't believe she'd be jealous of me — not if you explained who I —'

‘Oh, not you. Paula. She won’t allow me to mention her name. We have to pretend I’ve never been married.’

‘Yes, I see.’ I was tempted to say, ‘Well, at least that’s something you won’t have to worry about any more.’

Carl gave me a quizzical look. He stood up and crossed to a glass-fronted corner cupboard.

‘Want to change your mind? No alcohol while on duty, eh? What about a Coke? Ice and lemon in the kitchen. Won’t take a moment.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Just a small one then — to steady my nerves.’ He poured himself a large vodka, then sat on the floor by my feet. It was slightly unnerving and, contrary to all psychological theories, seemed to give him an advantage over me.

‘I met Paula when she was nineteen,’ he said. ‘I was already over thirty but I think she liked that. It made her feel secure. There was something about her, she was so fragile, waif-like. Of course after we’d lived together for a few months and the first fine careless rapture had worn off I realized the last thing we should’ve done was get married.’

‘Paula felt the same way?’

‘Ah. No. That was the problem. I tried, my God I tried, but it was tough going and the lack of cash didn’t make it any easier. Only bits and pieces of work. A tour of an old David Hare play. The odd telly commercial. Then the series came along and I was out a good deal of the time ... ’

He paused, swilling the liquid round the tumbler.

‘What happened?’ I asked, a little too impatiently. I had no right to ask questions about his private life, but he seemed quite happy to

talk about himself and there were only twenty minutes left before I had to go.

‘What happened was I met Liz. She was working as a set-dresser, buying props, checking their historical authenticity, you know the kind of thing.’

‘Is that what she does now?’

‘God, no. Finding that kind of work’s almost as tough as being an actress. Of course, if we lived in London ... ’

Standing up, he massaged his calves as though he had cramp. ‘After the show folded Liz found a job with a company that makes corporate videos, films for industry, that kind of stuff.’

He pointed to a huge photograph that covered most of the wall at the other end of the room.

‘See that. Last year’s Balloon Festival. One of the first promotional videos Liz worked on. That’s a blow-up of one of the stills. Have a look.’

I stood up. When I moved closer I could see there were two photographs. One was of the familiar balloons that can be seen above Bristol on most warm summer evenings when the wind’s in the right direction. Balloons in the shape of a heart, a six-pack of lager, a bottle of Scotch. Others with stripes, all the colours of the rainbow, sponsored by local or international companies. The second photo was of a balloon shaped like a can of pet food. It was just about to take off and inside the basket sat two figures dressed as Dalmatian dogs.

‘Is that Liz?’ I asked, pointing to the smaller of the two.

‘God, no, she’d never agree to make such an idiot of herself. Of course if they’d asked me ... ’

Behind the balloon a group of bystanders were perched on a grassy bank, craning their necks to get a better view.

‘They’re good,’ I said, brushing past Carl, who was standing so close to me that I could feel his breath on my ear. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got a photo of Paula, have you?’

He sprang back in mock horror. ‘More than my life’s worth, but I can tell you what she looked like — even though it’s over a year since we set eyes on each other.’

He glanced at the clock again. ‘No problem, plenty of time. She’s not normally back before six but I like to err on the side of caution. Right. Straight straw-coloured hair. Nice hair but she never did anything with it. Just let it grow, had it cut when it started to get in her eyes. Eyes. Let me think. Have you noticed how difficult it is to remember what colour eyes people have, even close friends? Blue. Yes, I’m certain of it. Quite a dark blue. Tall, thin. Not shapeless, but not your curvaceous blonde. Does that put you in the picture?’

‘Yes, very well. I’m sorry to keep asking questions, but what kind of clothes — ’

‘Clothes. Oh, ethnic stuff. Peasant skirts, blouses with embroidery on the collar. I once saw her in one of those ridiculous hats with beads — but that was after we’d split.’ He thought for a moment. ‘What else? Shoes. Black plimsolls. Wore them all the time. Not exactly flattering but Paula’s mind was on higher things.’

‘What kind of things?’

‘I told you. Doggies, pussy cats, saving the environment, the hump-backed whale. You name it, Paula wanted to save it.’ He glanced at the clock and broke off suddenly. ‘I think that’s about all I can tell you.’

'You've been very helpful. Thanks for sparing the time.'

'You're welcome. I've told you far more than I intended but I suppose that's your superb counselling skills.'

'I haven't used any —'

'You've listened. Isn't that what people can't resist?' He held out his hand. 'I hope we meet again, only if we do you must pretend we're strangers.'

'I will.'

'Of course you will, I can spot a talented actress when I see one. Incidentally, who gave you my address?'

I hesitated.

'Oh, I can guess,' he said. 'That spotty horror who helps out in the shop. Bob something or other. He thought I could get him a part in the show, got quite shirty when I couldn't come up with anything.'

'He's an actor?'

'Thinks he is. Went to some stage school for kids, hasn't even got an Equity card. Oh, by the way ...' I was halfway through the front door when he called after me. 'I can't think how in hell it happened. Paula was always so bloody careful.'

*

It was not until I was back in the car that it occurred to me that Carl Redfern had made no effort to check I was who I said I was. I could have been a journalist, a private detective, anyone.

I was back at the office by five fifteen. Heather came out from Reception and whispered that there was a man who wanted to see me as soon as I returned. 'A client?'

'He didn't say.'

'What does he look like?'

'Oh, average height, dark hair, expensive suit, leather briefcase. I told him you might not be coming back here this evening but he said he'd hang on just in case.'

When I opened the door to the waiting room the man had his back turned. He was looking at one of the pictures Heather had insisted on buying to add a bit of class to the place. A jug of purple irises on a window sill. Blue gingham curtains on either side, and beyond everyone's idea of a perfect English garden.

'Hallo. You wanted to see me?'

He turned and stared. Then he stepped forward and held out his hand.

'Michael Jesty. Luke's brother. I wondered if I could be of any assistance.'

6

At first glance it was almost impossible to believe Michael Jesty and Luke were brothers. It was not just the way Michael looked: average height, dark brown hair, narrow slightly hooded eyes. His voice was different too, and the way he moved.

He was wearing a grey suit, with a white shirt and a blue silk tie. When we met he had been carrying a slim leather briefcase under one arm. It lay between us now on the red plush corner seat.

On the way to the pub I had given him a blow by blow account of what had happened since the night of Paula's death. He had listened without comment, apart from expressing regret that so much of my time had been taken up dealing with the situation.

'It's my job,' I said.

He raised his eyebrows. 'Spending the night at his lodgings? Driving him to the hospital the following morning?'

Now that the drinks had been ordered and we were settled in a relatively private part of the bar his manner changed a little.

'Anyway, it's an ill wind ... ' He smiled for the first time. 'I'm glad we've met; now where shall I begin? I'm five years older than Luke. The oldest child always gets treated rather differently from the rest, wouldn't you say?'

'Bound to be, really.'

'Exactly. I tell you what, I'll give you a brief resume of my twenty-seven years. Then you can tell me what you know about the rest of the family and I'll fill in the gaps. Would that help?'

‘Fine.’ I had a feeling he wanted me to understand that whatever impression of Luke I had gained during the last few months I was now talking to someone entirely different.

‘Right, here goes.’ He sipped his beer then slowly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘I left school at sixteen. Since I’d already decided to start my own business academic qualifications were a waste of time, what I needed was some work experience.’

‘You went to the same school as Luke?’

He nodded, his eyes moving from side to side as though he was scanning a mental image of a dreary classroom. ‘It was the kind of place where you were supposed to slog your guts out. Anything less than a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge and you were more or less a write-off.’

He looked round the bar, stretching his neck to see beyond the partition that divided our section from the rest.

‘This your local?’

‘Not really. We sometimes come here for lunch.’

‘You and the other psychologists? How many of you?’

‘There’s three where I work. Used to be four but Beth left to have a baby and she hasn’t been replaced.’

‘So that means extra work for the rest of you.’

The place was empty except for two middle-aged women drinking gin and tonic. They were talking about a television programme, something to do with doctors who had been sued for negligence but got away with it. The conversation consisted mainly of four-letter words exchanged in low but audible voices.

Michael Jesty jerked his head in their direction.

‘Nothing people like better than a bit of righteous indignation.’

'I know.' I wanted to talk about Luke but he would get there in the end.

'Right, where were we? Oh, yes, after I left school I had a series of temporary jobs, working for a cowboy roofing firm, an estate agent, then a couple of Indian characters who imported battery-operated toys.'

'And then?' For the first time I noticed a family likeness. Something about the muscles in his face? It was the sort of likeness that never comes out in a photograph, only when the person's face is animated, moving.

'I was between jobs,' he said, 'cleaning one of the department stores, starting at five in the morning and working through till eight. The equipment was inadequate and there were far too many of us. I realized I could have organized things a hundred times more efficiently. It was time to set up on my own.'

'Right.'

'Most of my employees are temporary. Out of work actors, artists who've yet to make a name for themselves, teachers who've overstretched their budgets and can't keep up the mortgage repayments.'

'Teachers do cleaning jobs before they start at school?'

'After work mainly. Offices, shops, a few private houses. Actors are the most popular with the clients. People enjoy talking to them.'

I tried to imagine Carl Redfern pushing a vacuum cleaner round someone else's house. It seemed unlikely.

'You pay cash in hand, do you?'

'Why? D'you need some extra money?' He smiled. 'No, it's all above board. I'm running a business. I can't afford to get the wrong

side of the Inland Revenue.'

'Sorry.'

'No need to be.' He unzipped the leather briefcase, took out a card and slid it across the table. 'Just in case you need to get in touch.'

I picked it up, read the name of the cleaning agency — white lettering on black — then turned it over and found he had written his home address and private phone number.

'You live in Portishead.' Somehow I had pictured him in one of the town houses overlooking the floating harbour, or maybe a flat near the Downs, one of the huge old Victorian houses converted into luxury apartments.

'The sea,' he said. 'I love it. We used to go sailing with my father before — ' He broke off, running his finger round the rim of his glass. 'Right then. Luke, how long d'you suppose he'll be in hospital?'

'It's hard to say. I saw him yesterday and I'll be going again tomorrow.'

'Lucky old Luke. I mean, he's lucky having such a devoted guardian. My mother phoned, wanting to know what she was supposed to do. Visit him on the ward? Wait till he comes out? Pretend it never happened? By the sound of it just thinking about the place had given her one of her tension headaches.'

'I think it's probably better not to visit.'

'You do? Good. My father had told her to leave well alone and I agreed.' He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand. 'You've met my mother. Poor old thing, she doesn't have much of a life.'

It was strange hearing Brigid Jesty described as a poor old thing. Carl Redfern had used the same phrase to describe Paula.

'She used to be an actress,' said Michael. 'Did quite well back in the sixties. Then she married Dad and gave it all up.'

'Couldn't she have gone back to it later on?'

'I suppose. But it's a tough business, once you've lost touch, out of the swing of things.'

He lapsed into silence and I guessed he was deciding how much to tell me about his father.

'Right,' he said, 'starting to get a hang of the family dynamics, are you?' He laughed. 'You'll find I'm reasonably well up with the jargon. I do voluntary work for a Housing Trust that finds homes for kids who've been in trouble. Working with some of them calls for a smattering of psychological know-how.'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

'Of course I've only read the softer kind of psychology. Not the scientific stuff.'

I pulled a face. 'The first lecture I ever had the head of department took great delight in informing us that whereas we might have thought psychology was about helping people, in fact it was about controlling them.'

'And was he right?'

'Yes and no.'

'Diplomatic answer. Anyway, where was I? Luke's problems began around the age of five or six when someone stuck a label on him: 'gifted child'. The kiss of death, if you ask me, and for Luke of all people ... He was always pretty anxious. The brainy, sensitive one, whereas I was categorized as the tough, self-sufficient type. Family myths, isn't that what they call them?'

I watched him finish his drink, then wait for me to follow suit. 'Same again?'

'I'll get them.' I stood up and collected his glass, expecting him to protest, insist on paying for everything, but he stayed where he was.

'When you come back I'll give you the run down on my father, then you must tell me about yourself.'

The landlord knew me a little.

'What's it to be, Anna? Don't usually see you in here this time of day.'

He glanced at Michael, who had his head down and seemed to be turning the pages of a notebook.

'Didn't know you were a friend of Michael Jesty. Only know him by sight myself but he helped my sister's boy. Been in trouble with the police, nothing serious but you know how it is, one thing leads to another. Michael Jesty found him somewhere to live, helped him get back on his feet.'

I nodded, handing him a five-pound note and waiting while he counted out the change.

When I returned to the table there was no sign of Michael. For a moment I thought he must have left, then I saw him standing by the pay phone. He punched out a number and whoever it was he was ringing answered straight away. It was a brief call, the kind where a piece of information is passed on at once without wasting time on social chit chat.

When he came and sat down he looked pleased.

'Right, where were we?' He took off his jacket and hung it over the arm of the seat.

'You know Luke took an overdose,' I said.

‘End of April. Not a serious attempt, was it, more of a cry for help.’

‘It could have killed him. If you absorb enough paracetamol it destroys your liver. Takes about a week or ten days and there’s nothing anyone can do. People don’t realize.’

‘Should it be on sale to the general public?’

I shrugged. ‘I think there should be more of a warning on the container.’

He thought about this for a moment, then started talking fast as though time was running out but there was still a fair amount of information I needed to know.

‘When I said Luke was always pretty anxious I didn’t want you to think I’m unsympathetic, it’s just that he was the sort of kid who worries if his homework’s anything less than a hundred per cent perfect. I felt sorry for him, I really did. Of course, being that much older I had a better insight into the problems between my parents and how they were affecting us. Luke seemed to blame himself for every little thing that went wrong in the family.’

‘Are you talking about when he was at primary school or later on?’ I was trying to steer the conversation round to their sister’s death, but without seeming to have a morbid curiosity.

‘Primary school, secondary school. Then when it happened ...’

I waited, looking down at my drink, aware that Michael was watching me. He had placed one of his hands on the table and I noticed that it was exceptionally long and narrow — the one feature he seemed to have inherited from his father.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I don’t really like talking about this but I will if you think it’ll help. I’m not sure how much Luke’s told you already. My

mother said you've been seeing him for several weeks but haven't been able to get much out of him.'

'He finds it difficult,' I said, trying not to sound as irritated as I felt. 'We have to take things slowly.' I paused. 'You were telling me about your sister. I'm very sorry. I didn't know — not until your mother ...'

I looked up and noticed a puzzled expression on his face.

'Luke never told you about Diana? Oh well, I suppose I can understand that. He was only sixteen when the accident happened.'

'Accident?'

I realized I had assumed Diana had become ill. Something awful like meningitis or kidney disease.

'Luke and Diana had taken the dog for a walk. Stupid great thing. Big, black and hairy. The crazy thing was it had been my father's idea we should have a dog. I suppose it went with his idea of country living. Anyway, nobody had bothered to train the creature and it saw a cat or something and dashed straight across the main road. It must have happened in an instant. Diana rushed after it and ...' He stared at the carpet, then lifted his glass, splashing beer on the table. 'She died in hospital two days later. My father blamed Luke.'

I was horrified. 'But how could he? What was Luke supposed to have done?'

'I know. I suppose he just had to find someone to hit out at. Not that he ever said very much but we all knew what he was thinking. You see, Diana was his favourite — the daughter he'd always wanted. He withdrew from the rest of us, became even more of a workaholic. In my opinion, for what it's worth, he doesn't want to get over it. Coming to terms would be a betrayal. Maybe someone like you would understand how he feels.'

I was thinking fast, shocked by what I had heard and ashamed at my enormous sense of relief. No wonder Luke's reaction to Paula's death had been so extreme. It was all beginning to make sense. He hadn't pushed her. The accident outside the Hippodrome had nothing to do with his violent fantasies. For Luke, history had repeated itself and once again he was blaming himself. All his old feelings about his sister's death had been resurrected. It explained too why Peter Jesty had seemed so indifferent to his son's well-being, and why Brigid Jesty had been so nervous, on edge.

I yawned. I couldn't help myself. The tension of the last few days had dissipated. I was exhausted with the relief of knowing that Paula's death was not my fault.

Michael stood up. He looked sad, strained.

'I'll have to leave now I'm afraid but if there's anything else ... I don't suppose Luke'll be going back to work in the shop. If he needs some cash to tide him over I'll be more than willing.'

'I'll give you my address and phone number,' I said. It was the least I could do after he had gone to so much trouble. In any case, it was reassuring to know that at least one member of Luke's family was prepared to provide some practical help.

*

I drove home through Redland. Not the shortest route but I wanted to look at the cards in the window of the newsagent's near Doug and Elaine's. My last meeting with Doug had made me uneasy and, now that I could stop thinking about Luke as a possible murderer, I was free to speculate about what had been going on in his life during the weeks preceding Paula's death. Was there something Doug knew about but was keeping to himself? Were Doug and Elaine having

problems and, if so, had Luke got caught up in their domestic difficulties?

As I passed the row of shops I could see the place was deserted apart from a solitary man leaning against an advertising hoarding with a half-empty bottle in his hand. Turning left into a side-street I parked the car — too close to the corner but I would only be gone a couple of minutes — and returned to the main road.

The first shop was a greengrocer's with one of its windows boarded up. Next in line was a dry cleaner's, then a video rental place that doubled as an off licence: everything on tap for a satisfactory evening's entertainment.

The newsagent's was on the corner. Outside, a metal bin, wrenched from its stand, leaned to one side. Greasy newspaper, crushed drink cans and something that looked like a purple vest were in danger of spilling out on to the pavement. A glass panel by the entrance to the shop protected half a dozen yellowing, curled-up cards. *Divan bed, good as new* and a phone number that was indecipherable. *Want to Earn Five Hundred Pounds a Week? Own car essential.* Three other cards offered personal services under various euphemistic guises. The sixth was typed in smudgy red and black ink. *Picture Framing Classes for beginners. Sat. 7-9. Tools provided. Ring Neil between six and eleven.*

I made a note of the number, glanced round guiltily as though I expected Doug to be watching me, then walked quickly back to the car.

*

When I arrived back at the flat, Aaron, Janos's dog, was sniffing the begonias in Ernest and Pam's front garden. I stroked his head, then

ran up the steps two at a time.

My living-room smelled of lavender and beeswax. A quick spray and polish first thing in the morning had achieved its effect but already the dust was reclaiming its position on the bookshelves and television. Taking my diary from my pocket I memorized the figures I had scrawled on the back page and picked up the phone.

It rang four times, then a man's voice answered.

'Who is it?' He sounded as though he suffered from asthma. I could hear the wheezing when he breathed.

'Is that Neil? I'm sorry, I don't know your other name but I saw your card in the newsagent.'

'Oh, that.'

'It said you run classes in picture framing.'

'Not any longer.' The wheezing was getting worse.

'But you used to.'

'They never really got off the ground.'

'Oh, I see.' It was important to stop him ringing off. 'Will you be having any more?'

'I doubt it. Only had one customer. We wound it up. Must be over a month ago.'

'Hang on a minute. Are you sure it was as long ago as that?'

But the line had gone dead.

I sat down heavily. The feeling of euphoria, when I found out why Luke had reacted to the accident so badly, had evaporated. Doug had lied about the framing class. Elaine had said he returned to the house just before the police brought Luke home; but so what, he could have been anywhere. Out for a drink with friends, unwilling to admit to Elaine that the class had been a non-starter, using it as an

excuse for a Saturday evening at the pub. The irony was that Elaine wanted more time alone in the house. I wondered if they ever really talked. About Doug's redundancy and the likelihood he would be permanently unemployed for the rest of his life. About Elaine's job at the supermarket. About Luke.

*

My thoughts shifted to Michael Jesty. It had been a relief talking to him but it had forced me to re-examine my whole approach to helping Luke. I should have insisted, right from the start, that he provide me with at least a sketchy account of his life up to date. It had been wrong to concentrate on gaining his confidence, on trying to reduce some of his psychosomatic symptoms. Diana's death, even though it had taken place six years ago, must have haunted him ever since. During his brief time at Oxford had he felt that his father was glad to be rid of him? Was that why he had returned home and then, when he found he was unwelcome, moved out and found himself a bed-sit, condemning himself to a lonely, isolated existence?

I closed my eyes and Diana's accident merged with Paula's. Better to face up to your worst imaginings. Mangled bodies, crushed beneath heavy wheels. Limbs wrenched off or twisted at unnatural angles. Bones sticking through ripped flesh. I sat up straight and focused on the carriage clock that my father had given me when he moved to a smaller house. Another school of thought says it's better to shift your thoughts away from morbid images. To kill them stone dead before they get a hold. Wasn't that what I had been trying to persuade Luke to do? But when I tried to practise what I preached the images returned in the form of bad dreams, nightmares that

forced me awake and reminded me that sleeping alone had more than one disadvantage.

Outside in the street Aaron had paused in the middle of the road and was sniffing the evening air. A shiver twitched the skin between my shoulder blades. I ran downstairs, put my hands either side of his tail and pushed him hard in the direction of the steps leading down to Janos's basement flat.

7

Carl Redfern's parting words kept going round in my head. 'I can't think how in hell it happened. Paula was always so bloody careful.'

Careful people got killed in road accidents, of course they did, but did they allow themselves to be forced off the pavement when the pedestrian lights had changed to red?

During the night I had lain awake going over and over my conversations with Luke, picturing him sitting in my office, always wearing the same torn jeans, the same blue and white sweater. The sweater — where was it? Not in his bedroom. I'd checked when I packed his zip-up bag. In Elaine's washing machine? Lying in a crumpled ball under the bed? Or perhaps he had left it in the herbal remedies shop.

I rang Doug, who asked me to hold on while he investigated, then returned several minutes later to say he had searched Luke's bedroom and several other parts of the house, including the garden shed, but there was no sign of the sweater.

Something stopped me phoning the shop. Maybe it was the thought of Bob, who would ask if I had seen Carl — he had looked the kind of person who could easily cause trouble — but, in any case, Luke was unlikely to have left his sweater at work. Once, on a hot afternoon when I had suggested he take it off, he had told me he wore it all the time, his voice implying that it was almost like a lucky mascot, that without it something awful would happen to him.

I picked up the phone, dialled the number of the police station and asked for DS Whittle. It was only an off-chance and common sense told me it would have been better to stay well clear of the police, but some instinct pulled me in the opposite direction.

Howard Fry answered.

'Oh.' He was the last person I wanted to talk to. My meeting with Graham Whittle had been informal, almost social. Bringing Inspector Fry into the case was quite another matter. But there was no case. I was being ridiculous. 'Anna McColl.' I tried to sound as casual as possible. 'Sorry to bother you, it's nothing really but Luke Jesty — did Sergeant Whittle tell you — '

'Oh, hallo, Anna. Yes, I was sorry to hear what happened, and am I right in thinking you're not entirely happy about the circumstances of the accident?'

So he and Whittle had discussed my visit to the police station.

'Oh. No.' I sounded a little too emphatic. 'Nothing like that. I'm just trying to find out as much as possible so I can help Luke.'

'Yes, of course.'

'He's not being very communicative at the moment. It's difficult to get much out of him.'

'I understand.'

'The thing is, Luke had a blue and white sweater he wore all the time. It's only an off-chance but I wondered, d'you know what Paula Redfern was wearing at the time of the accident?'

'I don't but I could certainly find out. Hang on.'

While I waited I cursed myself for making the call. Was it really about Luke's sweater or was it a semiconscious wish to diffuse responsibility, to bring the police in while at the same time trying to

keep them out. If only Luke would start talking rationally, tell me everything he knew about the accident, explain the nature of his relationship with Paula.

Howard Fry came back on the line. 'Anna?'

'Yes.'

'I've had a look at the report of the accident and you're right. She was wearing jeans and a blue and white sweater.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, quite sure, you can see the report yourself if you think it'll be any help.'

'No. I mean, thanks very much. The thing is,' I lied, 'Luke goes over and over what happened in his mind and he has this obsession with getting the details exactly right.'

There was a short silence. 'If there's anything else you know where I am.'

He rang off and I realized I was holding the receiver so tightly it had made a ridge along the tips of my fingers.

My next client would be in the waiting room, watching the door, checking her watch. I ran downstairs to collect her.

'Mrs Powers?'

She stood up and walked towards me. She had tears in her eyes that she hadn't bothered to wipe away.

'Sorry to keep you waiting,' I said.

'That's all right.'

She walked ahead of me, holding on to the rail as though she was having difficulty hauling her small, stocky body up the stairs. Once inside my room she sat down, with her shopping bag on her knees and her head sunk to her chest.

She had been referred by Dr Sims, who had complained about Mrs Powers' non-compliance to treatment. A diabetic who was failing to stick to a sensible diet and seemed set on deliberately ruining her health — or that was the way Dr Sims saw it.

'I can't go on,' she said wearily.

'I'm sorry you're feeling so depressed.'

'I can't see the point. If it wasn't for Ted I'd do away with myself.'

'Tell me about it.'

She sighed. 'Ted's been to the library again.'

'What did he find this time?'

'An autobiography by a woman who's been diabetic since she was six years old but hasn't let it interfere with her life. Now she's the owner of a chain of stores selling leather and rubber goods.'

I smiled. So did Mrs Powers. It was the first time I had seen her face light up.

'Look,' I said, 'next time you come, do bring Ted.'

'I can't, he's at work.'

'He could get time off. Or you could come at five. Surely he could manage that.'

'He doesn't like you.'

'He's never met me.'

'Ted wouldn't let a little thing like that stand in his way.'

Mrs Powers, my most reluctant client, was beginning to trust me.

After she left I phoned William Stringer but he was at a meeting.

Martin put his head round the door and asked if I was coming for lunch. When I shook my head he sat on the arm of a chair and gave me one of his reproving looks.

‘The Luke Jesty business, is it? If you want my opinion, which I’m sure you don’t, I think you should let the hospital take over.’

‘It’s not that simple, Martin.’

‘No, it never is. What isn’t?’

I wanted to tell him about the blue and white sweater and how the murderer might have assumed that Luke was wearing it, and how that meant Luke could have been the intended victim. But there was no murderer. It was all in my over-active imagination. It had even occurred to me, while Mrs Powers had been telling me about her sister-in-law’s migraine, that Luke might have lent his sweater to Paula for the precise purpose of confusing the issue.

‘Well,’ said Martin with mock exasperation, ‘I can’t force you to join us, but I can tell you that Beth’s coming round with the baby and Nick and I are having lunch with her in the garden of the White Hart.’

‘I’ll come,’ I said. ‘Don’t go without me.’

*

On the way to the hospital I began listing all the different hypotheses and disposing of them one by one. First I had been afraid that Luke was responsible for Paula’s death, that against his will he had acted out one of his fantasies. The tension of wondering if he was capable of behaving so violently had become too much. Pushing Paula in front of the traffic had been a kind of release, even though afterwards he had been appalled at what he had done. I remembered games with my brother Steven, when he was nine and I was six or seven. He would give me time to hide then count to a hundred and call: ‘I’m coming to get you.’ Sometimes the tension of waiting to be found became so great that I ran out from my hiding place shouting, ‘Catch me, catch me.’ Anything to get it over with.

Had Luke felt the same? No, of course not. It wasn't a comparable situation.

Michael Jesty's account of their sister's death had eased my anxiety — but only for a time. Speaking to Howard Fry had been a mistake but it had been the only way I could find out what Paula had been wearing. Now both Fry and Whittle suspected that I knew something but was holding back from telling them, protecting my client — or somebody else. They wouldn't put any pressure on me, not yet, but their suspicions would grow as they mulled things over.

Then another thought occurred. Howard Fry would be wondering if Luke had anything to do with Paula's death but there was another possibility. Supposing Paula had been pushed, but not by Luke? Who could have wanted to get rid of her? Carl Redfern's girlfriend, Liz, who was so insanely jealous? Carl himself? But what possible motive could he have had?

I switched to thinking of Luke as the intended victim. Luke had found out something about Doug and Doug had decided to silence him before the information could be passed on to Elaine. Or Doug had been afraid Paula knew something about him and was about to tell the police. This would account for Doug's unexpected reaction when he inadvertently let slip that he had met Paula once in the shop. It would also explain why he had pretended to be at the framing class.

A sign by the side of the road warned of road works and temporary traffic lights two hundred yards ahead. The traffic was slowing down. I joined the queue and wound down the window, unwilling to breathe in petrol fumes, but desperate to let in more air. Enough was enough, my brain was reeling. I was a hopeless private investigator,

endlessly speculating when I should have been sticking to hard facts. The trouble was I had so little in the way of definite information.

In a lay-by, on the right-hand side of the road, a group of travellers had parked their vans and set up camp. It would be days, maybe weeks, before the police moved them on. In the meantime they were making the most of their new surroundings. Two small boys were careering round on what looked like brand-new tricycles. A girl of about fifteen or sixteen was sitting on the grass, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. In spite of the heat she was wearing thick trousers, heavy boots and a denim jacket. A puppy peered out through the jacket opening, wriggling to get free and letting out high-pitched squeaks. I smiled at the girl but she ignored me and as the traffic moved on I saw her jump up and disappear inside one of the vans. For the first time it came to me that being a traveller might be quite a pleasant way of life. Plenty of hassle, of course, but also plenty of variety. New places, new people, very little responsibility. Who was I fooling? I couldn't cope with the squalor! Imagine having to do without a bath.

I turned off the main road, pulling down the visor as the sun shone directly into my eyes. The fields looked yellow and parched but the hedgerows were still green and lush. Here and there the road became dangerously narrow as cow-parsley stuck out, obscuring the view and leaving insufficient space for two largish cars to pass, let alone a couple of trucks or a tractor.

In less than five minutes I would have reached the hospital and there would be no time to think about what I was going to say to William Stringer. But in any case it was no use trying to work

anything out in advance. I would have to follow his lead, accept any criticism he had of the way I had handled Luke's case and take it from there.

I turned in to the hospital gates, parked, and steeled myself for whatever William Stringer had in store for me.

*

Luke was in the Occupational Therapy building. Henry Anayake was off duty, but another nurse, a large auburn-haired woman with a friendly, easy-going manner, told me the OT would be quite happy for me to interrupt the class.

'D'you know how he is?'

'Luke? Oh, he's much better, love. Doing well.'

'Really? D'you mean he's stopped talking rubbish? He's behaving rationally?'

If it was true I was furious that Stringer had failed to get in touch.

The nurse pursed her lips, thinking about what I'd just said. 'If you want my opinion, for what it's worth, I'd say he's a little tired, a little anxious, but over all not too bad at all.'

I tapped on the door of the OT building and entered, looking quickly round the room and spotting Luke at the far end, bent over a large piece of drawing paper. I introduced myself to the therapist and asked if I could talk to him.

'Yes, of course.' She looked a little fraught, as though the job was getting her down, or maybe she had problems of her own. 'Today's Luke's first time with us. He's doing some drawing.'

'Hallo, Luke,' I said, crossing the room and sitting on the empty chair beside him. 'How are you?'

He had seen me come in but had chosen to keep his head down.

I tried again. 'What are you drawing?'

He kept his right arm on the paper and with his left hand selected a black felt-tipped pen. It was the first time I had noticed he was left-handed, although, come to think of it, it was the first time I had seen him holding a pen. He had drawn a series of enclosed shapes, like amoebas or small puffy clouds. The shapes were joined by thin wavy lines. In one corner of the paper was the head of a man. A face with its cheeks blown out, like the West Wind at the edge of a map or a giant in a children's story book. He could draw quite well but had attempted to disguise his skill by adopting the style of a child of three or four.

I watched as he outlined the shapes in thick black waterproof ink. Then, without a word, he stood up, handed the paper to the occupational therapist and left the room.

He was waiting for me outside and one look at his expression convinced me that the play-acting had come to an end.

'They want me to leave.' He was standing on one leg with his other foot wrapped round his ankle.

'Is that what Dr Stringer said?'

He shook his head. 'I can tell.'

'All right,' I said, 'you wait in the ward and I'll go and speak to him.'

He started walking away, fast, and I had to run after him to ask which ward he was in.

'Down the end,' he muttered. 'Clarence Ward.'

'All right, you stay there, I won't be long.'

William Stringer's door was ajar but he was away from his office. I searched for the auburn-haired nurse and found her locking up the drug cupboard.

'Sorry to bother you again, but d'you know where I could find Dr Stringer?'

'He's in a meeting, love.'

'Another one?'

'That's right.' She didn't ask who I was. Neither did she tell me when the meeting would be over.

'I wanted to talk to him about Luke.' She thought for a moment, sticking her fingers in her mouth and tapping her nails against her teeth. 'You could speak to Dr Chin. She might be able to help.'

'All right, where would I find her?'

The nurse started walking and I followed. Halfway down the passage she knocked on a door and put her head round.

'Someone about Luke Jesty.'

Dr Chin came out and invited me in. She was small, only five foot one or two, and had a rather beautiful face apart from the faint pockmarks on her cheeks.

'How d'you do?' She pulled out a chair, then sat down beside me, not behind her desk.

I explained who I was, how I had come to visit Luke but now had the impression the hospital wanted to discharge him.

'Dr Stringer tried to get in touch with you,' she said. 'Luke can go home as long as he has someone to look after him.' Silently I cursed Heather, who must have forgotten to pass on the message. Just wait till I saw her, although on second thoughts I would probably let it pass.

'What did Dr Stringer think? What was his diagnosis?'

'Oh, nothing too serious. Luke is a very nervous young man, I think, but there's no evidence of psychosis.'

‘So all the time he was behaving like — ’

Dr Chin held up her hand. ‘Sometimes we all need to hide. For Luke perhaps this was the only way he knew.’

‘He lives in lodgings,’ I explained, ‘but they’re very good to him. I’m sure it’ll be all right.’

‘Good.’ She opened a folder lying on her desk and turned several pages. ‘When Luke was admitted there was some doubt about the diagnosis.’

‘Yes, he had some of the symptoms of a paranoid schizophrenic — ’

‘But to you it didn’t ring true.’

‘No. At least — ’

‘You were quite right. More of a compulsive neurotic, I’d say. And you’ve been treating him for how long?’

‘Just a few weeks.’

She smiled and closed the folder. ‘Well, I hope you’ll be carrying on the good work.’

She wasn’t being patronizing, just doing her job. Her perfectly reasonable aim was to play down any problems and hand the responsibility for Luke back to me.

‘You want me to take him now?’ I asked. ‘I think perhaps I should phone the people where he lives — to let them know we’re coming.’

‘Of course.’ She pointed to the telephone on her desk, then stood up and left the room.

It seemed like a long time before Elaine answered. I had expected her to be at work and it threw me a little when I heard her voice, although I wasn’t sure why.

‘Elaine, it’s Anna.’

'Oh, yes.' She didn't ask what I wanted.

'Look, I'm at the hospital, and the thing is, Luke's much better, almost back to his old self, so they want to discharge him.'

There was silence at the other end of the line and for a moment I thought we must have been cut off.

'Elaine?'

'I don't think he should come back here.'

'Oh.' I wanted to say 'Why not?' but I controlled my impatience — just. It would be best to give her a chance to explain in her own words.

'I'm not sure we know enough to help him,' she said. 'I mean, you're a professional, it's different for you.'

'He'll still be coming to see me once a week,' I said feebly. 'Perhaps more often.' But even as I spoke I knew I was wasting my time. Elaine was the type who made up her mind about something and stuck to it.

'I'm sorry, Anna, I really am.' She didn't sound it.

'Don't worry,' I said coldly, 'I understand. I'll talk to you later when I come to collect his things — if that's all right.'

'Of course. Whenever you like. There's usually one or other of us at home.'

I sat, staring at the desk, wondering who to phone next. Mr and Mrs Jesty? But the White Cottage was hardly the best place for Luke's convalescence and it was always possible that Peter Jesty would think up some excuse for refusing to have him. His brother Michael? I had no idea of the size of his flat in Portishead but if, as I thought, it was in the new development on the waterfront, he was bound to have a spare bedroom. Portishead might be better for

Luke. Quieter, by the sea, away from the scene of the accident and the herbal remedies shop.

Taking Michael's business card from my wallet, I dialled the number of the cleaning agency.

'Good morning, can I help?'

It was a man but it certainly wasn't Michael.

'Could I speak to Michael Jesty, please?'

'I'm afraid he's in London.' The voice was slightly effeminate. I imagined a young man with his hair in a pony tail and a collection of rings in his ear.

'D'you know when he'll be back?'

'Couldn't say, I'm afraid. He may be staying overnight. I could give him a message when he returns.'

'No. No thanks.'

Elaine and Doug had let me down. Peter and Brigid Jesty were out of the question. Michael was away. I could try Social Services but how would Luke react to being placed in a hostel surrounded by total strangers? That left two choices, which might as well be narrowed down to one. I could plead with Dr Chin or William Stringer to keep Luke for another few days, or I could take him back to my flat. Perhaps that was what I had wanted all along. A chance to discover what was going on in Luke's mind. A way of remaining involved, of keeping control of the situation.

When I left the room there was no sign of Dr Chin. I walked slowly down the corridor to Luke's ward and found him sitting on the bed with his zip-up bag beside him. He looked up and rubbed the back of his head. He reminded me of a dog hoping to be taken for a walk. I thought about the accident, six years ago. What kind of dog had it

been? Something large and black, that was how Michael had described it. Most likely Peter Jesty had taken the poor creature to the vet the same day and had it destroyed. Eventually I would persuade Luke to tell me about it. But that conversation was some time off.

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘We’ll go and look for the doctor, then I’ll take you home.’

8

Luke was in the bathroom, washing his hair. I took it to be a sign that he was feeling a little better. On the way back from the hospital he had hardly spoken a word. When I explained that he would be staying with me for a few days he just nodded. He looked pale, washed out, defeated. But back in the flat he had begun to look a little more cheerful. The sun was coming in through the living-room window. Ernest, sitting in his wheelchair on the lawn, had looked up and waved.

‘It’s not really my garden,’ I explained, ‘but if you want to go down Pam and Ernest won’t mind at all.’

He had made no comment, just asked if there was any shampoo, and when I showed him the bottle muttered something inaudible and closed the bathroom door in my face. He wasn’t being rude, just Luke-like. I was disappointed, I suppose I had hoped the shock of Paula’s accident would be cathartic, shake him out of his withdrawn state, give him a new start.

I had decided to give him my bedroom and sleep on the sofa in the living-room. That way, in the morning, he could have a lie-in and I could eat my breakfast and prepare for work in peace. There was a slight problem about where to keep my clothes but I would have to remember to collect what I wanted the evening before. Anything that needed hanging could be left on a hook by the front door.

Luke’s zip-up bag was lying on the bed. I cleared the top drawer of the chest of drawers so he could put away his few possessions. It

hardly seemed worth it, but when I had collected the rest of his stuff from Doug and Elaine's there might be enough to fill one small drawer.

The bathroom door opened and Luke emerged, holding out his dripping hands.

'Oh, sorry.' I fetched him a clean towel, then told him I was going to make something to eat. Would pasta be all right?

He nodded slowly, taking the towel but remaining in the door-way. I knew I ought to be relieved that the paranoid babbling had stopped, but now I was irritated by his passivity. In spite of everything that had happened he owed me some kind of explanation. Instead he had regressed to the emotional age of a five-year-old. He would do as he was told but beyond that I could expect nothing.

'After we've eaten I'm going round to fetch the rest of your clothes,' I said.

He kept his head down, pretending to be studying a scuff mark on one of his trainers. 'How long will I be here?'

'I don't know. Just a day or two, I expect.'

He followed me into the kitchen. 'I missed my appointment,' he said. 'I was meant to come and see you on Monday.'

'You can come next Monday,' I said crossly.

By next Monday would he still be staying in the flat? If he was there wouldn't be much point in him coming all the way to my office. Already I was beginning to regret my decision. After all, even though Elaine and Doug had refused to have him back, it was hardly my responsibility to find him somewhere to live.

I knew, from Janos, there were no rooms to let in the house across the road and, in any case, I had taken the trouble to find him

lodgings with Elaine and Doug precisely because it was bad for him spending so much time on his own. In a few days' time I would take him to see them, and when they realized he was perfectly rational surely they would agree to let him live with them again.

Taking spaghetti sauce from the freezer compartment, I eased it out of its container and dropped the solid lump into a pan.

'Listen, Luke,' I said, 'after the accident, when they brought you back to Doug and Elaine's, it was terrible, I know that, but how did you think pretending to be psychotic was going to help?'

His head shot up. 'What?'

'There was no need. It just made everything worse.'

I was watching his face, feeling a mixture of compassion and irritation. I was putting pressure on him, but only because I wanted to help. His hand had gone up to his mouth and he was tearing at the nail of his little finger.

'All right, if you don't want to talk about it. As long as you realize no one's blaming you for what happened. It was an accident.'

He continued to chew his nail but he had turned his back and was staring out of the window. His hair had grown, even during the last few days. He had shaved, but not very well, and when the sun came out from behind a cloud I could see patches of straw-coloured stubble. Where his T-shirt had slipped towards one shoulder there was a line dividing his sun-tanned neck from the whiteness of the rest of his body. I wanted to shake him, to force him to break down, then to comfort him, make him better. But it wasn't going to be like that.

'Sometime you must go across the road and see Janos,' I said. 'He's cleared away the rubbish at the back and started making a

garden.'

He turned away from the window, then sat down heavily and rested his elbows on the table.

'While you were in hospital I went to see your parents,' I said. My voice sounded falsely unperturbed. 'They were sorry about what's happened. They sent you their love.'

It was untrue. He knew it was. I felt angry with the Jestys for forcing me to pretend they had shown more concern. Brigid Jesty had appeared upset but I suspected her agitation had more to do with her husband's hostile reaction towards me than worry about her son. Or was I being unfair to her?

Luke frowned. 'What did my father say?'

'Your father? Oh, well, not very much really.' I hesitated, wondering how much to tell him about my visit. 'Your parents never met Paula, did they?'

It was the first time I had mentioned her name. I expected a sharp reaction but he just shook his head.

'Luke, how well did you and Paula know each other?'

'She worked in the shop.'

'Yes, I know that, but you saw each other after work as well, didn't you?'

'Sometimes.'

'You were fond of her?'

He looked at me suspiciously. 'We used to go for a walk. It was better than going back home.'

'Yes, I see. Did you know she used to be married?'

He nodded again.

'She told you about it?'

'Not much.'

Questions, too many questions, but if he was going to stay in my flat I deserved to know what had been going on. I lowered spaghetti into the boiling water. 'Did Paula ever see her ex-husband?'

'What for?' he said flatly. 'They didn't have any children.'

'He's an actor, isn't he?'

But he was thinking about something else. His shoulders were hunched up and for an instant I had a clear picture of his father bending down to avoid knocking his head on the door frame.

He turned to face me. 'Sorry, what did you say?'

'Nothing. I just mentioned that Paula's ex-husband's an actor. Someone said he was in that television series about a psychiatrist.'

'What? Oh, that.'

I ploughed on. 'Did he give her any money?'

'He's out of work most of the time. She was better off without him. Anyway he lives with someone called Liz.'

'Liz who?'

'What?' He was twisting one leg round the other and his clenched fist was pressed against his mouth.

I decided to change the subject.

'Your mother,' I said, 'I hadn't realized she used to be an actress.'

'What about it?' The colour rose up his face. The deadpan voice had disappeared.

'I met your brother too. He came to the office, wanted to know how he could help.'

This time he looked genuinely surprised. 'Michael? What could he do?'

‘Well, for a start he thought you might need some money. I don’t know if you’ll want to go on working in the shop but I thought it might be better to find something else. Anyway, it’s not all that long till you start at the university.’ I pulled open the drawer in the kitchen table and pointed to the box of cutlery. ‘A couple of forks should do us.’

He stared at the drawer as though I had asked the impossible. He seemed preoccupied, miles away.

‘Michael runs his own business,’ he said.

‘Yes, I know. Maybe you could work for him for a couple of months. That way you’d have some cash in the bank to supplement your student grant.’

He made no comment.

‘You and Michael,’ I said, trying to encourage him to talk. ‘You get on all right, do you?’

‘What?’ His hands rested on the table, the fingers clenched, the knuckles shiny white. ‘Michael’s older than me.’ His voice shook as though he was having trouble controlling some strong emotion.

‘Luke,’ I said softly, ‘I wish you’d told me about your sister. If I’d known ... the accident ... Paula’s accident ... It would’ve made it so much easier to understand.’

He stood up and placed a fork at each end of the table. Then he looked through the window and for the first time his face became animated. ‘Aaron’s in the front garden. He’s walking on the flowers.’

I joined him at the window. ‘Oh, God, could you go down and shoo him off? That border’s Ernest’s pride and joy.’

He hesitated for a moment, then left the room and ran down the outside steps. I watched him pulling at the dog’s collar, dragging him to the other side of the road. When he let go Aaron rolled over on his

back on the pavement, writhing and waving his legs in the air. Luke smiled, then glanced up at the window to see if I was watching.

‘Go and see Janos,’ I called, but he shook his head and came back across the road.

The spaghetti was good enough but neither of us felt very hungry. We did our best but a fair proportion of it had to be scraped into the bin.

‘I was going to offer you a drink,’ I said, ‘but if you’re taking tablets ...’

‘I’m not.’ He searched in his jeans and produced a small white container. ‘They gave me these but I don’t need them.’

‘I’ll leave it up to you,’ I said, pulling open the fridge door and taking out two cans of beer.

I had made a decision not to talk about the ‘schizophrenic’ behaviour any more. If Luke wanted to explain that was his decision. If not, it was best forgotten.

‘The funeral’s on Friday,’ I told him. ‘I don’t know if you’ll want to —’

‘Do I have to?’

‘No, of course not. Funerals are for the sake of the living, not the dead.’

It sounded trite but he nodded in agreement and seemed enormously relieved. Then he sighed deeply.

‘Paula thought the world was a horrible place. People killing each other. Millions of people with nothing to eat. She couldn’t see the point of going on.’

‘Luke, you don’t mean ...’ Why on earth hadn’t I thought of it before? Because I had seen Paula as someone who was helping

Luke. Someone strong, down-to-earth.

‘What?’ He looked puzzled. ‘Oh, she wouldn’t kill herself. That would’ve been against her religion.’

I pictured them working together in the shop, going for walks on the Downs or by the river. Two people whose experience of life so far had left them depressed, disillusioned.

‘You’ll miss her,’ I said, ‘it’s going to be hard.’

He stared at the wall behind my head, then down at the table. Lifting the beer to his mouth he emptied the can in great noisy gulps.

*

Up on the Downs a boy was flying a kite with a dragon’s face. The sky was blue and the air still very warm but there was enough breeze coming up from the Gorge to lift the kite above the trees. The boy, who was only about five or six, ran forward, then stumbled and fell. His father called to him and he stood up, laughing, pointing proudly at the hand still holding the string.

I had left Luke watching television, explaining that I had to see a friend but not telling him I intended to visit Doug and Elaine. The programme was about gene therapy. Before it came on he had brightened a little and started talking about what he planned to do after his degree course. He would need a higher degree, then he hoped to find a research post. Genetics had always been his real interest. Genes were the answer to everything, not just physical characteristics but intelligence, personality, predispositions to particular diseases. Once they were properly understood it would be the end of psychology, sociology, all the social sciences. A sample of DNA would explain everything about a particular individual, or even a

particular cultural group. I had argued with him briefly, enjoying the discussion, pleased to hear him sounding so enthusiastic.

Then something I said, I had no idea what, had caused him to lapse into silence again, curling up his legs on the armchair and closing his eyes.

I wondered what he would do when the programme ended. Read the paper? Poke about round the flat? Do the washing up?

My car was parked a short distance away from the wall above the Gorge. Before I drove off I stood for a moment staring at the river two hundred feet below. The tide was up and most of the thick mud was covered in murky brown water. Across the other side, in Leigh Woods, three tiny figures leaned against another wall. One of them lifted an arm and I waved back although I wasn't even sure they were looking at me. Suddenly my knees felt weak and my head swam. How long would it take to fall all the way to the bottom? Long enough to know what was happening surely, or would you lose consciousness? I had read about one or two people who had jumped from the Suspension Bridge and landed in the mud, surviving with only minor injuries. More than likely the stories were apocryphal. Normally the jump proved fatal.

It was just after eight. Late enough for Doug and Elaine to have finished their meal, and for Elaine's evening soap opera to have ended. I drove slowly past Durdham Down, turning right at the roundabout and approaching Elaine and Doug's road from a different angle. Paula had lived close by — in a room above a shoe repair shop. It was about the only thing Luke had told me about her. That and the fact that she was vegetarian but not because she believed it was wrong to kill animals. Remembering Carl Redfern's description I

tried to picture her, alone in her room preparing her lentils and nuts. Tall, with fair hair and ethnic clothes. Perhaps she had changed since Carl last saw her. The police report said she had been wearing jeans — and Luke's blue and white sweater. Standing on the pavement, laughing and talking, unaware that only a moment later ...

I parked outside the house and switched off the engine. For the first time for ages I longed for a cigarette. Just one or two good long drags would have been enough.

Elaine answered the door. She must have seen me coming. Under her arm was a cardboard box that appeared to hold the sum total of Luke's belongings. Socks, pyjamas, a few books and papers, a clock, an old radio.

'Thanks.' I took the box, then waited on the path, expecting her to justify her decision, apologize, ask how Luke was getting on.

I could see Doug hovering at an upstairs window. When he realized I had seen him he moved out of sight. Inside the house a television game show was in full swing.

'When I say now,' squeaked a high-pitched man's voice. 'When I say now you have exactly thirty seconds to ... '

'Well,' I said, trying to sound more friendly than I felt, 'thank you for everything you've done. Am I right in thinking you don't want Luke to come back here, even when he's quite better?'

'I think that's best,' said Elaine. She wasn't going to invite me in. She just wanted me to go away as quickly as possible.

'Is there a particular reason, Elaine?'

'As I said, I think it's for the best. Now, if you'll excuse me.'

We stared at each other for a moment, then she turned and went back into the house, closing the front door with a quiet, controlled

click. I thought I heard her calling to Doug to come downstairs but it could have been the noise from the television.

Back in the car I pulled out from the kerb, switched on the radio, then filled my lungs with air and shouted at the top of my voice. Anger, rage — the best way to prevent yourself from crying. For Luke? For myself? What difference did it make? Even though I had only known Elaine and Doug since May I had come to think of them as friends, allies. Now it was clear that they would be heartily relieved if they never saw me or Luke again. Had something happened while he was living there? Had he spent too much time with them — or too little? Had they hoped, as Doug had suggested, that he would be like the son they had never had? They'd had high hopes for him but he had let them down.

Turning into Coldharbour Road I steadied Luke's box of belongings with my left hand as it threatened to slide off the passenger seat. I thought about my phone call to Neil, the mysterious picture framer, whose classes had never really got started. Perhaps Doug really did have something to hide.

A car shot out from a side road. I slammed on the brakes and stopped a fraction of an inch from the driver's door.

'Bloody idiot!' I yelled. 'What the hell d'you think you're ...'

The old man in the driving seat glanced at me, then looked away, lifting a hand in what would have to do as an apology. He was so low down in his seat I doubted he could see very much at all. Stupid bugger, he was too old to drive, should have had his licence taken away. Ashamed at my aggressive response, I attempted a feeble smile. It was wasted. He was looking straight ahead, fiddling with the

gears. A moment later he drove off with screeching tyres and black smoke pouring out of the exhaust.

I pulled over to the side of the road.

The cardboard box had fallen off the seat and was lying on its side. Some of the contents had spilled out over my foot. As I reached down to pick up a book about apes a folded sheet of paper fell out. About to stuff it back in the box, I hesitated. The paper was stiff and looked like a letter. I opened it out and saw that it was handwritten. Large looping letters in bright blue ink. It was private property, nothing to do with me. I started reading.

Darling, I think about you all the time. If only we could talk properly or would that make things worse? I blame myself entirely. But you know that. Take care. Be happy. Please be happy.

'Please' was underlined twice. There was no signature, just a small, smudged kiss.

9

It was the first meeting of a group for compulsive eaters that Martin had persuaded me to arrange. He hoped it would turn into a self-help group but I had my doubts. Perhaps I had illusions about how important my role in the group would be. On the other hand I had run other therapeutic groups and knew how easily difficulties could arise.

Because the group was new I was not expecting a high attendance but in fact seven people, all women, had turned up. Four I knew already. They had seen me individually and I had suggested that the group might be more helpful for their particular problem. The other three had been referred by a local doctor who had tired of handing out diet sheets and was prepared to give the Psychology Service a try.

We had introduced ourselves to each other and the women were taking it in turns to describe the situations that led them to raid the kitchen cupboard or fridge. 'When my husband's mother's coming to stay. She's as thin as a stick and could eat a horse without putting on weight.'

'When I'm bored, back from my job at the leisure centre but it's not yet time to collect the kids from school.'

I was finding it difficult to concentrate. I thought about Luke, alone in the flat. I had told him to read whatever he could find, watch television, listen to the radio, or just sleep. He had opened one eye — he was still in bed when I left for work — and mumbled something about going for a walk. I wanted to tell him not to go down to the city

centre, to take things easy and avoid brooding about what had happened. But if he wanted to return to the 'scene of the crime' he would. And how could he not think about the events of the last few days?

The group had fallen silent, waiting for me to take the lead.

'I want to try an experiment,' I said. 'I'm going to give each of you some paper and a pencil and I want you to draw yourself with no clothes on.'

One or two of them giggled. Another said she couldn't draw.

'You must be fair on yourself,' I said. 'Draw your good points as well as the parts you don't like. The reason behind this exercise is to help you to understand how you feel about your own body.'

I passed round the paper and pencils and for five minutes we sat in comparative silence. At one point somebody asked if they were allowed to rub out. For the rest of the time, with a few anxious glances in my direction, they concentrated on the job in hand.

There was not enough space in my office to accommodate eight people so we were using one of the downstairs rooms. I thought I could smell dry rot but perhaps I was imagining it, although the whole building could have done with some updating and a fresh coat of paint.

Halfway through the drawing session Heather knocked on the door, apologized for interrupting, but could I take a telephone call.

Outside in the passage she apologized again.

'Sorry, Anna, but it sounded important. Detective Inspector Fry. He didn't think it ought to wait.'

I took the call in my room, listening for the click as Heather replaced her receiver.

'Hallo?'

'Anna, Howard Fry speaking. I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily but a witness has come forward.'

'A witness?'

'She's thoroughly unreliable, someone you'd almost certainly describe as an attention-seeker. All the same, we'll have to make the usual enquiries.'

'What did she say?'

'Hang on a moment. I have her statement on my desk.'

I heard papers being shuffled, Fry clearing his throat before he came back on the line.

'I won't read it all. The gist of it is that she noticed a woman and a tall fair-haired man having a heated argument. Then moments later she saw the woman fall in front of the traffic.'

'I don't believe it. Who is this witness?'

'As I said before. I'm extremely sceptical.'

'Why didn't she come forward before?'

'Exactly. She claims to be afraid of the police but there's nothing on file. No record. Anyway, she says now her conscience has got the better of her, she's afraid the man might do it again. I'm really phoning on behalf of Sergeant Waters. He thought you should know about it and he also wanted to check that Luke Jesty's still in hospital.'

'He's not.'

'Oh, I see.'

'He's in my flat. I'll bring him round to the police station. That's what you want, isn't it?'

‘If you could. Apart from anything else Sergeant Waters needs a statement about the accident.’

‘You’ve talked to other witnesses — people who were waiting on the ... ’

‘Of course. The pavement seems to have been crowded with theatre-goers — and a coach party, the worse for wear, coming out of that pub behind the — ’

‘What did they see?’

‘Nothing that’s much use to us.’

‘Until this witness came forward.’

‘Exactly.’

When I returned to the compulsive eaters they were talking about their children and one of the teachers at the local school. Their abandoned drawings lay face down on their laps. They picked them up, shielding them from view with their hands.

‘I don’t want to see the drawings,’ I said, my voice shaking a little, although nobody seemed to notice. ‘I’d just like each of you to describe how it felt when you were drawing yourself. Who’d like to start?’

A small woman with a round worried-looking face raised her arm. ‘I don’t mind. I felt bloody awful, except when I got to my feet.’

‘You like your feet?’

‘They’re the least awful part.’

Some of the others laughed nervously. I glanced at the clock, resisting the temptation to cut short the session with some excuse about not wanting to do too much since it was our first time together. I had forgotten that, as soon as he felt up to it, Luke was supposed to have made a statement about the accident. I should have

reminded him, or taken him there myself. Now the visit to the police station was likely to throw him completely.

‘Right,’ I said, ‘who’s next?’

There was a short pause, then someone else volunteered to talk about her drawing. I tried to listen carefully, understand how she felt, but my mind was on Luke, alone in the flat, starting to come to terms with what had happened, unaware that he had become a potential suspect in a murder case.

The woman who was talking about her drawing was in her late thirties or early forties. Her black hair was scraped back from her face and tied with a red ribbon.

‘I hate everything about myself,’ she said fiercely. ‘Every morning on my way back from taking the kids to school I buy a cream doughnut. When I’ve tidied up I sit in front of the television, drinking coffee and eating. I suppose if I had to go to work I’d be better, but who’d give me a job, I’m no use to anyone.’

Several of the other women made sympathetic noises. I tried to join in but Howard Fry’s ominous words were repeating themselves in my head. ‘A tall fair-haired man ... a heated argument ... the woman ... fall in front of the traffic.’

*

My front door swung open before I had turned the key in the lock. Luke must have looked out to see if my car was coming down the road, then left the door on the latch.

I called his name but there was no response. Then I checked each room but there was no sign of him. It was ten to six, only five minutes later than the time I had told him I would come back. I had promised Howard Fry I would take him to the police station by half-past.

He must have gone for a walk in the park or slipped out to buy something from one of the local shops. I wasn't worried, just annoyed with him for leaving the door open, especially since there had been a spate of break-ins in the area during the last month or so.

Returning to the street I looked up and down, craning my neck to see beyond the parked cars. As far as I could tell the road was empty, apart from a boy on roller skates, who was coming down the road at a considerable speed and looked as though he would be quite unable to stop if a car came round the corner.

A voice called out. 'Watch it, Mark, you'll kill yourself one of these days.' And Janos came up the steps from his basement flat.

Perhaps Luke had been to visit him. Perhaps he was there now. I called his name and he jumped.

'Anna, how are you? What about our talk?'

'Sorry? Oh yes, I hadn't forgotten. You haven't seen Luke, have you?'

'Luke?'

'He's staying in my flat. Yes, I know it's not a very good idea, but ... It's a long story, I'll explain later. I just thought he might have been round.'

'I wish he had but his memories of this house are not so good.'

'Oh, I'm sure he'll want to see you. Only he's been ill. Well, not ill exactly.'

'I understand.' He was pushing a bag of rubbish into one of the large green bins that took up most of the space at the front of the house. 'You look worried,' he said. 'Come inside.'

'I'd like to, Janos, but I think I'd better try and find Luke. He can't have gone far.'

'I will come with you. No, I tell you what, you stay in the flat in case he returns and I look round a bit.'

'Would you? I'm sure I'm worrying unnecessarily only he has an appointment in half an hour's time and I'm afraid he may have —'

'Leave it to me.'

Back in the flat I searched for any clue, however unlikely, that might tell me where Luke had gone. It was a lost cause. His clothes were still in the drawer and the zip-up bag lay on the floor by the bed. The cardboard box that Elaine had filled with the rest of his belongings had been pushed under the chair. I examined its contents, turning over a brand-new shirt, still in its cellophane packet, half a dozen paperback books — all non-fiction — and a folder containing a prospectus for the university and a leaflet about applying for accommodation. Then I lifted out the book about apes and flicked through the pages. The letter had gone.

The bed had been left unmade. With quick automatic movements I pulled up the duvet and straightened the pillows. Was it my imagination or did the sheet feel slightly warm?

I would have to phone Howard Fry, explain that Luke knew nothing about the witness, that he must have gone out for a walk but would be back soon. When he returned I would bring him round straight away.

In the silence I heard a faint hum like the sound of a music centre that had been left on. But when I checked it was switched off just as I had left it. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the phone lying on its side on the floor several feet away from its rest.

As I picked it up someone came through the front door.

'Luke?'

'Anna.' The voice was familiar but it didn't belong to Luke. 'I was passing near by and I wondered if there was anything I could do. I phoned the hospital but they said Luke had gone home.'

Michael Jesty entered the room. He was wearing a dark blue suit, a cream shirt and a dark red tie with thin white stripes. I took in all these irrelevant details from my position on the floor by the phone.

'Luke's staying here,' I said, standing up and attempting to look reasonably composed. 'Just for a day or two.'

'That's very good of you. What happened to the place where he was living before?' He was looking at a photo of my parents on the mantelpiece. 'Nice flat you've got. Been here long?'

'Not very. Look, there's a bit of a problem. I said I'd take Luke round to the police station at six thirty but when I got home he wasn't here.'

'Probably gone for a walk.'

'Yes, I expect so.' I gestured towards a chair.

'Thanks. He's better, is he? I thought he'd be in hospital at least a week. When I rang up and heard he'd been discharged I wondered if he might need some help. I'm afraid you were my only contact. I tried to phone but your number was engaged.'

'It had been left off the hook.'

'Really? By Luke? I suppose he was afraid someone might ring while you were out.'

He sat on the arm of a chair and gazed out of the window. Ernest was on the lawn in his wheelchair, reading the *Evening Post*. The sun had moved round but perhaps he preferred to be in the shade.

'Your neighbour?'

'From the ground-floor flat.'

'He's an invalid?'

I nodded. Any minute now I was expecting Janos to come back with Luke. He was sure to find him, he would know all the right places to look. The shop in Queen's Road that stayed open till late.

The patch of grass on the way to Clifton Village where Aaron was exercised morning and evening. The seats on the opposite side of Hotwells Road where people sat for hours at a time, watching the sand boats being unloaded.

I wanted to tell Michael about the witness but was it fair when not even Luke knew about it? On the other hand, Howard Fry had said she was unreliable. Masses of people confess to crimes they haven't committed. Presumably people also pretend to be witnesses. That way someone listens to them, they become interesting, important.

'A witness has come forward,' I said. 'She claims she saw Luke and Paula quarrelling.'

For a moment I thought he had failed to understand what I was saying. He put up his hand to smooth back his hair. 'Oh, you mean at the time of the accident.'

'They're not taking it very seriously but — '

'I'm sorry you're having to deal with all this.' He was worried but trying to sound as unconcerned as possible. 'You must have quite enough to do at work without coming home to another set of problems.' He picked a speck of dust from his trouser leg and placed it carefully in the waste-paper basket next to his chair. He was trying to stay calm, composed, but I could see the muscles in his jaw, clenching and unclenching.

'This witness,' he said, 'who is she?'

'I don't know.'

He frowned. 'I've been up in London, otherwise I could've collected Luke from hospital and taken him back to Portishead. Still, I doubt if he'd have stayed with either of us for long.'

'So you think he's run off?'

'Not necessarily, but even if he has I don't think you should feel responsible.'

*

It was after ten. Janos, Michael and I had taken turns looking for Luke but it was a token search. By now he could be anywhere in Bristol. He might even have caught the train to another part of the country. Michael had phoned his parents, not mentioning Luke's disappearance, just wondering if Luke was there so he could talk to him. I had forced myself to phone Elaine, using the excuse that I was checking to make sure no rent money was still outstanding. Before that I had phoned Howard Fry to say Luke was out, probably visiting a friend, and to tell him I would be in touch in the morning if that was all right. He had sounded a little doubtful but accepted the explanation without pressing for more information.

Janos had returned to his flat. He wanted to go on searching but Michael had insisted we leave it till the morning.

'This is typical of Luke,' he told me, 'when he's had time to cool down he'll get in touch.'

'How d'you mean cool down?'

'I just meant he must be feeling fairly disorientated. This witness.' He glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece and checked it

against his watch. 'You say she claimed to have seen Luke and Paula fighting?'

'Not fighting, arguing. Anyway, she didn't know who they were. Just a tall fair-haired man and — '

'Sounds a bit vague.'

'Yes, I know.'

He forced a smile. 'Look, I don't know your plans for the weekend but if he hasn't turned up by tomorrow lunchtime I've one or two ideas where we could look.'

'I expect the police will have started searching by then.'

'Possibly, but they won't have a clue where to begin.' He paused, tipping back his head and staring up at the ceiling. 'Perhaps the reason he left ... Staying in your flat, it changed the nature of your relationship. It was too intimate. He felt bad about pretending to be psychotic and — '

'We discussed all that.'

'I'm sure you did. All right then, maybe he was afraid now that you'd been in touch with our parents they might turn up and insist he went back to the cottage.' This seemed unlikely. I was thinking about the letter. The bright blue ink. The smudged kiss. *I blame myself entirely. You know that.*

'Did Luke ever tell you how he felt about Paula?'

'Tell me? I never saw him. He'd cut himself off from the rest of the family, couldn't stand the pressure.'

'What pressure?'

He shrugged. 'My father, you've seen my father, and my mother's not the happiest of people. She can't stand the thought of growing old. I suppose she thinks she's wasted her life.'

‘By not picking up on her acting career.’

‘That too.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Have you eaten? If not I could fetch some take-away. Indian or Chinese? One’s in Hotwells, the other’s up in Clifton Village.’ Already he was halfway through the door. ‘Luke’ll be all right, you know. He needs time on his own and if you ask me he wants to give us all a good fright.’

From the kitchen window I watched him set off towards the steps leading up to the Village. He was shorter than Luke — and broader. Not the same build as his father or his mother but he had his mother’s colouring and the shape of her eyes. I remembered Luke’s remarks about all our characteristics, including our personality, being inherited. At the time of our discussion he had seemed in relatively good spirits. Had something happened while I was at work? Perhaps he had been round to the herb shop and Bob had questioned him about the accident, made insinuations.

Across the road one of the tenants had flung open his window to talk to a friend down on the pavement. Rock music turned up to full volume filled the air. The monotonous beat of a drum thumped inside my head. No one was complaining, not the other tenants, not Janos. Luke would have put his hands over his ears. Luke and I were alike. Over-sensitive, easily upset. I pictured him standing by the slip-road that led up to the motorway, trying to hitch a lift to the north, anywhere, as far away as possible, in the vain hope that running away would allow him to escape from what was going on in his head.

In a short time Michael would be back with chicken tikka or mutton roganjosh. I was so tired, too tired to eat, but I would force it down. I had made that mistake before, becoming so involved with a case

that I had lost my appetite and lived off sandwiches and cups of coffee until my body finally protested.

I found plates, forks, a couple of spoons so we could help ourselves from the tinfoil containers. Beneath the reassuring smile Michael was as worried as I was. He was trying to stay calm, positive, but the news about the witness had shaken him badly. Perhaps Luke would turn up, hiding in one of the places Michael knew about. It was a relief to have someone else around, someone who had known Luke all his life and understood how his mind worked. But supposing even now he was lying in the thick woodland above the Gorge with an empty container of capsules beside him on the grass. Or staring over the parapet of the Suspension Bridge at the dark water below ...

Had I wanted Michael to stay the night? We had talked for ages, mostly about Luke, but a little about ourselves. It was a relief to have someone to talk to but he had known I was being careful not to break my rule of confidentiality. He hadn't probed or tried to trick me into saying something I would later regret. Shortly after midnight he had stood up, cleared away the remains of our meal and announced that he was leaving. Had I felt a small twinge of disappointment? Wouldn't I have made some scathing remark if he had assumed he could stay?

By nine o'clock next morning I was on my way out of the flat. Last night Michael had told me he had business matters to deal with — apparently he worked most Saturday mornings and sometimes right through the weekend — but we had arranged to meet around midday. In the meantime I decided to call in at the police station, explain that Luke was still missing and try to find out more about the witness. At least as long as Luke was out of the way no one could interview him. That was the most positive way of looking at things.

My car had been boxed in by a ridiculous jeep-like vehicle that belonged to one of the over-privileged university students and a dilapidated motor-cycle that had fallen on its side. After a series of finely judged manoeuvres I squeezed out of the gap and started up the hill. A light mist obscured the sun but it was going to be another hot stuffy day. My eyes itched and my ears felt as though they were

stuffed with cotton wool. Nearby sounds seemed to come from a long way off.

I swallowed hard, trying to clear my head, then concentrated on the traffic zooming down Constitution Hill at the kind of speed that would have made it impossible to stop had a pedestrian suddenly stepped into the road. As I turned left into Jacobs Wells Road I saw an old man struggling along with two bags of shopping and remembered that I was running out of basic foods: bread, milk, bananas. Some time during the morning I would have to visit the supermarket and fight my way through the Saturday crowds.

Searching for a parking space off Whiteladies Road I thought I saw Carl Redfern. The same loping walk, thick grey hair. But the man who turned round was well into his fifties, with a small moustache and round, metal-framed glasses. He reminded me a little of my father.

I turned in to the multi-storey car park above the shopping centre. Once or twice on a Saturday morning I had bumped into Doug Hargreaves buying fruit and vegetables. He and Elaine had no car but he had explained that the walk did him good and there was more choice than up where he lived. I suspected Elaine sent him off so she could have the house to herself. The arrangement probably suited them both — or was I jumping to conclusions again, speculating about other people's lives, filling in the gaps with my own inventions?

Inside the police station it felt cool, almost church-like. Light grey walls, dark grey lino, heavy wooden doors. I asked to speak to Inspector Fry, waited for the desk sergeant to put through a call, then made my way down the familiar corridor.

Howard Fry was standing in the doorway. It was several months since our last meeting but I could have sworn he was dressed in exactly the same clothes as the last time I saw him. Light-coloured trousers and a dark brown jacket, striped shirt and plain green tie. The first time we met I had estimated his age at around forty. Now I decided he was nearer thirty-five. His dark red hair was cut in the same neat style, parted on the left. From his rather formal manner he might have been mistaken for a bank manager or an accountant, nothing like your average policeman — if there is such a thing.

He seemed relaxed enough, standing there smiling, with his hand in his trouser pocket. But when he spoke I sensed a slight tension in his voice.

‘Anna. I was just about to phone.’

I followed him into his office and sat down on a chair near the window.

‘Luke’s disappeared,’ I said. ‘I haven’t seen him since yesterday morning.’

‘I see. Well, thank you for coming to tell me. I’d be grateful if you could fill me in with a few details.’

I hesitated. ‘What kind of details?’

‘Oh, the usual. Names, addresses. I’m presuming in this instance confidentiality won’t be a problem. Since Luke has a medical history we must at least make a token attempt to find him.’

I didn’t know whether to be relieved or outraged.

‘A token attempt? But he could be in danger.’

‘His doctor says that’s unlikely.’

‘You’ve been in touch with the hospital?’

‘Just doing my job, Anna.’ He was watching me closely. ‘As a matter of fact the only reason I’m involved is because you and Graham Whittle had a chat about the case. The witness who came forward was somewhat inarticulate, incapable of sticking to the same story. We’re not taking her evidence very seriously but we have to follow the rules.’

‘I don’t suppose you’ll tell me,’ I said, ‘but this witness, what’s her name?’

‘Rhiannon Pascoe. I’m telling you on the off-chance that you’ve come across her in your work. It occurred to me that she could probably do with some kind of psychological treatment. Rather a pathetic looking girl. Only sixteen, distinctly under-nourished and of no fixed abode.’

‘That doesn’t mean — ’

‘Of course not.’ He was sitting at his desk, turning the pages of a typewritten report.

‘Rhiannon,’ I said. ‘No, I don’t know a Rhiannon. She’s homeless, is she?’

‘Not quite. She shares a van with some of those New Age travellers. It’s all down in her statement.’

‘What did she say exactly — about the accident?’

‘That she’d seen a woman arguing with a tall fair-haired man. Shortly afterwards the woman had fallen in front of the traffic.’

‘Fallen?’

‘In her first statement she said she’d been pushed. Later she changed it to ‘could’ve been pushed’. We run across this kind of thing all the time. People read about a crime and like the idea of

becoming involved. We even have an elderly man who rings up and informs on himself.'

He had used the word 'crime' but that didn't mean ...

Swivelling his chair until he faced the window, he stretched out his legs and clasped his hands behind his head. I remembered our very first meeting when I had told him about a possible intruder in my flat. Expecting him to make light of my anxiety I had been pleasantly surprised when he took my fears seriously. There had been a slight frisson between us — the kind that sometimes takes place when one person is in the role of an authority figure and the other feels in need of protection. Since then I had learned from Martin that Howard Fry was divorced with an eight-year-old son, that his wife had remarried and moved to East Anglia so he hardly ever saw the boy.

Perhaps that accounted for the sadness I occasionally saw in his eyes.

He was holding a pencil, moving it round between his finger and thumb.

'Of course the girl must have been in the vicinity,' he said, 'or she wouldn't have been able to describe Paula Redfern and Luke with a fair degree of accuracy.'

I watched his face but made no comment. He returned the report to its folder, then placed the folder in the top drawer of his desk.

'As I say, she's a thoroughly unreliable witness. I just wondered if she might know Luke Jesty, have some kind of grudge.'

I thought about it for a few moments, tried to remember a stray remark. Someone who had helped out at the shop? A friend of Doug and Elaine's? I even considered inventing a recollection of someone with a Welsh-sounding name.

'I don't remember Luke mentioning anyone called Rhiannon,' I said. 'So what will happen now?'

'We'll do a few checks. If you've any ideas where he could have gone ... First I suggest you tell me everything you know about him. We don't have the manpower to send people off on a wild-goose chase, but any reasonable possibility, in this area, or another part of the country, and we'll follow it up as best we can.'

So he was more concerned about Luke's well-being than apprehending a possible murder suspect. Or was he bluffing? Lulling me into a false sense of security so I would unwittingly incriminate Luke? I smiled at him and he smiled back. But it was the smile of a policeman, not a friend.

'His parents live out towards Chew Magna,' I said.

He passed me a sheet of paper and I wrote down the address.

'Then there's his brother. He lives in Portishead, runs his own contract cleaning agency.' I searched in my wallet for Michael's business card, then passed it across the desk.

'You know these people?'

'Yes. Well, I've met them.' I glanced up at him but his face was expressionless. 'Then there's the couple where he was lodging. Doug and Elaine Hargreaves, they have a house in one of the streets off Coldharbour Road, but you know that already.'

'Quite near where Paula Redfern lived.'

'Yes. Luke worked with her in that herbal remedies shop on the way to the hospital. There's an art gallery, then a shop that sells old musical instruments —'

He nodded. 'You knew Paula Redfern?'

'No. Why?'

'No reason. I just wondered.'

'I doubt if any of the people I've told you about will know any more than I do,' I said.

His fingers drummed on the edge of the desk. 'I'm sure you're right. Just routine checking and I'll put his name and description on 'Locate and Trace'. The central police computer.' He made a few notes, pausing in the middle of writing to listen to a passing ambulance. 'D'you think there's any point in circulating the local doctors, or GPs in other areas come to that? I thought he might call in for a prescription.'

'I suppose it's possible.'

'Was he taking any tablets?' His voice had an edge to it as though he thought I was being less than co-operative. What on earth did he expect?

'He was given some tranquillizers when he left hospital,' I said, 'but he told me he didn't want to take them. I left it up to him.'

'Major tranquillizers?' He wrote a few words on his pad.

'No, just something to calm him down. I thought Dr Stringer would have told you all that kind of thing.'

We stared at each other. I didn't trust him and he didn't trust me. I thought the witness had told him more than he was letting on. He thought I was withholding information about Luke. It was inevitable, part of the nature of our jobs. I felt a twinge of hostility. Fry was supposed to be a friend. Well, he knew a great deal about me from the last time our jobs had overlapped and surely that made us friends of a sort. I decided not to mention the fact that Michael and I were going to spend the afternoon searching for Luke. Neither would I mention my visit to Carl Redfern and his description of the 'insanely

jealous' Liz. What was the point? They had nothing to do with Luke's disappearance.

*

As soon as I turned the corner I could see Doug waiting at the bottom of the steps leading up to my flat. Was it really Doug, or was it just one of those days when almost everyone you see reminds you of somebody else?

It was Doug all right. When I got out of the car he started walking quickly towards me. His tongue was moving backwards and forwards across his upper lip and when he came closer I could see that his whole body was trembling.

'Anna, could I have a word?' His voice came out as a sort of airless gasp.

'Yes, of course. Come on up.'

'I thought you might have gone out for the day. I asked the lady in the ground-floor flat. I wasn't sure which part of the house you ...'

He followed me up the steps, losing his footing halfway up and putting out his hands to steady himself.

Once inside the flat he stood in the hallway, his eyes darting round the three half-open doors.

'In here, Doug.' I steered him towards the kitchen. From there I would be able to see if Michael arrived — or Luke came up the road.

'Elaine doesn't know I'm here,' he said. 'She thinks I'm at the garden centre. I shall have to go there after this and buy a few bedding plants. I can't stay long.'

'Sit down,' I said, 'I'll make some coffee.'

'Not for me. Luke's found somewhere to stay, has he? I'd have had him back like a shot but Elaine — she couldn't take it.'

So he had come to apologize.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘I understand. I’m sure you both had a lot more to put up with than I realized. I thought Luke would be a fairly easy person to have as a lodger but — ’

‘Oh, he was. No trouble at all.’ He paused, his face contorted, as though in pain. ‘Did he say anything?’

‘When? What about?’

‘When he came to see you. When he was in hospital. About — about when he was staying with us.’

‘Not really. I got the impression he was happier, liked it better than when he was in a room on his own.’

‘Is that what he said?’

He breathed out heavily and sat down on the chair I had offered him several minutes before.

‘As a matter of fact, Doug, I don’t know where Luke is. I brought him back here on Thursday, then yesterday evening when I returned from work he’d gone.’

‘Oh, God.’ Doug was sweating profusely. It collected in droplets on his forehead and ran down his nose and cheeks. He took off his glasses and started wiping them with a tissue.

‘It’s not your fault,’ I said. ‘Luke was in a very volatile state. Even if you’d had him back I don’t know if he’d have stayed put for long.’

‘You don’t understand.’ The sweat was still pouring down his face but now he was crying too. ‘I wanted to help, get close to him, but ...’

The sobbing was so loud it was impossible to hear the rest of the sentence.

‘You’d better tell me what’s happened,’ I said.

I had to wait several minutes. When he spoke it was in the form of a question.

‘D’you think Elaine knows?’

‘Knows what?’ But already I had an inkling of what he was about to say.

‘Take your time,’ I said. I wanted to reassure him, help him to talk, but I sounded cold, intimidating — like Howard Fry.

‘I told you about the photography,’ Doug muttered. ‘Luke was helping me — in the darkroom — the shed at the bottom of the garden.’

He stopped, wanting me to guess the rest. I wouldn’t.

Blowing his nose, then keeping the handkerchief still held to his face, he started to explain. In spite of the handkerchief his voice was louder, clearer, as though having got this far there was no point in trying to protect himself.

‘I felt sorry for him, Anna. He’s so — so ... The first time — it was a mistake. Brushing against him. I expect that’s what he thought.’

‘Luke’s not that naive,’ I said. ‘If he knew how you felt he should have stayed away from the shed.’

‘No! It was my responsibility. He’s only a boy.’

‘He’s twenty-two,’ I said wearily. ‘Anyway, when was all this?’

‘The last time was Thursday, two days before the accident. Has Elaine said anything? When you phoned from the hospital? Is that why she wouldn’t let him come back?’

‘I’ve no idea. Was there any reason why she should suspect?’

‘No. No, nothing — unless Luke ... ’

‘I should think that’s highly improbable. It’s much more likely she was put off by the way he behaved the night of the accident.’

He replaced his glasses and attempted to pat down his tuft of hair. 'What will you do?'

'About what you've just told me? Nothing.' I was torn between feeling sorry for him and wanting to punish him for making Luke's life even more difficult than it was already. But Luke hadn't complained ... 'Nothing. Thank you for coming to tell me. It must have been hard.'

He stood up and held out his hand. From the expression on his face I guessed the confession had produced a brief feeling of euphoria. He was almost back to his old self. I wanted him to go away.

'I knew you'd understand.' He smiled, as a naughty child might smile through its tears after a good telling off. 'Only trouble is — put it in a nutshell — if Elaine found out ...'

'She won't hear about it from me.'

'I knew I could rely on you.' Already he was halfway to the front door. 'By the way.' He tried to sound as casual as possible but his words came out in a kind of croak. 'The night of the accident Elaine stayed home and watched that serial about the couple who moved to the north and bought a market garden.' He cleared his throat several times. The front door was open and only his head and shoulders remained in the flat. 'I saw the first episode, then my classes resumed. She keeps me up to date with the plot. The reason I'm telling you. Well, you know me, I like to get the facts straight.'

'I understand.'

I did. He was attempting to provide Elaine with an alibi. Had he guessed that Paula had been wearing Luke's blue and white sweater and realized that Luke might have been the intended victim? Could

he really imagine Elaine had found out what had happened and was prepared to go to any lengths to get rid of her lodger? It was crazy — but people in a panic tend to have crazy ideas.

I called down the steps after him. ‘Don’t forget the garden centre.’

He raised an arm but didn’t look back. From the kitchen window I watched him unlock the padlock on his cycle and set off, freewheeling down the hill.

Janos had come up from the basement and was talking to the tiny woman from number twenty-three. She was dressed in a thick winter coat and was talking animatedly out of the corner of her mouth that didn’t hold her cigarette. Then Pam appeared from the ground-floor flat and crossed the road to join them.

When I opened the window I could hear them engrossed in their favourite topic of conversation: the shortage of road sweepers and refuse collectors. ‘It’s not good enough.’

‘I blame the council.’

‘Dirt breeds dirt.’

Janos looked up, saw me at the window and waved.

‘Any news, Anna?’

I shook my head and he pulled a face. ‘I’ll talk to you later, all right? I take Aaron to Leigh Woods but we find nothing. Later we walk along the path by the river.’

He had such a kind, sensitive face. Why on earth had I persuaded Luke to move out of his room and become Doug and Elaine’s lodger? But I had done it from the best of motives, wanting him to feel less isolated, more like part of a family.

I stepped back from the window and sat on the edge of the table. My hand brushed against something sticky. A blob of marmalade?

Some of last night's take-away? The job in the shop had been my idea too. Better than packing china in the basement of a department store. But if Luke had stayed in the same job Paula Redfern might still be alive. I cursed myself, not for trying to help Luke, but for the way I always ended up blaming myself for things beyond my control.

The phone started ringing. I picked it up expecting it to be Michael held up at the office, or Howard Fry with a couple more questions he had forgotten to ask.

'Yes?'

There was no reply but neither did the caller ring off.

'Hallo ... Who is that?'

Still no response.

I held my breath, listening for any sounds that might tell me where the call was coming from. Passing traffic, the siren that warned motorists the Swing Bridge was about to open.

'Luke? Is that you? Just tell me where you are and I'll come and fetch you. Luke?'

Nothing. A short pause, then the dull purr of the dialling tone.

11

Michael was knocking on the door. I went to let him in. It was the first time I had seen him without a suit and he looked different, less the high-powered businessman. He was wearing rust-coloured trousers and a dark red shirt. He looked tired, preoccupied, then he smiled and walked past me into the flat.

‘Ready?’

‘Where are we going?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Well, I suppose we should start with a tour of the Clifton area.’

‘He’s hardly likely to be walking up Whiteladies Road.’

‘You don’t know Luke.’ He broke off. ‘Of course in a way you probably know him better than any of us.’

We stared at each other for a moment, then he turned and walked back out of the flat, calling over his shoulder. ‘Got everything you need?’

‘What did you have in mind?’

He laughed. ‘Oh, nothing in particular, only I’m not sure how long this is going to take.’

He ran down the steps ahead of me and waited on the pavement.

‘I parked a bit further up,’ he said. ‘We’ll go in mine, shall we, that way you’ll be free to scan the highways and byways.’

‘Yes, all right, but shouldn’t we be going on foot? We won’t see much from a car.’

Crossing the road to get a better view of the floating harbour he shaded his eyes against the hazy sun, then called to me to join him.

‘See those boats? I used to have one like that. They race pretty well if the wind’s right. You sail, I expect.’

I shook my head. ‘I tried it once, nearly got knocked out by the boom or whatever it’s called.’

He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Look, we both know this search is pretty much a lost cause, but at least it makes us feel we’re doing something. You can’t sit in that flat all day, blaming yourself for what’s happened.’

‘I’m not blaming myself.’

‘Good.’

I stopped to shake some grit out of my shoe.

‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘I thought you knew places where Luke might be hiding out.’ He sighed. ‘Long shots, but I suppose anything’s worth a try.’

We crossed the road, and turned the corner, passing a house that was being re-roofed. There was always building work going on in Cliftonwood. Renovations, one person moving out, another keen to get started on the home improvements. Scaffolding stuck out across most of the pavement. Michael stood back to let me go first, then caught up again and started talking animatedly.

‘What would you be doing if this was a normal weekend?’

‘Me? Oh, shopping, cleaning the flat.’

‘All weekend?’ Did he want to know if I had someone who spent most of the weekend with me? ‘Doesn’t sound much fun.’

‘I enjoy the rest.’

‘Of course.’

His car was a white Honda CRX. The new model.

'Good for business,' he said, holding open the passenger door. 'You know what they say? Nothing succeeds like success.'

We drove up Clifton Down Road, turning left along Princess Victoria Street, then weaving our way between parked cars and pedestrians, making for Sion Hill and the Suspension Bridge.

'Leigh Woods?' said Michael.

I shook my head. 'I doubt if he'd be there and even if he was we'd never find him.'

I thought about Aaron sniffing his way through the undergrowth, wagging his tail non-stop, hoping to find something exciting. A rabbit, a half-eaten burger bun, something far worse.

'We'll go up College Road, shall we,' I said.

'Whatever you think best. You know this part of Bristol better than I do. I suppose Luke does too. Since he's never learned to drive, or even bought himself a bike, he must be used to walking long distances.'

We passed Clifton College playing fields, then turned right into Guthrie Road and slowed down near the entrance to the zoo. A coachload of children was waiting by the turnstile, chattering and squealing, each with a brightly coloured backpack. A youth leader finished counting them, then started all over again.

'Up Pembroke Road,' I said, 'then across the Downs and back through Westbury Park. That's where Paula lived.'

'You think he might have gone to her flat?'

'She only had a room.'

'We could ask the other tenants. It's possible they might have seen him.'

'I don't know the address,' I said, wishing I had asked Howard Fry a few questions myself.

The whole morning had an air of unreality. The police station. Doug. This pointless tour of Clifton.

'I know,' said Michael, 'what about his old lodgings? I realize he won't be there now but at the very least they might know Paula's address.'

'I don't think that's a very good idea.'

He glanced at me. 'Why not? He might have been to see them, wanted them to explain why they wouldn't have him back.'

'Doug would have told me if he had. In any case, you know Luke, he never confronts anyone if he can possibly avoid it.'

The mist that had made the day seem dull and overcast was starting to clear. Michael turned on the radio, then switched it off again as a DJ started gabbling the names of the last three recordings. The inside of his car was immaculate.

'I had a phone call this morning,' I said.

'Oh, yes?'

'Whoever it was he didn't speak, just hung on for a moment or two, then rang off.'

'He?'

'Or she. I've no idea.'

'Probably a wrong number. Oh, you're thinking it could've been Luke. Maybe he just wanted to hear your voice.'

He drew in to the side of the road, pulled up behind an ice-cream van and switched off the engine. 'Feel like a walk? We'll have a look round, then decide what to do next.' He turned to face me. 'Something's happened, hasn't it?'

'Yes.'

He said nothing. Just waited for me to decide if I was going to tell him about it. We had left the car and he was walking fast across the Downs. I had to run a few paces to catch up with him.

'Doug Hargreaves came to see me this morning,' I said. 'Luke's old landlord.'

'And?'

'Apparently Luke's been helping him to develop his photographs.' I paused. 'In a shed at the end of the garden. I'm not sure exactly what happened but ...'

'Go on.' He sounded intrigued.

'To put it in a nutshell, as Doug would say, he found the close proximity something of a temptation.'

'Doug did.' He sighed. 'Poor old Luke. Women old enough to be his mother, men hanging about in bus shelters.'

'It's happened before?'

'Oh, I imagine so, don't you?' For the first time he sounded depressed, as though he believed his brother was doomed to make a mess of his life.

'I blame myself,' I said. 'It was my idea he should go and live with Doug and Elaine.'

'It was hardly something you could've foreseen. Anyway, Luke's a big boy now. A swift departure from the darkroom should've done the trick.'

We reached a clump of trees. Michael bent down to re-tie his shoe lace. 'Good up here on the Downs. D'you come here often?'

'Quite often. Sometimes first thing in the morning. It's deserted then apart from a few people walking their dogs.'

‘You like dogs?’

I expected him to make the usual remark about dog shit spoiling the environment. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘don’t you?’

‘Of course. All animals. I have a cat — a Burmese brown.’ He laughed. ‘Don’t look so surprised. Cats don’t mind being left on their own all day. You should get one.’

‘What’s he called?’

‘She. Her name’s Sasha.’ He kicked at a heap of sticks and dead leaves, revealing several empty beer bottles and the remains of an old shopping bag on wheels.

I shivered a little, catching hold of a branch to steady myself. Once, walking on the Downs with a friend, we had spotted a crumpled blood-stained sleeping bag pushed under some bushes and convinced ourselves it contained a body. Approaching it nervously I had flicked over a corner of it with my foot, then jumped back for fear of what might emerge. It had turned out to be stuffed with newspaper and the ‘blood stains’ were just damp patches.

‘Now what?’ said Michael. ‘Something else you haven’t told me about?’

‘No.’ I started walking across the grass. ‘If we walk in a circle, well, more of a rectangle, we can cover most of the open space.’

Half an hour later we arrived back by Michael’s car.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘where now? Luke’s old lodgings are out. Paula’s room — we could waste ages and still draw a blank. If you can stand it I’d like to go to Keynsham. I don’t imagine for one moment Luke’ll be there but I want to introduce you to someone who might have a few ideas.’

I hesitated. How long was the trip going to take?

'This woman,' he said, 'she's a friend of the family, not a blood relation, but as good as.'

'A sort of honorary aunt.'

'Something like that. She used to live in the village. When we were kids she'd baby-sit, that kind of thing.'

'If you think it'll help,' I said doubtfully.

I was glad to be back in the car. The walk across the Downs had been aimless, whereas driving provided a sense of purpose. Moving from A to B, on the way to somewhere important. Part of me was wishing I had stayed in the flat. If the phone call had been from Luke he could ring again and next time he might pluck up courage to speak. On the other hand I couldn't think of anything worse than a day waiting for a phone call that never materialized and, besides, whereas Howard Fry had made me irritable, uneasy, Michael was making me feel a little better.

We were approaching the city centre, queuing up to join the roundabout.

'Her name's Faith,' said Michael. 'Faith Gordon. She lives alone, values her independence, plus the fact she's got a fairly low opinion of men.'

'She might be out.'

'Unlikely. I don't want to phone or she'll start making elaborate arrangements, dusting the furniture.'

The digital clock on the *Evening Post* building said twelve thirty-three. We were going to reach Keynsham in less than half an hour and that would mean Faith Gordon might feel obliged to offer us something to eat.

'What about lunch?' I said.

‘You’re hungry?’

‘No, but if we’re going to reach your friend around one o’clock — ’

‘We’ll tell her we’ve eaten already.’ He signalled to change into the left-hand lane. ‘She won’t try and force-feed us, she’s not that kind of person. You’ll like her. She’s very down-to-earth, hates cant, anything pretentious.’

‘I doubt if she likes psychologists.’

‘Why ever not?’ He glanced at me and smiled, negotiating the next lane-change with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the edge of the passenger seat.

I looked away. He noticed and a slight current passed between us. We both knew what it meant.

*

Faith Gordon lived in a flat in a small purpose-built block. Each flat had a balcony and most of the balconies held pots of geraniums in varying shades of orange and red. I had expected the flats to be full of old people with a warden employed to make sure nobody had been taken ill or fallen and broken a hip.

I was wrong. A youngish woman was sitting on the grass in a deck-chair reading a newspaper, and a few yards away a girl of seven or eight was threading daisies together to make a chain. It broke and I saw her turn to the woman and mouth an obscenity. The woman slapped her leg and the child let out a high-pitched shriek. Michael pointed to a window at the corner of the building.

‘That’s Faith’s flat. The ones on the first floor only have one bedroom. Some of the others have two or three. It’s quite likely she won’t know anything about the accident or Luke’s time in hospital, never mind the latest development.’

‘Won’t your parents have told her?’

He shook his head, pushing open a door that led to the flats with uneven numbers from one to twenty-three. I followed him up the stone steps and we waited outside flat eleven until someone came to answer the bell.

Through the ribbed glass I could see a figure approaching. She appeared to be dressed all in white but when she opened the door I saw that only her top half was white. Her skirt was a great swirling mass of yellows and reds. It came almost to the ground and looked as though she had worn it each summer for the past twenty or thirty years, taking it out at the beginning of June and putting it back in mothballs at the end of September.

‘Michael.’ She held out both hands. ‘What a surprise.’

He kissed her lightly on the cheek, then turned towards me and made the introductions.

She looked me up and down, then smiled to herself as though she had observed something no one else had noticed. ‘Come along in, both of you. I’ve never met a psychologist before but I’ve heard you’re all the rage.’

The rooms of the flat led off one corridor and all the doors on the right-hand side were closed. On the left was a tiny kitchen, then we entered a fairly large living-room with two windows overlooking a stretch of lawn, and beyond the grass another block of flats.

We were commanded to sit down.

‘Have you eaten? Of course you haven’t.’

‘We had a snack,’ said Michael. ‘No, really, neither of us is very hungry. Look, I’d better tell you straight away, we’re here about Luke.’

She drew in a sharp breath, then covered it up with a laugh. 'Well, I didn't think it was a social call.'

Not surprisingly she had assumed Michael and I knew each other well. Sitting back in a large shabby armchair she hitched up her skirt, crossed one freckled leg over the other and waited with her eyes half closed. She was a large woman but big-boned rather than fat. Her hair was white, cut short, with a thick straight fringe. From the rest of her colouring I guessed that it had once been red. There were freckles on her arms too and the back of her hands.

'Anna's been helping Luke the last couple of months,' said Michael. 'You know how nervous he is, lacking in confidence.'

'Yes, of course.' Her tone was matter of fact, as though Luke's treatment came as no surprise.

'Anyway,' said Michael, 'last Saturday, a week ago today, there was a road accident.'

'Not Luke.' In an instant she was sitting up straight, bracing herself for a shock.

'No, not Luke,' I said hastily. 'A friend of his called Paula Redfern.'

The name meant nothing to her. Why should it?

'What kind of an accident? Was it fatal? Oh dear, oh dear, I sometimes wonder how any of us survive into old age.' Michael moved his chair closer to her. 'It was nobody's fault, just one of those tragic ... Anyway, Luke took it very badly and Anna decided he'd be better off in hospital.'

'Hospital? Oh, one of those places. And that's where he is now?'

'No.' Michael glanced at me, acknowledging that clearly she knew nothing of Luke's whereabouts. 'He came out of hospital on Wednesday and Anna took him back to her flat in Cliftonwood.'

‘That was good of you, but don’t your superiors frown on that kind of thing?’

He laughed. ‘Anna’s not bothered what her superiors think. Luke talked to her, trusted her. You know how wary he’s always been. Anyway, to cut a long story short, the following day he disappeared.’

‘Into thin air? You mean he’s gone off to lick his wounds.’ She stood up, walked across to a revolving bookcase, then returned and handed me a silver-framed photograph.

‘It’s the only one I’ve got. Taken about twelve years ago. How old would you all have been, Michael?’

He shrugged.

‘Oh, come on, you must have been just fourteen and that would make Luke nine and Diana six.’

I studied the stiff studio portrait. Neither Michael nor Luke had changed very much. All three of them were sitting down so it was difficult to judge how tall they were but the two boys looked more or less the same height. The girl was much smaller. She had beautiful eyes with long thick lashes and her fair hair was tied back in a pony tail.

‘Michael wondered if you might have any idea where Luke could have gone,’ I said, still studying the photo. ‘He’s not with his parents and we’re not sure where to look.’

The two of them exchanged glances. Then Faith moved towards the window and stood with her hand resting on the sill.

‘Can’t help, I’m afraid. Doesn’t he have friends in Bristol who’d put him up for a night or two?’

‘None that we know of,’ said Michael. ‘He was in lodgings up near the Downs but Anna’s certain he hasn’t been back there.’

She didn't enquire about the lodgings.

'Poor Luke, I haven't seen him for well over a year and then it was quite by chance — in the Galleries at the shopping centre.'

Michael raised his eyebrows. 'Really? I thought you couldn't stand Bristol, always shopped in Bath.'

'I felt like a change. Regretted it, of course, the parking was well nigh impossible and they overcharged me, I know they did.' She coughed. 'What about Oxford? I know he wasn't there long but he must have met people at his college. He might have kept in touch.'

Michael looked doubtful. 'What d'you think, Anna?'

'As far as I can tell he shut himself away in his room most of the time. I doubt if he made any close friends.'

Faith turned round sharply. 'You know what happened, I assume? Of course you do. Nothing's been the same since — since the ...' Her voice trailed away. She was close to tears.

I expected Michael to comfort her, put his arm round her, say something reassuring. But he stayed quite still. His lips were pressed together, his eyes looked cold, angry. Then he turned towards me, smiled briefly, then looked away and started studying his fingernails. A small twinge of fear pinched the back of my neck. I sat on the broad arm of a chair, gripping the rough worn material with both hands.

Straining her eyes to make out the figures on the grass Faith started speaking slowly, carefully, almost as though her words had been planned for just such an occasion.

'I've been expecting something like this for a long time. Oh, not the road accident, but something that pushed people just that little bit too far. It's easier for me, of course. I'm single, unattached, and besides

I'm a Christian.' She glanced at me to make sure I was listening. 'Of course when I say I'm a Christian I don't mean I believe in God. Well, certainly not in the sense that our vicar does. Still, for all its shortcomings the Church is better than nothing.'

I put my hand up to my face. She thought I was smiling but she was wrong. I was wondering what she meant by something pushing people 'a bit too far'.

'Oh, you can smile,' she said. 'Most people think I'm rather a joke.'

'I wasn't laughing at you,' I said.

'No? Well you, no doubt, can see some deep, underlying meaning in every word I say.' She crossed over and patted me on the shoulder. 'You haven't said much, haven't had a chance, but I like the look of you.'

Michael stood up and walked towards us.

'We'll leave you in peace, Faith, but I'll let you know if there's any news. In the meantime if you hear anything perhaps you could get in touch with me — or Anna if I'm out of the office.'

He handed her one of his business cards. She turned it over and I saw that he had written my office number on the back.

'That's all right with you, is it, Anna?'

'Yes, of course.'

Faith wasn't listening. I felt as though I was intruding on private grief. Diana's death six years ago had obviously been a shattering blow for her as well as for the whole Jesty family. Nobody had really recovered.

*

It was so long since I had defrosted the fridge that the thickness of ice was making it impossible to close the door properly. I had

switched off the electricity a couple of hours ago. Now it was time to mop up the mess. As I transferred soggy newspapers to the washing-up bowl I thought about Michael. When he dropped me off at my flat he had expected to be invited in, but when no invitation had been forthcoming he had appeared quite unconcerned. All in good time, that was the message his eyes had conveyed. No need to rush things, that could spoil everything.

Tipping the newspaper in the sink and pressing hard to squeeze out as much water as possible, I switched my thoughts to Doug. Why had he been so keen to bare his soul? There was no need to tell me about the goings on in the garden shed. At the time I had assumed he felt guilty, worried in case it was his fault that Luke had disappeared. Now I wondered if his confession was a smoke screen, a way of diverting my attention away from something more important, something he was desperate to conceal.

Spreading more newspaper on the floor and stuffing a tea towel into the bottom of the fridge I left the flat, slamming the door behind me, ran down the steps and climbed into the car.

It was just before six thirty. If I was right Doug would leave the house around six forty-five, set off in the direction of the mythical framing class, then make his way to his real destination. Perhaps he spent the whole evening in the pub, but somehow I doubted that.

If I stayed in the car I would be less visible. On the other hand, if he took a short cut through an alleyway I would be unable to follow and might lose track of him altogether. I reached the end of his road just after twenty to. The best thing would be to park the car near by, then walk to a spot where I was out of sight but could keep an eye on the house. Of course, I might be too late.

I wasn't. The porch door opened at ten to seven and I saw a slight figure in a beige anorak hurry down the short path, then turn right and set off in the direction of the main road.

Standing in the doorway of a boarded-up wool shop I watched him reach Coldharbour Road, then turn left and increase his pace. He was carrying a brown polythene bag with the name of a chain of supermarkets printed in orange on the side. I stepped out on to the pavement, convinced he had no idea he was being followed. Perhaps I was right and what took place next was only what happened every Saturday evening. A bus passed by and Doug started running. He reached the stop as a couple of middle-aged men were boarding, and jumped inside a moment before the doors swung shut.

I started running back to my car but by the time I reached it I had already decided it was pointless to try and catch up with the bus. In the first place I had no idea which route it followed and, in the second, Doug might have alighted at the next stop. Annoyed with myself for having planned the whole operation so badly I left the car where it was and walked back towards a pub I had noticed the day I collected Luke's box of belongings. The King's Arms? Queen's Head?

From the outside it looked quite imposing but once inside it turned out to be small and slightly scruffy. No alterations appeared to have been made to the decor for the last two or three decades. The people in the bar looked like regulars. Four old men sat together at a table looking up at a television on a wooden shelf near the entrance to the Gents. The colour was turned up almost as bright as the set in the hospital day room.

One of the men was dabbing at his lip with a greyish-looking handkerchief. The other two kept their eyes glued to the screen.

I ordered half a pint and sat on a stool by the bar. With any luck the landlady would start a conversation. With a great deal of luck I might find the answer to some of my questions.

'Live round here?' she asked. She was thin, tired looking and had made only a token attempt to wear an outfit in keeping with her job. A white silk blouse held together at the top by a blue glass brooch. A paisley patterned skirt that hung loosely over her thin angular hips.

'Quite near,' I said. 'Cliftonwood.'

She nodded. 'Traffic bad?'

I wasn't sure if she was talking about the traffic in Cliftonwood and Hotwells or the traffic in general.

'Quite bad,' I said. 'Could be worse.'

In a moment she was going to walk away, start tidying up, washing glasses.

I stared at the back of her head and she sensed it and turned to face me.

'I came up here looking for an evening class in picture framing,' I said.

She looked blank.

'Photography,' I added. 'Someone told me there was a place round here —'

'I wouldn't have thought it was the kind of —' She broke off, fiddling with the blue brooch, then looked at me carefully. 'Not a policewoman, are you? Don't look much like it but these days you never know.'

'No, I'm not.'

‘Just wondered.’ She paused, glancing at the four old men. ‘There’s a few of them come in here about nine thirty. No, not the police. A group of men, younger than that lot but not that young. Only see them on Saturday evenings. Talking and whispering. You can hear every word in a place this small. People don’t realize.’

I waited patiently.

‘Nothing to do with me but I think it’s disgusting. Photography they call it. Just an excuse to gawp at naked women.’

I nodded vigorously to indicate my whole-hearted agreement. ‘You don’t know where they come from, do you?’

‘Men like that — pathetic — most likely the only chance they get to stare at female parts.’

‘Yes, pathetic,’ I said, finishing my drink and sliding off the stool. Then I raised my hand, muttered something about how it had been nice talking to her, and left.

Doug at a mock photographic session goggling at naked women? Somehow I had a feeling the sessions were rather different from the kind of thing the landlady had in mind.

12

It was four days since Luke had disappeared. There was no word from Howard Fry, and nothing from Michael since the weekend. Most of Sunday I had spent asleep or lying in bed listening to the radio. The *Archers*, *Pick of the Week*, *The World at One* all rolled by, interspersed with thinking about Luke, Paula, Doug Hargreaves ... There were no phone calls, not even a silent one. Now I was back at the office.

Declan, one of my angriest clients, was scratching at the sole of his boot with a bunch of keys. He had nowhere else to direct his anger. His wife was perfect, his home was perfect, when the building society account reached a good round number it would be time for them to start a perfect family.

Earlier, while I was with my previous client, Brigid Jesty had phoned. She had left a message with Heather asking me not to ring back.

'She'll try again at twelve fifteen. I told her you should be free by then.'

'Thanks, I'll make sure I am. She didn't say what she wanted?'

Heather had shaken her head. 'I don't think it was urgent. Although, come to think of it, she did sound a bit upset.'

My thoughts returned to Declan. He had failed to notice that, for thirty seconds or so, I had stopped listening. In their self-obsession clients rarely noticed. Once, with toothache so excruciating that it seemed my jaw must be visibly throbbing, a client told me how

helpful I had been, adding, 'You're always so relaxed. I don't know how you do it.'

'It's only an idea, Declan,' I said cautiously, 'but perhaps everything in your life is a bit too perfect.'

He stared at me angrily but I refused to be put off.

'There's a theory,' I said, 'that we're genetically programmed to be problem-solving creatures. If there aren't any problems we create them.'

'Load of rubbish,' he muttered, but I could see he was interested. He had been referred by his GP because of a phobia about going up in the lift at the office block where he worked. Lifts, I had soon discovered, were the least of his worries.

'Like Hansel and Gretel she wants us to be,' he spat out. 'If she could arrange it she'd have us living in a gingerbread house, just like a bloody fairy-story.'

'And you want something rather different?'

He spread out his legs, nearly kicking me in the process. 'Anyway, there's nothing you can do about it.'

'Perhaps next time you come you could bring Wendy with you.'

He pushed up his sleeve in an exaggerated gesture and looked at his watch. 'If you insist. She'll come if I tell her you need her help. Always ready to help, she is, if it suits her. Just like all you bloody women.'

After he left I wrote up some notes then sat waiting for Brigid Jesty's call. It came through dead on a quarter past.

'Is that Anna McColl? This is Brigid Jesty, Luke's mother.'

'Mrs Jesty, how can I help?'

‘A policeman came round and told us Luke had disappeared. Peter couldn’t see what all the fuss was about but ... Well, I wanted to know how you felt about it. I assume he hasn’t been in touch.’

‘No, but I’m sure he’s all right. I expect he felt he needed some time on his own.’ I didn’t sound very convincing. How much did she know? Had whoever called at the White Cottage told them about the witness? I thought it unlikely.

There was a moment’s silence. I thought I heard her put the phone down on the table. Perhaps she was lighting a cigarette. When she spoke her voice sounded unnaturally cheerful.

‘So you’re not worried. The policeman said it was only a routine check — because of Luke having been in hospital. I was wondering. I’ve no idea where you live but if you were driving anywhere in this direction ... ’

‘You want me to come and see you.’

‘Would that be possible?’

‘Just after five?’

‘I beg your pardon? Oh, you can come today. Yes, five o’clock would be all right. I’ll see you then.’

*

On the way out of Bristol I started speculating about why Brigid Jesty wanted to see me. She had some information to pass on? She wanted some information from me? The visit to Keynsham had made me uneasy. Something didn’t add up. Why had Faith Gordon said it was easier for her, being single and unattached? What was easier? Michael had explained how she had moved to Keynsham when her cottage needed expensive repairs. Also, she wanted to be nearer to Bath, where she had several friends. Did she and Brigid Jesty still

see each other? Now and again, Michael was vague, and when I asked if there had been some kind of disagreement he said not as far as he knew, it was just that his mother stayed at home most of the time and Faith's car had packed up and she hadn't bothered to buy another.

The grass verges on the main road were yellow from lack of rain. I watched the driver of the car in front wind down his window and toss out a cigarette end. Supposing the lighted end blew back into my face. I could write down his registration number, sue him for grievous bodily harm. The cigarette fell harmlessly to the road but the adrenalin in my body remained, whipped up by a silly fantasy that had nothing to do with the man in the car in front. I needed an outlet for my frustration and anxiety. Wasn't I doing exactly the same as Luke? Except that Luke was incapable of expressing any negative emotion at all so the build-up inside his head led to imaginings far more violent than my own.

Brigid Jesty was waiting for me in the garden.

'How nice of you to come. I hope it wasn't too inconvenient.'

I had expected her to ask if there was any news of Luke. But it seemed to be the last thing on her mind.

'I wasn't sure what hours you worked,' she said. 'Not nine to five, I imagine. Do you have to see people in the evenings and at weekends? I expect it's the kind of job that's difficult to leave behind at the office.'

'Yes, it can be.' I followed her across the lawn. She was wearing flat Italian shoes, made of soft white leather, and this time she was dressed in trousers, loose-fitting ones in some soft pinkish-brown

material, and a pale shirt that hung in a straight line from shoulder to hip.

She turned round, shading her eyes from the sun.

'Would you prefer to sit in the house?'

'No, the garden's fine.'

'Can I get you some tea or a soft drink?'

'No, thanks.'

She sat down with her back to the tree. Her dark glasses lay on the table, along with a gardening magazine and a can of insect repellent.

'I don't know about you,' she said, 'but I get bitten to pieces. Peter says it's the same for everyone but some people have a stronger allergic reaction. Is that right, d'you suppose?'

'It sounds a reasonable explanation,' I said. How much longer would it be before she got round to telling me the point of my visit?

'Peter's a scientist.' Her voice was high pitched, brittle. 'Would like to have been. He comforts himself with his hobbies. Well, they're more than hobbies, almost like a second job.'

The metal chairs had round pink and blue cushions that matched the parasol. They were slightly too small and the edge was pressing into my leg.

'So,' she said, resting her fingers on the table and inspecting her nails, 'Michael's persuaded you to spend your Saturday searching for Luke.'

'It was what I wanted to do.'

'Of course.' She adjusted a silver ring with a small opaque stone that had slipped round her finger. 'Of course, we're very grateful for all your help ... ' I looked at her and a shudder ran down my back. Was she trying to warn me off? In all my efforts to find out where

Luke had gone, one possibility had never entered my mind — not until that moment. Had someone — his mother perhaps — known where he was all along? Worse. Did someone know he was already dead?

‘Of course, Michael has his business to run,’ she said. ‘He’s like Peter — a natural organizer — whereas Luke and I are dreamers.’

She sounded flippant, superficial. I wanted to shake her. Instead I asked if Michael had told her about our visit to Keynsham.

For a moment she seemed transfixed, then she came back to life with a small shake of the head.

‘No, no he didn’t. We only spoke to each other for a minute or two. He was in a hurry as usual.’ She stared at me, as though waiting for me to confirm that Michael never had enough time to spare for other people. ‘What did you think of Faith Gordon?’

‘She seemed very concerned about Luke.’

‘Really? She knew he was missing?’

‘Not until Michael told her.’

‘No, well I don’t know why he took you all the way to Keynsham. She’s an obstinate old woman, set in her ways, but I suppose we all end up like that.’

She glanced at me intimating that there was nothing more to say about Faith Gordon. Then she stood up, lifted a pair of secateurs off the grass and began snipping dead heads off one of the rose bushes.

Now that she had her back turned she could relax a little. After a short silence she tossed me a question in the kind of voice people use when they want you to believe the question itself is unimportant and they are simply making pleasant conversation.

'Has Luke told you much about his childhood?'

'Very little.'

She thought about this. 'So mostly you discussed what had been happening to him since he left Oxford.'

'Yes. It was difficult to get him talking.'

'I can imagine. His friend, Paula, what did you think of her?'

'His friend, Paula.' It was an odd way to describe someone who had been killed only nine days ago.

'I never met her,' I said.

'Really? I saw her once — in the antique market in Clifton Mall. Luke introduced us but we only exchanged a few words. She was married to an actor, you know. Carl Redfern, he does mostly TV, tends to get typecast as a bad lot.' She was gazing into the distance but not seeing anything. 'I don't think Paula was good for Luke,' she said slowly. 'She had problems of her own, I could tell, and of course she was years older. I don't know about you but I got the feeling she was making demands on him he couldn't possibly meet.'

'What kind of demands? Is that what Luke told you?'

'Not in so many words. I tried to talk to him but it only made things worse. Anyway, I just wanted you to know what a strain he was under. He couldn't take it. It was all too much.'

If I hadn't been watching her closely I would have missed the vein that started throbbing in her neck. What was she afraid of? Perhaps she thought Luke had killed Paula and she was sounding me out to see if I thought the same. She could be working out some far-fetched scheme that involved the two of us covering up for him. But somehow I got the impression she was less concerned about Luke's

welfare than she was about finding out what I knew about Paula. It was strange.

I was tired of talking to her back. I stood up and walked over to where she was attending to a deep pink rose, with a label that said its name was *Jacques Cartier*.

'When was the last time you saw Luke?' I asked.

'I forget. Three weeks ago. Longer.'

'Did you talk to him on the phone?'

'No, never. He didn't like the telephone. Nervous people don't. If you can't see someone's face they could be trying to deceive you in some way.'

'You said the police came to see you.'

'Sergeant something or other,' she said irritably. 'I forget his name. I gave him a photo, not a very good one, taken more than three years ago.'

'You haven't got another, have you?'

She stiffened. 'I don't know. I suppose so.'

'The reason I'm asking — Janos — he lives opposite me in the house where Luke once had a room — he's been having a look round, asking people who might have seen anyone answering Luke's description.'

It was a lie. I wanted the photo myself. I've no idea why. Maybe it was because I was having trouble remembering Luke's face. If someone had asked me to say how he looked my description would have been no use to anybody. Tall, thin, fair hair.

Brigid Jesty put the secateurs on the table and started walking towards the house.

‘Come inside, I’ve an album in my desk. There may be a snapshot that would do you.’

I followed her into the living-room and waited as she wrenched open the heavy bottom drawer of a large mahogany desk.

‘Luke’s done this before, you know,’ she said, ‘after he left Oxford.’

‘Disappeared?’

‘I wouldn’t put it that strongly. But we thought he was still at his college and the college assumed he’d come back home.’

‘Where was he?’

‘He never told us. I suppose he went to stay with friends, or to a hotel. Ah, here we are.’ She sat on one of the green sofas and placed two leather-bound albums in front of me. ‘The first one won’t be much use to you. Pictures of the children as babies.’ She pushed it aside. ‘But this one goes up to three or four years ago.’

Turning to the penultimate page, she pointed to a wedding photo in a white and silver mount.

‘Luke’s cousin,’ she explained. ‘She married a solicitor from Stratford-on-Avon.’

I leaned forward to get a better view. It was the usual family group. A bride in cream satin, a groom in morning dress. In front of them, sitting on the grass, a couple of page boys in blue velvet knee breeches pulled silly faces, a solitary bridesmaid looked as though she wanted to go home.

‘There’s Luke,’ said Brigid. ‘They always make him stand at the back because he’s so tall.’

‘Oh, yes.’ My eyes travelled along the row of over-dressed guests. ‘He looks different.’

'He was wearing a suit. You know how he hates dressing up. Michael's just the opposite. He couldn't go to the wedding. I forget why. He was up in London attending a meeting, I expect, something to do with his housing trust thing.'

She lifted up the album and shook it. Two photos fell out on the table. One of a little girl. The other of Luke, aged about fifteen.

'My daughter,' she said, pushing the first photo in my direction. 'She must have been five. That was her first school uniform.'

'She's sweet.' My hand shook a little. I was talking about her as though she was still alive.

'Yes.' Brigid showed no emotion. 'And this is Luke just before he went to university.'

So he was eighteen in the photo, not fifteen. I lifted it up to the light.

'Would it be all right if I borrowed this one? I'll make sure you have it back when Luke ...'

'If it'll be any help,' she said vaguely. 'You think I'm hard-hearted, don't you? Yes, you do, I can tell. Years ago I was on the stage. Actresses are supposed to be temperamental but in my case it taught me self-control. After all whatever else was happening in your life the show still had to go on.'

She looked at me but her face remained expressionless.

'Of course, I gave it all up when the children came along. It was what Peter wanted, a secure family life. That's what children need, isn't it? Do you have children?'

I shook my head.

'I had Michael when I was only twenty-one. In those days you didn't really plan your family, just waited to see what came along. Then after Michael nothing. I don't know why. Peter said I drank too much

coffee but the doctor said it was just one of those things. We'd more or less adjusted to having an only child, then along came Luke.'

'That must have been wonderful.'

'Yes.' She paused. 'I expected Michael to be jealous but he wasn't at all.' Her eyes widened. Beautiful, but oddly expressionless eyes. 'I suppose with five years between ... Luke cried all the time, especially during the evening, and Michael used to come downstairs bringing some of his toys for the baby. Peter said the crying was my fault. I wasn't firm enough.' She glanced at me. 'Oh, don't judge Peter too harshly. We're a good combination, we balance each other out.'

It was a strange way of describing their relationship but when the children were young perhaps they had been happy together.

'Peter says I was over-anxious when I was carrying Luke and it affected the foetus. That's why he's the way he is.'

'That's rubbish.'

'You know that for a fact, do you? Of course, Peter's a worrier too but in his case it means he's been extremely successful.'

She closed the photograph album. I wanted to see the baby book but it seemed like an intrusion to ask.

'It's a tragedy,' she said. 'Your children mean everything to you but to them you're just their boring old mother. Perhaps when they have children of their own ...'

I tried to picture her changing nappies, preparing bottles, measuring out small portions of sieved prunes and baby rice. It was difficult.

She sighed. 'You do your best — in my case that meant looking after children for over twenty years — then they're gone and you're

expected to make a life for yourself, take up new interests you never had time for, except you don't want any new interests. They all seem rather pointless.'

Her voice was cold, angry. I glanced at her, expecting her to tell me it would be better if I left. Suddenly she buried her face in her hands and her body heaved with sobs.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'Oh, it's not you.' She searched in her pocket for a tissue. 'I'm often like this.'

I wondered why she had wanted to see me. To let me know she cared about Luke? To cover herself in some way in case I thought she had been a bad mother?

I felt genuinely sorry for her, I really did. There was only a tiny part of me that wondered if she was making up for her lost career on the stage.

*

Quite late in the evening Michael phoned to ask if I was alone and, if so, could he call round.

'What's happened?'

'Nothing, I just wanted to see you.'

'I don't think that's a very good idea.'

He laughed. 'I was afraid you'd say that. What's the problem? You disapprove of mixing business with pleasure?'

'Something like that.'

'All right then, fair enough, but you won't get rid of me that easily. No news your end?'

'No, nothing.'

I heard him draw in breath then sigh deeply. 'By the way, that girl who went to the police, how much did they tell you about her?'

'Next to nothing. Why?'

'Oh, no reason, I just wondered why someone would do a thing like that.'

'Your mother,' I said, 'she doesn't know about the witness, does she?'

'Christ, no, you haven't — '

'No, of course not.'

'That's all right then.' And he rang off leaving me with a twinge of regret that he wasn't coming round.

13

My first client was not due until ten fifteen. I phoned Heather to say I had someone to see but would be in by ten at the latest.

‘Oh, by the way, Heather, how well d’you know the Hargreaves?’

‘Elaine and Doug?’ She was eating a sweet, or it might have been one of her indigestion tablets. ‘Hardly at all really.’ She spoke between chews. ‘Doug collects for Christian Aid, that’s how we met. They seem a very devoted couple.’

‘Yes. I just wondered. See you later.’

I picked up an old raincoat and left the flat. The sky was overcast but there was no likelihood of even a shower. I was wearing the raincoat as a kind of disguise, a protection. Against the travellers? What did it matter to them how I was dressed?

As I crossed the road that led up to the old railway bridge, I started rehearsing in my mind what I was going to ask. ‘D’you know a girl called Rhiannon? Rhiannon Pascoe. She’s about sixteen, quite small and thin.’ Was she small and thin? Howard Fry had said she seemed a bit pathetic, under-nourished, but he hadn’t actually described the way she looked.

On the wall of one of the empty warehouses down by the river someone had sprayed a new set of messages to the world. *Kill the Medics. Gimme a Job.* Stopping halfway across the bridge I leaned over the parapet to look at a pair of ducks. I noticed a man coming towards me, leading two dogs on lengths of rope. Filthy white trousers showed through the tears in his jeans. His denim jacket was

so encrusted with dirt that it stood stiffly away from his body. He walked straight past, shouting at one of the dogs. I turned right on to the path that led across the rough grass beneath the underpass. With every step I felt less like talking to the travellers. It was extremely unlikely that Rhiannon would be living with this particular group and in any case the last thing I wanted was to come face to face with her. A few words, however innocuous the conversation, could be construed by Howard Fry as trying to influence a witness. All I wanted was to find someone who knew her, or knew of her. I suppose I hoped to hear she was 'a bit of a nutcase', 'a born trouble-maker', anything that would convince me she had made up the story about Luke and Paula.

All the vans except one had their doors firmly closed. Just inside the open door a child, dressed in pale pink pyjamas, was sitting cross-legged, holding a doll with yellow hair and scarlet lips. I smiled at her and she stood up and disappeared back inside. A golden-brown lurcher that had been lying under the van crawled out, growling and wagging its tail. I put out my hand and it sniffed my fingers, then moved away as far as its tether would allow.

My visit had been a mistake. It was too early in the morning. One look at me and they would think I was some official come to check up on their benefits or hand them a court order telling them to move to another site.

A woman appeared, holding the child by the hand.

'Did you want something?' Her voice was quiet and she looked curious rather than hostile.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' I said, 'but I'm looking for someone called Rhiannon.'

'Rhiannon who?'

'Pascoe. Her other name's Pascoe.'

'Why d'you want her?'

'You know her then?'

The woman twisted her hair round her finger. 'What made you think she'd be living here? Friend of yours, is she?'

'Not exactly.'

She looked me up and down. 'Rhiannon don't live here. Don't know where she is these days. There was someone else after her a day or two ago. You a social worker?'

'No. This person, what did they look like?'

She thought for a moment, looking over my shoulder at the build up of traffic on Rownham Hill. 'Couldn't tell you,' she said, 'didn't look that closely.'

'Well, was it a man or a woman?'

But already she was disappearing back into the van, pulling the child in after her.

*

At ten past one Nick and I left the office and started walking to the pub. Martin was to join us later on. Nick chatted away as usual — about the hopelessness of being overworked and under-appreciated, starved of resources, forced to work in a run-down building which was enough to make the most optimistic person abandon hope, when the aim of our job was to make the clients feel better about the state of the world.

We were waiting to cross the road. A delivery van came round the corner much too fast and I pulled Nick back on to the pavement.

‘Anyway,’ he said, opening his large brown eyes as wide as possible to acknowledge the fact that he could have been flattened but here he still was, alive and well, ‘how are you? Tuesday lunch-time and you look like you’ve done a whole week’s work.’

‘I’m all right,’ I said.

‘Lived it up over the weekend?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither. I had to visit my mother and let her stuff me full of unwanted food while she made unsubtle hints about how nice it would be to have grandchildren. She knows I’m gay. I told her when I was nineteen but she prefers to live in a fantasy world.’

He gave me a hug. He was wearing grey jeans and a red and grey shirt. He felt warm, comforting.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Why is it you have such a soothing effect? Must be something to do with your metabolism.’

‘Like leaning against a cow? They say it’s better than a whole bottle of tranquillizers.’

I smiled.

‘That’s better,’ he said. ‘What is it — the Jesty boy? Old Stringer been giving you a hard time?’

‘No, he was really quite helpful.’

Nick raised his eyebrows. ‘Must have mellowed in his old age. So what’s the verdict?’

‘Luke was only in a few days. Once he’d given up the schizoid babble they decided to discharge him.’

‘And now?’

‘He’s disappeared.’

‘Disappeared? Sounds a bit dramatic.’

‘He was staying in my flat. His landlord wouldn’t have him back and I couldn’t think where else he could go. You won’t tell Martin.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’ He pulled open the door of the pub.

Coming in out of the bright sunlight made the place seem unnaturally dark. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust — and my ears to the loud beat of the music. Nick offered to buy the usual and I looked for a table as far away from the jukebox as possible.

On the wall above me a large poster advertised the forthcoming Balloon Festival. It was something I looked forward to. I would be able to see most of the balloons just by leaning out of my bedroom window, and if I wanted to watch them taking off I could walk over to the other side of the river, near where the travellers had parked.

‘Balloons,’ said Nick, placing the drinks on the table and sitting down opposite me. ‘Ever been up in one?’

‘No thanks, I’m terrified of heights.’

‘Me too, but if you drink enough champagne I dare say it dampens the fear.’

A man was standing at the bar. I might not have recognized him from the back of his head but when he spoke to the landlord I knew at once who it was. He turned round, still talking, then saw me and lifted an arm.

‘Oh God,’ I said. ‘I’ve just seen someone I know.’

‘A client?’

‘No. Well, not exactly. He’s an actor. Carl Redfern. He was in that series about a psychiatrist.’

I expected Carl to join us. He would ask if we minded. We would say, no, of course not. Then he would monopolize the conversation, telling jokes and anecdotes, and referring to us as ‘shrinks’ or ‘trick-

cyclists'. But I was wrong. He stayed leaning against the bar, glancing in our direction now and again but then I must have been watching him too or I wouldn't have noticed.

Then Martin came through the door. His eyes were shining and he was breathing hard. He could hardly wait to tell us how he had spent the morning with Social Services and how he and a woman called Fran had disputed the regulations about having clients admitted to psychiatric hospital.

'I was right all along,' he said, pulling his sweater over his head and tossing it on to a chair. 'The silly cow had to admit she was totally wrong.'

'That must have been gratifying,' I said. 'Getting the better of a woman always makes your day.'

He grinned. 'There's a friend of yours at the bar. Either that or he's a total stranger who just happens to fancy you like crazy.'

I explained all over again.

'Really?' said Martin. 'He doesn't look much like your average doctor but I suppose they can do wonders with make-up and wigs.'

'He played the senior consultant's husband,' I said. 'He wasn't a doctor.'

'Sorry! My mistake.' He walked over to the bar to order some food.

Nick announced that he had to make a phone call and asked if I had any change. I searched in my pockets and found a couple of coins. I knew what would happen next. As soon as Martin and Nick were out of earshot Carl strolled across and pulled up a chair from the neighbouring table.

'Look, this won't take more than a couple of minutes.'

'You can see me in my office if you like.'

‘No, there’s no need for that. You people aren’t easy to locate. I spent half the morning trying to find the right phone number, then bumped into you by chance in here.’

It seemed improbable. He just preferred to keep the encounter informal, play down the importance of what he wanted to say.

‘It’s about Paula,’ he said. ‘When I told you I never saw her it wasn’t strictly true. Only I thought after you came to the house, I expect your patient told you Paula and I meet now and again — used to. It’s just that if Liz found out God knows what’d happen. Christ, life’s so bloody impossible. I only wanted to make sure Paula was OK but of course Liz would never see it that way.’

‘I understand.’

‘Yes, of course you do. You see I felt so guilty — about me and Liz and the two of us getting together just at a time when the money had started rolling in.’

‘Paula resented that?’

‘Heavens, no, not the money. But the thing was, we’d lived in this God-awful hole off the Gloucester Road, then suddenly I had enough to put a fairly large deposit on the Coach House. It didn’t seem right.’

He paused, glancing at Martin still standing waiting for his sandwiches.

‘You must come across this kind of thing all the time,’ he said, opening a tin of tobacco and lifting out a packet of cigarette papers. ‘Anyway, another reason I wanted to see you, I was afraid you might’ve got the wrong idea. About me and Liz. Well, Liz really. The night of the accident we were in Bath — at the Theatre Royal. This new play — a pre-London tour — hopeless production but I suppose if they tightened up the second act — ’

He broke off, waiting for me to say something. I gave him my full attention but made no comment.

‘Anyway, you’re wondering what all this is about. I suppose I was worried in case you ... Anyway, it was an accident, wasn’t it. Poor old Paula, but she was never really happy. One of those restless insecure people, you know the type, must come across them all the time.’

He stood up. Now that he had provided Liz with an alibi he could light his cigarette. I watched him puff at it, trying to draw the flame against the tobacco.

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘there was something I wanted to ask you.’

He blinked several times. ‘Me? Really? Fire away.’

‘As far as you can remember did Paula have a blue and white sweater?’

He looked puzzled.

‘At the time of the accident she was wearing one of Luke’s sweaters,’ I said. ‘At least, I think it was his.’

‘Let me get this straight. What you’re saying is someone could have mistaken Paula for Luke. But that means ... ’ His face lit up, then he became aware that I had noticed his relief when he realized Luke might have been the intended victim. ‘No, as far as I know she never wore a blue and white sweater. What was it — stripes or a pattern?’

It seemed an odd question. ‘More of a pattern,’ I said. ‘The two colours almost merged.’

‘Sure. I know the type of thing. They sell them in that shop up Blackboys Hill.’ He began strolling back towards the bar.

I called after him. 'Presumably it's possible to check if people actually attend the theatre or if their seats remain empty.' He frowned, then a grin spread over his face. 'For a moment I thought you were serious. Anyway, nice to see you. Hope we bump into each other again some time.'

*

When I returned to the office Heather told me someone had phoned. Liz Cook. Had she got the name right?

'Cook?' I couldn't think of anyone I knew called Cook.

'Did she leave a number to call her back?'

Heather handed me a scrap of paper with a Bristol number and an office extension.

'Thanks.' I ran upstairs.

I got through to the switchboard, then waited some time while the extension number rang. Just as I was about to replace the receiver a brisk, efficient voice came on the line.

'Yes'

'Liz Cook?'

'Yes.' Suddenly the voice changed. 'Oh, sorry, is that — '

'Anna McColl.'

'Thanks for phoning back. Look, I wondered if we could meet.' She paused. 'This evening if possible. What about the Watershed at six o'clock?'

First Carl, now Liz. I was curious to meet her but disliked being steamrollered into falling in with her schedule.

'Sorry,' she said, 'is that difficult? It's just that — '

'Six would be all right. How shall I recognize you?'

‘Oh, I hadn’t thought. I’ll wait in the foyer. I’ll be carrying a black portfolio and I’m wearing a suit. Red and black check.’

*

Apart from the woman behind the ticket counter there were only two other people in the foyer. An elderly man — dressed in wide pin-stripe trousers, a linen jacket and a battered straw hat — and a woman.

I smiled at her and she held out her hand. ‘Thanks. I’m really grateful.’

Her telephone manner had done her an injustice. I had expected her to be aloof, but she was warm and friendly.

She looked rather as I had imagined she would. Slim, smartly dressed, with short dark hair and a thin, slightly bony face.

‘We’ll go up to the cafe, shall we?’ I said.

‘This won’t take long. It’s just — ’ She broke off, looking over her shoulder as though she thought someone might have followed her. ‘Carl doesn’t know I phoned. You won’t tell him, will you?’

I made a non-committal sound. It all depended on why she wanted to see me.

We ordered two fruit juices and chose a table by the window. Across the other side of the floating harbour one of the ferry boats was filling up with passengers. From where we were sitting the water looked cool and inviting. In reality it was grey and murky with large quantities of empty drinks cans and fast-food containers bobbing about in front of the bridge.

Liz Cook had no interest in the view.

‘Right,’ she said, ‘the reason I wanted to see you. Carl said your client was friendly with Paula and you wanted to find out more about

her. That's why you went to see him, isn't it?

'Yes, that's right,' I said cautiously.

'Only after you'd been — he didn't tell me straight away of course but I knew there was something on his mind.' She paused. 'Well, I suppose I'd better tell you the whole thing. To cut a long story short I kept asking what had happened and we had a huge row and he admitted he'd told you all about me and now he was afraid you'd think I'd killed Paula.'

'Is that what he said?' I sounded too matter of fact. She wanted me to express astonishment at such an absurd idea.

'It's all so crazy. He thought I hated her — just because he and Paula used to be married. He used to visit her, not that I minded, but I did mind him lying to me all the time.'

'You'd better start from the beginning,' I said.

'Yes, you're right. Well, first I need to tell you a bit about Carl. I've met other actors, some of them quite shy, but Carl's not like that. He has to be the centre of attention and he has to believe women find him irresistible.'

'Go on.'

'Right from the first weeks we were living together I knew he was still in touch with Paula. I suppose it was because he protested too much. Always talking about how extraordinary it was that you could be close to a person, then make a clean break and feel perfectly all right about it.'

'So you asked if he'd been to see her?'

'Oh, no, he'd never have admitted it. Sometimes I mentioned her name, suggested he must be worrying about her now she was on her own.'

'But he denied it.'

'Absolutely. It's not as though I'm a possessive kind of person. If someone wants to be with me that's fine. If not, I'd much prefer to be told straight out.'

I finished my pineapple juice. 'So Carl thinking of you as jealous is just a projection.'

She looked at me enquiringly.

'He projects on to you what he feels himself.'

'God, I suppose that's right.' She ran her finger round the top of her glass. 'There's something else. A policeman came round, just checking a few details about Paula. He didn't mention the business with the videos but ... Well, I know Carl told you about it. He said he'd talked too much, it was because you were such a good listener.'

I opened my mouth to say 'What videos?', then closed it again.

'You see he doesn't know I know about it. Paula told me.'

'You went to see Paula?'

She laughed nervously. 'I had to. He was keeping something from me and of course I assumed he and Paula were ... Sometimes when people split up they start to fancy each other again. Anyway, there was nothing like that. I could tell. But she seemed quite happy to talk and of course she thought Carl would have told me about being in prison.'

I picked up my empty glass. 'Yes, I see.' She frowned. 'He did tell you?'

It was no good bluffing my way through the rest of the conversation. 'No, actually he didn't.'

'Oh, God, now I've made everything even worse. Still, it's not as though you're the police. I mean, you're nothing to do with them, are

you?’

‘I’m a psychologist.’

‘Yes. Look, I’d better tell you about it. Eight or nine years ago, when Carl was living in London, he got involved in some deal, importing videos and selling them off cheap. It was idiotic. He’s not dishonest, just gullible, trusts people too much. The reason I’m telling you, he’s not like you think. He acts on impulse, then he worries himself sick imagining all kinds of ridiculous things.’

‘Paula told you all this — about the videos?’

‘Yes. Carl’s no idea I know about it. You won’t ... ’

I was thinking fast. What if the picture of Paula I had built up in my mind was entirely wrong? Perhaps she had never forgiven Carl for leaving her. She could have been blackmailing him, not so much for the money, but as a way of getting back at him. A television actor with a dubious past. It was just what the papers loved. If it all came out it could ruin his chances of finding more work.

Liz was watching me, trying to work out what I was thinking.

‘Of course Paula’s death was a terrible shock,’ she said, ‘but he won’t show it, not to me. I’ve done everything to encourage him to talk but he just says she should have been more careful.’

She stood up and smoothed down her skirt. ‘I’d better go or he’ll be sending out a search party. If I’m later than usual he starts picturing me in bed with my boss.’ She laughed but not because she found the situation funny. Her aim had been to protect herself and she had ended up giving away Carl’s guilty secret. If he had been in prison the police must know about it. But would they have checked to see if he was on file — just because his ex-wife had been killed in a road

accident? Did they realize that he might have a good reason for wanting to get rid of Paula once and for all?

It was only later, on my way home, that it occurred to me that Liz letting slip about Carl's prison record might be less of an error on her part than I had imagined. I should have gone to look for Howard Fry. The seven days I had allowed myself to investigate Luke's past had already increased to ten. Maybe I would extend it a little further, just until the end of the week. Then I would tell the police everything I knew. About Carl and Liz, Doug and Elaine, the Jesty family — and possibly even Faith Gordon.

14

‘I’m using this special method,’ said Janos, spreading a map of Bristol on the table and smoothing out the folds. ‘See, you hold the glass pendulum on a thread — like this.’

He leaned over the map, supporting his right arm with his left hand, keeping the arm as steady as possible.

‘Shh, in a moment. Watch!’

The pendulum started swinging, slowly at first, then faster. It moved in a diagonal from the top left-hand corner of the map towards the centre right. After a short time Janos placed it on the side of the table. Then he fetched a ruler and pencil and drew a line as near as he could make it to the diagonal.

‘Now, you hold it,’ he ordered, ‘only start at the bottom left.’

‘All right,’ I said, ‘if I must. You know what does it, Janos, it’s the movement of your body. We’re never completely still, especially if we hold out one of our limbs.’

He ignored my explanation. ‘Keep quite quiet. Concentrate. Close your eyes if you wish.’

I did as I was told. Already I could feel the pendulum begin to move. When I opened my eyes Janos had the ruler poised.

‘Now I draw another line and we see where the two lines bisect.’

‘Oldbury,’ I said. ‘So you think Luke’s hiding out at the power station.’

‘Somewhere in that direction. What we need now is a large-scale map of the Severn Estuary. That way I will be able to pinpoint more

accurately.'

'Not now, Janos.'

'Tomorrow then. You come back tomorrow.'

I nodded vaguely. 'It's kind of you to go to so much trouble.'

'But you think I'm a big fool. We shall see.'

He walked up the steps with me. One of the tenants had forgotten his key and was standing by the front door, emptying his pockets.

'Darren,' said Janos, 'meet our neighbour from across the road. Anna McColl, psychologist.'

Darren mumbled something inaudible. I put out my hand and he held it for the briefest time possible.

'He was in an assessment centre,' explained Janos as Darren disappeared inside the house. 'I keep an eye on him. He's not a bad boy really.'

Janos, Michael and I couldn't exclude myself. All bending over backwards to help the unstable, the unhappy and those with criminal tendencies. What about the people who pulled themselves together, tried to make a go of things, struggled on regardless? No one seemed to find them half as fascinating.

Back at the flat the phone was ringing. I lifted the receiver, praying it was Luke. I would have to think fast, devise a way of persuading him to talk.

It was Michael.

'Anna? I rang you before but there was no reply. Look, I've seen him. I'm sure it was Luke. He was sitting on one of those seats outside the art gallery.'

'Where? Why didn't you go after him?'

'I was on the opposite side of the water. By the time I got there he'd have disappeared. Anyway, I thought it might be worth the two of us having a look round. What d'you think?'

I paused. Was he speaking the truth or was it simply a way of luring me into spending the evening with him?

'All right,' I said. 'Where are you exactly?'

'The phone box near College Green.'

'I'll be with you in fifteen minutes.'

*

'It can't have been him,' I said. We were sitting in more or less the same spot where Michael thought he had seen Luke less than an hour ago. 'What was he wearing?'

Michael rubbed his neck and stared into the distance. 'Oh, just the usual T-shirt and jeans.'

We had circled the floating harbour, staying near the water as far as possible. Past the Industrial Museum, the steam engine, the SS *Great Britain*, then over the Swing Bridge and back along Hotwells Road, turning down Anchor Road and emerging on the quayside just below the window where Liz Cook and I had sat together earlier on.

Now we were back where we had started from, outside the Arnolfini Gallery. It was a warm evening and all the tables were full. A short distance away two streams of traffic were crossing Princestreet Bridge, one leaving Bristol, another on its way in, preparing to spend the evening in the pubs and clubs. Outside the entrance to the Arnolfini people were queuing up to see an American dance group that had been written up in the nationals as 'the greatest exponents of contemporary dance in the world.'

Michael jerked his head in the direction of the queue. 'Your kind of thing?'

'No.'

He laughed. 'You and me, we're quite alike in some ways.'

'Are we?'

'Oh, don't worry, in plenty of other ways we're completely different. You with all your degrees and qualifications.'

'What about them?'

'That's what people with higher education always say. They forget about the rest of us who had to leave school at sixteen and earn our own living.'

I decided to change the subject. 'Perhaps it's a mistake to keep searching for Luke. If he doesn't want to be found I suppose that's up to him.'

I didn't mean it. So far I had put off telling Michael about the violent fantasies. As he saw it I was looking for his brother out of the kindness of my heart, not because I wanted to reassure myself that Luke was innocent. Could Paula's death have been prevented if I had taken the fantasies more seriously? It was a fear I was unable to admit to anyone. Not Martin or Nick, not even Michael. Instead, I decided to tell him about Liz Cook.

'Carl Redfern's girlfriend phoned,' I said. 'We arranged to meet at the Watershed. That's why I was out the first time you phoned.'

'Carl Redfern? Oh, Paula's ex. What did she want?'

'To tell me about Carl and why he suspected she might have pushed Paula in front of the traffic.'

'You're joking.'

‘They both suspect each other. The first time I saw Carl he told me how careful Paula always was. I don’t think he could believe she’d have let herself be forced into the road.’

‘I doubt if she had that much choice.’

‘No, I suppose not. Anyway, this kind of thing always stirs up people’s secret fears. Carl told me Liz was insanely jealous of Paula. Then, later, realizing what I might think, he concocted some kind of alibi. A visit to the Theatre Royal on the evening of the accident.’

‘He’d made it up?’

‘I’ve no idea. Anyway, the reason Liz wanted to see me, she knew what Carl was thinking and — ’

‘She wanted to sound you out.’

I nodded. ‘Inadvertently, or perhaps it was intentional, she told me how Carl had been in prison a few years back. Something not too serious, illegal videos, but if the press got hold of it’

‘You mean, if Paula had been feeling vindictive ... Shouldn’t you tell the police?’

It wasn’t what I had wanted him to say. I wanted him to laugh about the paranoid reactions of the people on the fringes of what had happened to Paula. I wanted him to agree that their stories were best forgotten.

He was opening the copy of the evening paper he had been carrying under his arm, spreading it out on the table and turning the pages until he found the one he wanted.

‘You haven’t seen this, have you? The girl who went to the police seems to think they didn’t take her story seriously enough. She’s given an interview to some journalist. Look, there’s a picture.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Oh, don’t worry, there’s no mention of Luke. Read it. I didn’t want to upset you. I thought if we could find Luke ... ’

I pulled the paper towards me and held it down flat as the breeze from the harbour threatened to lift the page. Rhiannon Pascoe’s small, pale face stared out at me. It looked faintly familiar but there were so many more or less identical young girls wandering round Bristol in the uniform of torn jeans or shorts, denim jacket, four or five rings in each ear, hair in imitation dreadlocks.

Underneath the photo a few lines described how she was a New Age traveller who had witnessed a road accident and was helping the police with their enquiries. The rest of the page was taken up with an article about the travellers, together with comments from a couple of local councillors, one in favour of a policy of nonharassment, a second adamant that the travellers must be moved as far away as possible — to abandoned industrial estates on the edge of the city.

‘What d’you think?’ said Michael. ‘I’d say your inspector friend was right. She looks a bit of a case to me. Just wants someone to pay her some attention.’

‘But why would she make up a story like that?’

‘Who knows? You’re the psychologist. It must be a crime to invent evidence, isn’t it? If there’s any justice she’ll end up in court and it’ll serve her bloody well right.’

I was surprised at the degree of anger in his voice. Up to now he had seemed almost too tolerant of other people’s shortcomings. Luke’s attempt to pass himself off as schizophrenic, Doug’s attempted seduction.

‘Michael, did you know your mother used to meet Luke in a wine bar in Clifton Village?’

He was reading the newspaper. He kept his eyes fixed on the page but his whole body had tensed. Then he breathed out heavily and took hold of my hand, squeezing the fingers together until I flinched, letting out a small involuntary sound.

‘A wine bar in Clifton? Yes, I believe she did mention it.’

‘I saw your mother yesterday.’

‘Oh, yes.’ He didn’t seem particularly interested. ‘She came to your office, did she?’

‘No, she phoned, asked me to call round on the way home.’

‘Typical. She must have known perfectly well it would be miles out of your way. What did she want?’

‘I’m not sure. She lent me a photo of Luke.’

He frowned. ‘You should’ve said. We could have shown it to people. Someone might have recognized him.’

I took the photograph from my inside pocket and placed it on the table. He studied it for a moment, turning it over to see if there was a date on the back.

‘When was it taken?’

‘Before he went up to university. It’s not even a very good likeness.’

‘No, you’re right. By the way, did you tell her about our trip to Keynsham?’

‘Shouldn’t I have done?’

He smiled suddenly, folding up the newspaper and holding it in place with a glass ashtray. ‘I don’t see why not. What did she say?’

‘I can’t remember. Nothing.’

He stood up. ‘Another drink?’

‘No thanks. I’d better go home.’

‘In case there’s another silent call? I’ll drive you back.’

His car was parked near the cathedral. We strolled along the quayside, stepping over the ropes that kept the boats safely moored to the edge. A tramp was lying asleep on a bench. Beside him an empty bottle rolled backwards and forwards on the cobbles. The sickly smell of cider — and something else that had been added to it — rose from his body, dissuading anyone from going too close.

‘I’m quite happy to walk back to the flat,’ I said.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it. Walking down here from your place is one thing. Walking back up that hill’s quite another. The inhabitants of Cliftonwood must either keep extremely fit or ruin their respiratory systems for life.’

His mood had changed again, but I wasn’t surprised. I felt the same way myself. Depressed and anxious one minute, then the next convinced that Luke would turn up any day now and everything would be all right. The police would ask a few questions then file a report and take no further action.

Sighing deeply he climbed into the car and sat staring through the windscreen, forgetting to unlock the passenger door. I tapped on the window and he jumped slightly, then leaned across and flicked the lock.

‘Sorry, I’m feeling a bit edgy. I don’t know about you but this whole business is starting to get me down. I keep thinking — d’you suppose Luke could have had a thing about Paula and when she didn’t reciprocate ... ’

I felt sick. ‘How d’you mean?’

‘Luke can’t take rejection. That’s why he’s so wary of people. Well, I’m sure I don’t have to explain to someone like you. If he took a risk with Paula, then felt she’d let him down ... ’

‘Come on,’ I said, ‘we can’t sit here all evening. I’ll make you some coffee.’

‘Thanks.’ He was still staring straight ahead. ‘Incidentally, I keep meaning to ask, you’ve never been married, have you?’

‘Me? No. Why d’you ask?’

‘Lived with someone?’

‘Briefly. It didn’t work out.’

‘Licking your wounds? That makes two of us.’ His head was very close to mine and I noticed a deep scratch on the side of his neck, as though someone had drawn a sharp fingernail across his skin. He leaned across and fastened my seat belt. ‘Most fatal accidents take place within a mile of the victim’s house. Isn’t that what they say?’

When we reached the flat Pam came out of her front door, carrying a large brown envelope.

‘This was delivered for you, Anna, but it wouldn’t fit through your letter box.’

‘Oh. Thanks. D’you know who brought it?’

‘A man on a bicycle. He was out of breath, looked a funny colour. I offered him a glass of water but he wouldn’t stay, said he was in a hurry.’

‘Thanks, Pam. How’s Ernest?’

‘Oh, not so bad. Up and down. If you have a moment I know he’d like — ’

‘Yes, I haven’t forgotten. I’ve been rather busy but next weekend ...
,

Pam glanced at Michael. She was thinking that I didn't look busy at all. Returning from a pleasant evening out with my latest boyfriend. Having fun. Living it up.

Back in the flat I slumped into a chair and tore open the envelope. A note fell out. From Doug, as I had expected.

Dear Anna,

I thought you might like to see this. I promised it to Luke so when he turns up perhaps you could pass it on. The police came round but it was just a formality.

Yours sincerely, Doug.

I pulled out the eight by ten black and white photo and held it up to the light.

'Let's have a look.' Michael was behind my chair. His fingers brushed my shoulder. 'Who took that? Luke looks like a bloody male model.'

'At least he's dressed,' I said.

'How d'you know, it stops halfway down his chest. That guy with the darkroom, was it?'

I nodded. 'He wants me to give it to Luke when he turns up.'

'Why? I mean, why did he bring it round here?'

'Who knows. I imagine there's all kinds of complicated motivations. He wants me to see what a good photographer he is.'

'Hardly my idea of a good —'

'That's beside the point. And he wants to demonstrate how strongly he felt about Luke. I suppose he thinks it kind of rounds things off. This way I won't bother him or Elaine again.'

I stood up and pushed the photo into a drawer, then I started walking towards the kitchen. Michael followed and stood leaning

against the window frame, watching a battered Transit van squeeze between the row of parked cars.

‘Why did you choose this road to live in? There seems to be a fair amount of traffic.’

‘I liked the flat.’

‘Bristol’s full of flats.’

‘I like the road too,’ I said. ‘It’s near the city centre and the river but it hasn’t been all tarted up.’

‘Best of all possible worlds,’ he said flatly. He was staring at me. He looked tired, depressed. His hair was damp with sweat and there were tiny lines I had never noticed before, running down from his nose to the corners of his mouth.

‘Anna.’ He crossed the room and slid his hands under my arms, gently pushing me back against the wall with his chest.

I tensed, then let myself relax. It was the last thing I wanted to happen, but I needed the warmth of another human being. Someone who could understand what was going on in my head, someone who would stop me from feeling so alone. We were both exhausted, angry with Luke, upset about what had happened — now and in the past — about what might happen when Luke finally turned up.

‘Oh God, Anna.’ It was the groan of a beaten man rather than a lover but its effect on me was stronger than the most passionate declaration.

15

The day had gone badly. One client had missed his appointment and another had walked out on me. When the phone rang I jumped.

‘Inspector Fry,’ said Heather. ‘Your client’s gone, hasn’t she? Shall I put him through?’

I took a deep breath. ‘Yes, I suppose you’d better.’

‘Anna, Howard Fry speaking. Nothing urgent but I wanted a few words about Douglas Hargreaves.’

‘What about him?’

‘I’ve been chatting to Graham — he went to see the Hargreaves — and he was under the impression, only a feeling, that Hargreaves was hiding something.’

‘It’s just his manner, he always looks shifty.’

There was a short pause. ‘Yes, well, I expect you’re right but Graham wondered if Luke might have told Hargreaves about a friend he was hoping to visit, a place the rest of us don’t know about. You’ve heard nothing — ’

‘I’d have told you if there was any news.’

‘Of course. Are you still in touch with the Hargreaves?’

‘Yes and no. You mean you want me to go round?’

Was that what he meant or was he just fishing for information, letting me know he thought I was holding something back?

‘If you could. It might help. We’ve drawn a blank so far. Run out of ideas.’

‘You’re still looking for Luke, then?’

I wondered if he had seen Rhiannon Pascoe's picture in the evening paper. I ought to be telling him how Michael thought he had seen Luke outside the Arnolfini Gallery. But what good would it do? We had searched the area fairly comprehensively and, in any case, even if it had been Luke he could be miles away by now.

I came up with a compromise. 'I've a feeling he's still in Bristol,' I said.

'What makes you think that?'

'Oh, nothing in particular. Just a feeling.'

'You go in for ESP too, do you?'

He wasn't being sarcastic. On the contrary he was trying to make the call seem almost a social one.

*

Elaine answered the front door. She stood in the porch, her face as nearly expressionless as she could make it, waiting for me to explain the reason for my visit.

'Can I talk to you for a few minutes?'

She went back into the house, leaving the door ajar. I took this to mean I could come in if I must. The house smelled stuffy, as though all the windows had been kept closed for several days. I followed her down the passage and caught up with her in the kitchen where, just as I expected, she began filling the kettle.

'Tea?'

'No thank you but you have some if that's what you were ... ' My voice trailed away. There was something about her rounded shoulders, the back of her crumpled pink sweatshirt. She wasn't angry with me, she hadn't the energy.

Abandoning the kettle but leaving the tap dripping, she sat down heavily on the nearest chair. In front of her a family size bag of prawn-flavour crisps, half eaten, spilled out on to the table. An empty glass stood beside it. We looked at each other and her lips parted a little as though she was deciding whether or not to speak.

‘Sit down then,’ she said. ‘What is it you wanted to know?’

‘The police told you Luke’s gone missing?’

‘You blame us, I suppose.’

‘No, of course not. I just thought you might have a few ideas where he could have gone.’

She fiddled with the bag of crisps, then pushed it aside. ‘The police thought the same but we couldn’t help. He never said much, just about the shop, or if he’d been to the pictures with Paula. The last one he saw, I mean, the one before last, was about street gangs in Los Angeles. Drug dealers shooting each other, some of them still in their teens.’

‘Doesn’t sound Luke’s kind of thing.’

She shrugged. ‘Who knows. Maybe it was Paula’s choice.’

I let that pass.

‘Luke never mentioned his family? Or people he’d met at university?’

‘Once — he was in a funny mood at the time — he told me his father hated him. I didn’t take much notice. Children often talk like that.’

‘Luke’s not a child.’

‘I know that. I was thinking of his parents. I expect if you have children you always think of them that way, even when they’re middle-aged.’

'I wouldn't know about that,' I said.

She smiled. 'Me neither.'

On a shelf above her head was a teapot I had never noticed before in the shape of a country cottage: thatched roof, shuttered windows, roses round the door. I thought about Brigid Jesty, standing in the garden of the White Cottage snipping dead heads off *Jacques Cartier* and *Stanwell Perpetua*. Her life style was a million miles from that of Elaine Hargreaves but given the right questionnaires their 'depression' score would probably come out much the same.

Elaine turned her head to see what I was looking at.

'Present from Doug,' she said dully. 'Spout drips. Still I suppose it's the thought that counts.'

'Luke once had a job packing china,' I said.

'Packing china? When did he do that?'

'Before he took the overdose. It wasn't much of a job, only temporary, but I thought he might have met someone in the store.'

She thought about it for a moment. When she spoke she still sounded wretched but there was a slight edge to her voice.

'You'd know more about all that than I do. You get paid to listen to people. I just took in a lodger.'

When I said nothing, she looked away and cleared her throat noisily. 'Doug's at the health centre.'

'He's not well?'

'An insect bite. He thinks it's going septic.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. Nothing a dab of cream wouldn't have sorted out.' She stared at me. She was weighing up her feelings of resentment against her wish to talk to someone — anyone.

‘Doug and me,’ she said slowly, ‘we’ve been together almost thirty years.’

I opened my mouth to acknowledge this fact but she shook her head to indicate it had just been an opening statement.

‘We met on holiday, both on our own, sitting next to each other in the coach. All the rest were married couples. Scotland. A tour of the Highlands and Islands. Food and accommodation part of the package. Nothing to do but sit there, do as you were told. I felt sorry for Doug. So nervous, he was. Nothing to say for himself, but longing to pour out his soul.’

I nodded.

‘Later, when we were back in Bristol, it seemed funny just to say goodbye, not arrange anything. I can’t remember who took the initiative. I expect it was me. The pictures or a trip to Weston, although neither of us could stand crowds. It was one of the few things we had in common.’

She paused, picking up a crisp, then returning it to the bag. I was praying Doug would stay away until she finished her story.

‘Our marriage just sort of happened. He was thinking of buying a house and we started looking in shop windows, choosing furniture, curtains, all that kind of thing.’

She stood up, gave the tap a hard twist, then sat down again. ‘We married in the registry office. My sister was a witness. She died a year or two back. She was fifteen years older than me, divorced with a couple of grown-up boys.’ Her voice was flat, expressionless. ‘Anyway, that’s about it, except after we’d moved in here I realized it wasn’t going to be quite as I’d expected.’

‘What happened?’

‘That’s just it. Nothing happened. I thought at first he was too anxious. It was making him incapable, if you know what I mean. Patience itself, that’s what I was, but after a month or two I began to have my doubts.’ She paused for a moment, staring at her wedding ring, twisting it round. ‘Of course people didn’t talk about that kind of thing, not like they do now. Once I suggested a chat with the doctor but he went all red in the face, changed the subject.’

‘He knew what you meant?’

‘Oh, he knew all right, but as far as he was concerned there wasn’t a problem. He had his housekeeper. Everything in the garden was —

‘I’m sure that wasn’t how he ... He seems very attached to you.’

‘Attached? That’s exactly it. You’ve chosen just the right word there.’

She was staring through the window at the cloud of midges hovering above the ornamental pond. I looked away, following the pattern on the wall tiles through half-closed eyes and trying to imagine what it must have been like to live for nearly thirty years in an unconsummated marriage. The anger. The misery. No wonder she kept a good stock of junk food to stave off bad feelings.

She turned to face me. ‘I know what happened,’ she said. ‘You know too, don’t you? I suppose when Luke was in hospital he told you all about it.’

‘About what?’ I had no wish to be cruel. It was just that I had to be certain we were both talking about the same thing.

‘Don’t make me go into details. Doug and Luke. Oh, I don’t blame the lad. I knew what was going to happen before he did. You only had to look at Doug’s face.’

'You should have told me.'

She pushed her hair behind her ears. 'What good would that have done?'

'I could have found Luke somewhere else to live.'

'It's never happened before. I'm sure of it. As sure as I can be. When you brought Luke round that first time ... If I'd known —'

'How could you have done?'

I reached out a hand but she stood up, then bent down to pick up a spoon that had fallen under the table. When she straightened up there were tears in her eyes.

'I liked having him live with us. He was so considerate, so thoughtful.'

Doug was back. I heard the key in the front door, then Doug whistling through his teeth, wiping his shoes on the mat.

Elaine froze. 'Don't say anything.' She was squeezing my arm so hard that I was afraid it might leave a bruise.

Doug came into the kitchen. When he saw me his tongue flicked out and brushed his upper lip.

'Anna! What a nice surprise. How are you? Any news of the boy?'

'Not yet.'

'Shame, but I'm sure he won't come to any harm. Put it this way, he's more resourceful than some people realize, that's what I used to say, didn't I, dear?' The evening paper lay on top of the fridge-freezer. I wondered if they had seen the photo of Rhiannon Pascoe in yesterday's edition. Even if they had, they would never have connected it with Paula's death.

The three of us sat in uneasy silence for what seemed a long time but was probably less than a minute. Elaine spoke first and her

words were evenly spaced, deadpan.

‘What did the doctor say?’

Doug jumped. ‘Dr Thornton? Wasn’t on duty. I had to see a trainee, no use at all.’

‘He told you there was nothing to worry about?’

‘Something like that, but the receptionist, that one with the blonde hair, she agreed it was always best to be on the safe side.’

‘That’s all right then.’

The nervous tic had returned to the corner of Doug’s eye. He put up a hand to try and stop it.

‘I believe Detective Sergeant Whittle came to see you,’ I said.

‘Whittle? Yes, that could’ve been the name.’

Elaine spoke slowly. Both her hands were clasping her neck as though it was an effort keeping her head up straight.

‘Doug doesn’t like the police, do you?’

‘Why d’you say that? Only doing their job.’

For a few moments we sat in silence.

Then I tried again. ‘Sergeant Whittle thought you might have a few ideas where Luke could have gone,’ I said, ‘but you didn’t want to say in case he wanted to be left in peace.’

Doug licked his lips, then spoke with an effort as though there was very little air in his lungs.

‘The lad hasn’t done anything wrong. Just finds it hard to make a go of things. Put it in a nutshell, he wants a week or two on his own, time to sort things out in his mind.’

I stared at him. He would have liked it if Luke had confided in him but in reality I doubted if he knew any more than the rest of us.

He turned to face me and just for a moment I could see what he was going to look like when he was old.

‘Forgot to tell you, Anna,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Several job opportunities in the pipeline. One with a car hire place although I’ve a feeling they might want a younger man. Don’t have to pay so much. You know how it is. And another in security.’

‘Caretaker,’ said Elaine. ‘Anna doesn’t want to hear about that now.’

He flinched. I felt sorry for him. ‘Something will turn up sooner or later,’ I said.

‘I doubt it.’ Elaine put a crisp in her mouth and crunched it between her teeth. ‘Wendy, she’s one of the other supervisors, she says the government wants the young people to get the jobs.’

‘She would!’ shouted Doug. ‘Wendy says this, Wendy says — ’

‘Anyway,’ I interrupted, ‘I must go. Oh, just before I leave. I expect the police told you, didn’t they? When Paula was killed she was wearing Luke’s blue and white sweater.’

‘Really?’ Doug leaned against the wall. ‘Of course they were about the same size. Same height, give or take an inch, same fair hair.’

Elaine rested her chin on her hands. ‘What Anna means is if the accident wasn’t an accident someone could have thought Paula was Luke.’

I turned to look at Doug. His body was shaking so much that he was having difficulty standing up.

‘Of course it was an accident,’ he muttered. ‘Who said it wasn’t an accident?’

Elaine spoke slowly, quietly. ‘You were out at your framing class at the time, weren’t you.’

‘What? When? Yes, the class. Afterwards we went to the pub. Just a quick one. Maybe two. People like to buy their round. You have to let them or ... I was back here — what time was it? You’d been watching the television, that programme about the people who — ’

‘I wouldn’t hurt Luke, Doug, you know that.’

‘What? Hurt Luke? Why would anyone want to hurt the lad?’ He slid to the floor. I noticed that his glasses had been repaired with sticky tape that was starting to unravel. The seam of his trousers just below the pocket had come unstitched. White underpants showed through the gap.

‘Up you get,’ said Elaine, taking hold of both his arms and yanking him to his feet. ‘You wouldn’t harm the boy and neither would I. We both know that and so does Anna.’

She glared at me, daring me to insinuate otherwise, even by the smallest change of expression.

Doug sat down, pulling his chair close to the table and resting his head on his hands.

‘Well,’ said Elaine, ‘what we ought to do now is have everything out in the open. That’s right, isn’t it, Anna, that’s what you’re supposed to do. But we won’t. Not today. Probably not ever. It’ll fester, won’t it, Anna. Fester away like it’s always done. But the way I see it, some things are best left festering.’

She started laughing, then moved towards the sink and switched on both taps. Her shoulders moved up and down in short, jerky spasms. I couldn’t see her face.

*

I was watching the news when the phone rang.

‘Anna, it’s me again.’

'Howard?' I tried to sound relaxed, unconcerned that he was phoning so late in the evening.

'Rhiannon Pascoe, the witness who came forward.' He paused. 'Is there anyone with you?'

'No. Why?'

'She was found by a small boy riding his bike near the allotments. There's a tunnel where the old railway line used to run. I expect you know it, can't be more than fifteen minutes from where you live. She'd been dead about an hour.'

16

I was with Heather in Reception when a phone call came through. I hoped it was Michael. I had tried to get through to him the previous evening and several times this morning, but without any luck. It wasn't Michael and whoever it was her voice was blasting my ear drum.

'Thank Heavens. They keep your office a secret, do they, in case you're overrun with all those poor wretched people who can't take responsibility for their own lives.'

I moved the receiver a couple of inches away from my ear. 'Miss Gordon?'

'Am I interrupting your work? Are you in the middle of sorting out somebody's problems?'

'No.'

'If you were I don't suppose they'd have put me through. The reason I'm ringing. Luke. I'm worried about him.'

'We all are.'

'How much have you been told? Are you still there? You know Luke well, do you? He's told you what happened?'

I wished I was up in my room but it was too late to have the call switched through.

'You mean about his sister?'

'No, I don't mean ...' Her voice softened a little. 'That was terrible, heartbreaking, but it was an accident. What happened later — that was a tragedy.'

'Later?'

'Michael hasn't told you. No, I suppose not. Yes, I see. The thing is I've been thinking ... ' She hesitated, then cleared her throat and tried again. 'I was worried. I ... You're a psychologist.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Used to dealing with disturbed people, people who ... ' Her voice trailed away. 'Anyway, you must talk to Michael, ask him to explain. Oh and Anna?'

'Yes.'

'Be careful.'

I wanted to ask why she was phoning me, not Michael. I wanted to ask why she had contacted me today, six days after the visit to Keynsham. But the line had gone dead and it would be no use trying to phone back. She had said as much as she was prepared to say.

'Problems?' Heather was sitting on her desk, peeling a banana. She had watched some of the top players at Wimbledon eating bananas between games and was convinced they would give her more energy.

'I don't know,' I said. 'If she rings again make sure you put it through even if I've got a client with me.'

'It's that important?'

'Yes.'

Back in my room I sat down and closed my eyes. What could have happened that was worse than Diana's death? It was almost impossible to imagine. Perhaps Faith Gordon had a strange notion of what constituted a tragedy. At school they had told us that your mother falling off a cliff was an accident but the fate of King Lear was a tragedy. It was a definition I had never been able to accept.

Outside, the drilling seemed to have moved closer. I stood up and crossed to the window. Something was being unloaded from a truck that had blocked off most of the road. The driver was leaning out of his cab, offering a cigarette to another man who was laughing and pulling silly faces. I wished I had an outdoor job, something physical, clear-cut, where someone told you what to do and you did it. I needed to talk to Michael.

*

Later, as I was about to go home, Howard Fry phoned.

‘Anna? We won’t be absolutely certain until after the postmortem but it appears Rhiannon Pascoe died from inhaling lighter fuel.’

‘Lighter fuel,’ I repeated stupidly.

‘Sprayed directly into the mouth it can cause sudden death from vagal stimulation by the freezing gas. Anyway I thought you’d like to know.’

‘Yes. Thanks.’

It was obvious that he expected me to be heartily relieved. Why? Because the means of her death added credibility to his belief that the poor girl had been an unreliable witness?

He cleared his throat. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve had time to visit the Hargreaves.’

‘I saw them yesterday but they’ve no idea where Luke could have gone.’

He paused. ‘Just one more question.’

‘Yes.’

The pulse in my neck was starting to throb.

‘Carl Redfern, Paula Redfern’s ex-husband, I believe you two have met. Can you tell me — at the time of the accident — were he and

Paula in touch with each other?’

‘They used to see each other occasionally but not recently — as far as I know.’

‘He’s made a statement but I thought there might be something you could add.’ I made a decision. ‘Look, I’m not sure what’s going on in your head. I mean, I know you’ve been trying to find Luke, but the accident ... After the witness came forward ... ’

‘I keep an open mind, Anna, but there are one or two things that don’t tie up.’

I wanted to ask what things, but he would have come up with some ambiguous answer and I would have been none the wiser.

‘Right then,’ he said, ‘I expect you’re waiting to go home. I’ll let you know the result of the full post-mortem.’ Bye for now.’

On the way back to the flat I took a route that passed close to the Coach House. Howard Fry had made me nervous, and also rather angry. He was using me to try and extract information from people connected with Luke but he wasn’t prepared to tell me what he wanted to know. The police don’t search for adult missing persons unless they believe they are a danger to themselves or other people. In Fry’s mind, which of these categories did Luke fall into?

I turned in to Carl Redfern’s road and pulled up fifty yards from his house. It was just after six. Most likely Liz would be home from work. If not, Carl would be pacing up and down, imagining her out drinking with her colleagues — or worse.

How had Liz found out about my visit to the Coach House? I pictured Carl telling her a bit more, then a bit more, trying to gain her reassurance but without ever voicing his real anxieties.

I wondered if the two of them had seen the story about Rhiannon Pascoe? But even if they had they would never have connected it with Paula's death. Perhaps Rhiannon and Paula had known each other. Carl had said Paula liked helping lame dogs and by the sound of it Rhiannon had needed all the help she could get. Might Paula even have told her about Carl's spell in prison? My imagination was running riot. It was time for a show-down with Carl and Liz, not to extract information for Howard Fry, but for my own peace of mind and because it just might lead me to Luke.

Liz answered the door. She was wearing a grey sweater that matched her eyes and black trousers. When she saw me she let out a small involuntary cry. Then she spoke in a whisper.

'Have you come to see Carl?'

'Both of you,' I said, 'if that's possible.'

'Oh.' She hovered in the hallway and for a moment I thought she was going to close the door in my face. Then Carl called out: 'Who is it?'

Liz sighed. 'You'd better come in.'

I followed her into the living-room. There was no sign of Carl but the French windows that led out to the conservatory were open and I could see bare feet sticking out from behind a large monstera plant.

Liz walked over to speak to him and I waited, straining my ears to try and catch a few words here and there. A hastily arranged agreement about who would say what? The finishing touches to a cover story they had worked out between them several days ago?

They came back into the room together. Carl held out his hand. He was dressed in white trousers, rolled up almost to the knee, and yet another eye-catching T-shirt, this time featuring the cast of *Star Trek*

//. His face looked less distinguished than the last time I had seen him, but maybe I was habituating to the perfectly proportioned features, the thick grey hair and clear blue eyes.

‘I gather you two have already met,’ he said. ‘Liz didn’t tell me before but it seems there’s a fair bit she keeps to herself.’

‘That’s not true.’ She was standing by the mantelpiece, holding a pink alabaster egg in her hand, rolling it round and round, then pressing it against her cheek.

‘I’ve no wish to make trouble between the two of you,’ I said. ‘Just the opposite.’ I sat down, hoping they would follow suit. ‘The accident — Paula’s death — must have made things difficult.’

Carl stopped rolling a cigarette. ‘Difficult? Paula’s been crushed to death and you’re worried in case it’s made things difficult for us.’

Put like that, he had a point. I had come to see them because one or other or both of them might be responsible for a murder, and here I was, talking as though I thought they were in need of some marital therapy.

Liz replaced the egg on the mantelpiece and sat down, glancing over her shoulder at Carl.

She laughed nervously. ‘Let’s find out what she wants to know, darling.’ She turned to face me. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what to call you.’

‘Anna,’ I said. ‘Look, the reason I’m here, I thought you might be able to help. A witness came forward and said she’d seen Paula and her friend arguing — just before the accident.’

‘The friend was your patient?’ Carl was sitting on the arm of a chair. The relief in his voice was impossible to disguise. ‘I knew it wasn’t an

accident. Paula was always so cautious. She thought people ought to be prosecuted for jay-walking.'

'The police haven't taken the witness's statement very seriously,' I said. 'She seems to have been a rather disturbed girl with a history of —'

'That doesn't mean her story should be ignored.' His cigarette had gone out. He flicked his lighter several times and managed to produce a tiny, flickering flame. 'Who is she anyway, what's her name?'

'She's dead,' I said flatly.

'Dead? When? What happened?'

'They haven't completed the post-mortem but it was almost certainly accidental.'

Carl sat up straight. 'Another road accident?'

'No.'

He slumped down in the chair, inhaling smoke and holding it in his lungs for several seconds. Then he started speaking, talking as though he was playing a part in a play.

'I might as well tell you. Liz thought I killed Paula.'

Liz snorted. 'You mean you thought I did it. Yes, you did. You thought I was so insanely jealous I'd do anything to get rid of her. That's how you'd like it to be, isn't it?'

'Don't be so ridiculous.' He looked older. I noticed the deep lines on the side of his neck, the beginnings of a double chin.

Once started Liz was in full flow. 'Most men — men with weak egos — like nothing better than to have at least two women fighting over them. I'm not jealous, never have been, you're the one who questions me all the time. Where have I been? Who have I spoken

to? Who did I have lunch with? Why am I back from work five minutes later than usual, as though I had the kind of job where I can just clock off at half-past five.'

Her face was flushed and her right hand was squeezing the fingers of her left. She sat down with both hands tucked under her legs and tried to calm herself.

Carl laughed, but there was no sign of amusement in the sound. 'What rubbish. You wouldn't let me mention Paula's name. I worried about her, felt responsible.'

'Why? She was far better off without you. But you couldn't leave well alone. You had to keep interfering, making sure you still had her dangling on a string. Except it was all an illusion, all in your head.'

Carl froze. 'You and Paula, you've —'

'The first time I met her was by accident, in the book shop in Whiteladies Road. She knew who I was, don't tell me how, and she came up and introduced herself. The second time we arranged to meet — in a pub on St Michael's Hill.'

'I see.' He didn't ask what the meetings were about. He was trying to preserve his dignity. He stood up and went to stand near the French windows. Neither Liz nor I could see his face.

Liz spoke so quietly that I could only just follow what she was saying.

'Paula told me about the trial, the videos, your time in prison. How could you lie to me about something so important? I thought we trusted each other.'

'I didn't lie to you,' said Carl wearily. 'I just didn't see the point of raking up events that happened over ten years ago.' He stood up,

relit his cigarette and sat down next to Liz on the four-seater sofa. 'I presume you've told Anna about it.'

'I was afraid Paula might be blackmailing you.'

'How d'you know she wasn't?'

She put her hand on his thigh. 'She wasn't, though, was she?'

'Of course not.'

He was telling the truth. I was almost certain. He leaned towards me, looking pale and exhausted.

'You don't smoke, do you?'

I shook my head. 'Not any more.'

'These can't do you much harm.' He indicated the thin roll-up between his finger and thumb. 'It's a ritual. The papers, tobacco, lighter. Something to do with your hands.'

'I know,' I said, 'that's what I miss the most.'

He smiled. He was an actor again, giving a polished performance. This time it was 'the confession': a painful performance but more in sorrow than in anger.

'When I first got myself involved in the video business I thought it was legit, above board. Not that I asked too many questions. I needed the money, don't we all. You've seen that blurb that comes on between the trailers and the main attraction. 'Video piracy is a crime. When in doubt telephone the federation against ... ' Anyway, a friend of a friend had this cousin who imported videos from the Far East and it was just a question of finding outlets. My part in it meant phoning round, collecting the money. To cut a long story short I got three months.'

'That must've been rough,' I said.

'Bloody murder. But the point is if the press got hold of it ... '

Liz kissed him on the mouth. 'I don't think anyone would be that interested, do you, Anna? A small paragraph in the local paper and —'

'The nationals would jump at it,' said Carl fiercely. 'Television star in video fraud. The fact that it all happened years ago wouldn't put them off in the slightest.'

Liz and I exchanged glances. From Carl's point of view not having his story written up in the newspaper might be marginally worse than having it splashed across the inside pages.

'So,' said Liz, 'you kept in touch with Paula to make sure she didn't become vindictive and start telling people about your past.'

He looked puzzled, then he gave her a hug. 'Stupid, wasn't it? Poor old Paula, I doubt if the idea ever entered her head.'

'Just one thing,' I said. 'You made up that story about going to the Theatre Royal, did you?'

Neither knew if the other was going to keep up the pretence. Liz spoke first.

'I was out at a reception, didn't get back till quite late. I told Carl I'd been with a girl friend. He hates me going to anything social, even when it's part of my work.'

'What nonsense!'

She pulled a face at him. 'You checked up with Judith, I know you did. Tricked her into giving me away, then drew your own conclusions.'

'Sorry, love.'

'I should think so.' She drew him towards her and he rested his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes.

'You'll go off me,' he said, 'I know you will.' He opened one eye to make sure I was listening. 'When we met I was a highly successful actor. Now ... '

Liz gave him a push. 'Oh, don't start feeling all sorry for yourself. You've two jobs lined up and these days that's two more than most actors.'

He managed to produce a convincingly woebegone expression. 'Dubbing a Polish film and wasting my talents on a reconstruction for a docudrama about people saved from a sticky end in the nick of time.'

Liz grinned at me. 'He'll love it,' she said. 'He's playing a bloke whose truck gets stuck halfway over a cliff. Sweat pouring, terror written all over his face and maybe, when it's all over, even a few discreet tears.'

Carl picked up a cushion and pretended to whack her over the head. I stood up, ready to leave.

'Crazy, isn't it,' said Carl, 'how one lie leads to another. Not worth it, much better to discuss things openly, sort out any problems before they start taking on a life of their own. Mutual trust, that's what it's all about, that's how it's going to be from now on.'

I started moving towards the door. 'Sorry to disturb your evening, but this business has stirred up so much trouble.'

They both sprang up together and Carl put his hand on my shoulder. 'Not at all, we're very grateful. Why not stay and have a drink. Help us to celebrate.'

Celebrate? It was an odd word to choose.

'Your client?' said Liz. 'Is there any news?'

I shook my head. 'Right, well, I'd better go.' I was standing by the photo of the Balloon Festival I had noticed during my last visit to the house.

Carl joined me. 'Liz's company made a promotional video. Oh, I told you before. The balloon that's just about to take off is shaped like a can of dog food. Well, you can see that, I expect. Meaty chunks floating over Bristol and across towards the Cotswolds. Wonderful advertising. Makes sure the brand name stays with you for life.'

He carried on talking, filling in details, describing how unorthodox-shaped balloons needed exactly the right weather conditions. I wasn't listening. I had spotted a familiar figure, standing in the crowd, holding an ice-cream cone in his hand. It was Michael, dressed in a lightweight suit and a dark blue shirt. His free arm was wrapped round a small thin girl with a pale pixie-like face. It was Rhiannon Pascoe.

Janos was sweeping the pavement in front of his house. When I parked my car he crossed the road and asked if there was any news. I shook my head and he sighed, leaning his broom against the wall and putting his hands on my shoulders.

‘Anything I can do, Anna, anything at all.’

‘Yes, I know. Thanks.’

I wanted to tell him everything. How I had just returned from Liz and Carl’s house, how I had seen a photo of last year’s Balloon Festival with Michael standing in the crowd and next to him ...

But not yet. First I needed time to think.

Back in the flat I shook out the duvet and lay on my bed staring at my face in the long mirror on the wardrobe door. Now that I was home I wasn’t even certain that the girl in the photo had been Rhiannon Pascoe. The newspaper photograph had been blurred and looked as though it had been touched up where the features were indistinct. The city was home to hundreds of pale, undernourished teenagers — although the dogs that often accompanied them appeared lively and well fed. Dogs. Puppies. The girl standing in the lay-by the time I went to visit Brigid Jesty. The puppy tucked under her jacket had caught my eye but I had noticed the girl too, her face with its pale skin and pointed features. Why had I failed to connect the picture in the evening paper with the girl in the lay-by? But were they really the same? And the girl at the Balloon Festival? That must have been someone who looked like Rhiannon but ...

I rolled over on my stomach. When the doorbell rang I knew at once who it was going to be.

*

‘So,’ said Michael, ‘you called in on Carl Redfern and his woman and they told you all their marital problems. There’s something about you, people can’t resist telling you their life history.’

He sat next to me on the bed while I put on my shoes. Since letting him into the flat I had made a huge effort to appear natural, unconcerned, pleased to see him. I had even responded warmly when he kissed me on the mouth although I was almost certain he had sensed the tension in my body.

Perhaps he had put it down to excitement, pleasure in his company. The dreadful part was that the physical attraction was still there, if anything it had increased. Fear, conflict, sexual arousal — were they all interlinked?

I stood up and went to fetch a glass of water. I felt like someone who has decided to plunge into a freezing pool but in order to work up the courage walks a few paces from the edge, then returns and jumps.

Michael had followed me into the kitchen.

I turned away but watched him out of the corner of my eye. ‘You know the witness who went to the police?’

‘What about her?’

‘She’s dead.’

‘She can’t be.’

I rinsed out the glass. ‘She died from inhaling lighter fuel.’

‘Oh God, no. What a waste. They’re sure that’s what happened?’

‘Her body was discovered yesterday. I tried to phone you but — ’

'Sorry about that. I tried to ring you too but I kept getting the engaged signal.' I wanted him to leave. But another part of me had to know the truth. There could be a simple explanation. He had met Rhiannon briefly but never even known her name. The photo had been taken nearly a year ago. He had forgotten all about it. Or perhaps she was one of the homeless teenagers his housing trust had tried to help. He must have met dozens of similar girls. How could he be expected to remember them all?

He was staring at me. His teeth moved up and down, pressing into his lower lip; the rest of his face was perfectly still. Suddenly it broke into a smile.

'Go on then, say what's on your mind.'

'Did you know Rhiannon Pascoe?'

'She was a traveller, wasn't she? I've met one or two of them. I never remember the names. Some of them get fed up with the life, want to find some permanent accommodation.' He moved towards me. 'Listen, I think I know where Luke is.'

'What?'

'Stupid. I should've thought of it ages ago.'

'Where?'

'Not far.' He took me by the arm. 'We'll go in your car, shall we, then I can concentrate on the route.'

We were standing just inside the front door.

'Just tell me where he is.'

He smiled to himself. 'A place we used to go when we were kids. Of course I could be quite wrong, if you'd rather stay here.'

'I'll come.'

Down in the street there was no sign of Ernest or Pam. Janos had returned to his basement.

Michael walked round the car and waited for me to unlock his door. There was still time to change my mind. I could jump out of the car and run back to the flat, slamming the door behind me.

Then what? Phone Howard Fry and tell him I'd seen a photo with two people in it who looked like Michael and Rhiannon Pascoe? By the time they had made a few checks Michael would have left hours ago and be on his way to find Luke.

I flicked the lock and pushed open the passenger door.

'Avonmouth,' he said, climbing in beside me and humming to himself. 'Fork left just before the fly-over. Sorry, you must have done it dozens of times.'

'We're going to the docks?' My mouth felt dry and there were pains running up the back of my head. I negotiated the steep hill down to the main road, waited for a break in the traffic then moved into the right hand lane.

Michael was enjoying himself, exhilarated.

'Crazy, isn't it,' he said, 'you rack your brains and all the time the most likely solution to the problem's staring you in the face.' He moved closer, twisting himself round till he could see my face. 'Hey, don't look so worried. Nothing's as bad as it seems. When I've explained you'll understand everything, I know you will.'

We were passing beneath the Suspension Bridge. The tide was high and a small motor launch was coming up the river. I caught a glimpse of a black and white sheepdog running backwards and forwards on the deck.

'I saw a photo,' I said.

'Oh, yes?'

'At Carl Redfern's house. Last year's Balloon Festival. Liz Cook was involved with a company that sponsored a balloon.'

'Really?'

'In the shape of a tin of pet food.'

He laughed. 'So. You decided to play the amateur detective and now you've had a chat with your inspector friend.'

'No.' It was an involuntary response. I should have said 'Yes' and let him think the police were tailing us along the Gorge.

'Why not?' He touched my face, then ran his finger down my throat. I shivered. 'You think I killed Rhiannon, don't you.'

'She died from inhaling lighter fuel.'

'Oh yes, so she did.'

I glanced at him, then back at the road. In front of us a truck of frozen meat jolted to a halt as it reached the queue of traffic waiting for the lights to turn green.

'Luke killed Diana,' said Michael.

'Don't be crazy. It was an accident. The dog ran — '

'Diana was only twelve. Luke was fifteen. If anyone was going to save the wretched dog ... '

'So you don't mean he killed her. What you mean — '

He pushed in the cigarette lighter. 'The dog was OK, who's to know it even ran into the road?'

'Luke wouldn't — '

'All right, it was an accident, but after I'd worked on Luke over the years he wasn't even sure himself what had happened. Luke's very susceptible, you know that, or you ought to except the stupid kid's an invention in your head. One of your precious clients. And of course

he has the looks to go with it. Christopher Robin, that's what we used to call him.'

He started singing in a child's high-pitched voice.

'If I open my fingers a little bit more I can see nanny's dressing-gown on the door. It's a beautiful blue but it hasn't a hood. Oh God bless nanny and —'

'Faith Gordon phoned,' I said. Anything to make him stop singing. I was shivering uncontrollably now and my hands felt clammy on the steering-wheel. I felt sick, dizzy, like the start of a migraine.

'Really?' said Michael. 'Did she tell all?'

The cigarette lighter clicked back into place. My shoulders jerked. I forced myself to turn and look at his face. 'She said you'd explain.'

'Good old Faith. I was just coming to that. Listen carefully, here's one for your case notes. Oh, and don't make a sudden turn when we reach the next junction. If you do I'll pull the steering-wheel out of your hand and we'll both be killed. OK? Ready? Once upon a time nice kind Faith thought she'd call round and see how Brigid was feeling. Poor Brigid, it was a year since Diana's death but she couldn't escape into her work like Peter had done. Brigid didn't have any work. Nobody wants an old actress who's been off the scene for over twenty years.'

'Just get on with it,' I said fiercely, using anger to try to control the fear, to keep my voice steady. What a fool I had been, believing all along that Michael wanted to help, ignoring any twinges of doubt I might have felt, not even considering that his wish to spend time with me was a way of keeping in touch with what was happening to Luke, a way of taunting, teasing ... The traffic was building up and I was

finding it difficult to keep my eyes on the road. I could feel drops of sweat trickling down between my breasts.

‘So,’ said Michael, ‘as I was saying, Faith went round to the house, as she often did in those days, although usually it was in the morning because she knew Brigid liked a little rest in the afternoon. It was three o’clock and she thought Brigid might like to go with her to pick strawberries from the Pick-Your-Own farm down the road. Only if Brigid was asleep it would be a shame to disturb her. Up the stairs she crept. One step, two steps. Then she peeped through the bedroom door and what did she see?’ His voice had become harsh. ‘My sodding brother in bed with our sodding mother having it off hammer and tongs.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘No? I didn’t think you’d be so easily shocked.’

‘I’m not. I just don’t believe you.’

I was shaking. If Michael was telling the truth did Peter Jesty know what had happened? It would certainly explain his cold, detached attitude towards Luke. Perhaps he wanted to get even for what had happened. His daughter, his wife. He might have hated his own son enough to ... I thought about Brigid Jesty’s secret meetings with Luke in the wine bar in Clifton Village. Had Peter Jesty known about them all along? And the day Brigid had asked me to visit the cottage. Had she intended to tell me about that afternoon six years ago? Or perhaps she’d been testing me out, trying to discover how much I knew.

We were approaching the roundabout that led to the motorway. North to London and the Midlands, south to Devon and Cornwall. Another exit went to Avonmouth.

‘Straight on,’ said Michael, ‘we’ll go via Aust, then take the slip-road.’ He wound up his window. ‘Close yours too or the fumes from the factories will get inside the car.’

‘Why did you take me to meet Faith Gordon?’ I said, desperate to keep him talking so my brain was free to make some kind of plan.

‘I thought you’d like her,’ he said, switching on the car radio, then switching it off again as a voice started talking about the Common Market. ‘Besides, she knows what Luke’s really like. Next question?’ And when I kept quiet, ‘Surely you want to know about the accident?’

We were passing the main gate to the docks. A row of advertising hoardings came into view. A blurred athlete leaping in the air in a well-known brand of training shoes. A boy, ten times larger than life, eating an iced lolly as he travelled to the seaside on a cheap day return. The accident. For a moment I had assumed he was talking about his sister’s death. But he meant Paula. Paula Redfern.

He was opening and closing the glove compartment, fiddling with the empty ashtray. ‘Go on, tell me how you think it happened.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Have a guess?’

‘Rhiannon Pascoe. You gave her money to say Luke had pushed Paula.’

‘Oh, she didn’t want money, she wanted me.’

I felt calm, icy cold, as though I was listening to my own voice from a long way away. ‘Where did you meet her?’

‘Rhiannon? As a matter of fact — that photo you saw — I’d only known her a couple of days. She hated being a traveller. She was sick of the dirt. Bored with just sitting around. Wanted a place she could call home.’

‘So you and your housing trust — ’

‘We got talking and she introduced me to some of her friends. What a pathetic set of idiots, but they had a kind of fascination. You know how most women are — blathering on about love, commitment. Not Rhiannon. Sex for its own sake. Pure, unadulterated fucking. It was like an addiction.’

He waited for me to speak. When I said nothing he continued in a high excited voice. ‘Out in the open air where somebody might come past at any minute. Or in some squalid abandoned warehouse. Of course, when it came to the crunch she was just like the rest of you. Wanted exclusive rights, my undying devotion. When I wouldn’t reciprocate she threatened to go to the police and tell them I’d forced her to say she’d witnessed the accident.’

‘So you killed her.’

‘She wouldn’t have lasted long, those kids never do. Abusing their bodies day after day. I just hastened the process a little.’

On our right were the huge pipes and chimneys of the ICI plant. On our left a large flat field stretched out towards the Severn Estuary. A herring gull had alighted on a wooden post by the side of the road. Michael was singing under his breath. A song from *Carousel*. ‘If I love you, time and again I would try to say ... ’ He was enjoying himself in the style of the classic psychopath. Callous, totally lacking in shame, with no capacity for love and attachment. But it was the other ‘symptoms’ that had been my undoing. Superior intelligence, and charm — irresistible charm.

‘Have you noticed,’ he said, ‘how Bristol’s overrun with schizoid-looking characters and winos?’

‘It’s the same in all cities,’ I said. I sounded quite calm, as though we were having a pleasant conversation. Everything was unreal, like dreaming I was having a dream. How could I have allowed physical attraction to make me so blind? Taking an immediate liking to Michael that first evening in the pub. Allowing myself to lean on him for support. Ignoring the danger signals, brushing aside the warning from Faith Gordon — someone who knew the two brothers so well.

‘I modelled myself on that bloke who hangs about at the top of Park Street,’ said Michael. ‘The one who hopes the students will feel guilty and give him a few coppers.’

‘Did you,’ I said mechanically.

‘My hair was the best part. Caked with filth and oil. And my face was so mucky I reckon my own mother wouldn’t have recognized me.’ He paused, running his finger along the scratch on the side of his neck. ‘Have you ever looked into the eyes of a wino? No? Nobody ever does. That’s why it’s the perfect disguise. Of course, normally people keep their distance, but in a crowd waiting to cross the road ... I followed Luke and Paula quite often, sometimes two or three times a week. Waiting my chance, waiting for the perfect moment.’

‘But someone might have seen you.’ I needed to know everything. So I could tell Howard Fry. Later — if there was a later.

Michael laughed. ‘Who could prove anything? I was pushed from behind, fell against Paula. Quick shove in the back and over she goes. Silly cow, she was another who fell for Luke’s hardluck stories.’

My stomach felt lined with acid as though I had eaten nothing for days. ‘I thought you’d never met Paula.’

‘Oh, two can play private detective. I told you, I followed the pair of them, checked up on their habits. They were just good friends, nothing more, I could tell. Mind you, I should think that’s all my little brother could manage.’

The wholesale tyre distributors, flower importers, commercial truck dealers and warehouses to let had given way to fields of long, yellowing grass surrounded by dusty trees. On our left the outline of the Welsh coast was visible across the other side of the estuary. The road swung right over a railway bridge and we passed a sign advertising teas and burgers from a boarded-up van. I felt the bile rise in my throat.

‘Why, Michael?’

‘Because I detest the little bastard.’

‘But Luke and your mother, you don’t know if anything actually happened?’

I felt him tense. ‘Oh, you think they were clinging together for comfort.’ His voice was cold, sneering. ‘You’ve seen my mother. Does she look the homely type? Mrs Rabbit taking baby bunny into her bed to keep him warm. Like hell she was. Those two, they were always the same. Mummy’s pet. Luke the sensitive, delicate little baby boy. Michael, the tough self-sufficient — ’

I swerved to avoid the body of a stoat lying in the middle of the road. Michael put his hand on my seat to steady himself.

‘You and your brother,’ he said. ‘You told me you had a brother — just the two of you, are there?’

‘Yes.’

‘There you are then. Two’s company, three’s a crowd. My father had Diana, my mother had Luke. Where did that leave me?’

I breathed in deeply. 'It can't have been that simple.'

'No?' His hand was on my hair. He twisted it a little, then smoothed it back.

'Why Paula?' I said. 'Why not just kill Luke?'

'And put him out of his misery? I want him locked up in one of those nuthouses for the criminally insane.'

'Yes, I see,' I said quietly.

'Oh, new tactics,' he sneered. 'Very clever. Humour me, lull me into a false sense of security.'

'Why did Luke run off?' I said. 'Last week when he was staying in my flat.'

'Who knows? Could have had something to do with my phone call, I suppose. I thought I ought to warn him a witness had come forward. So much for Luke the wonderboy.'

I stared at the row of bungalows on the road leading down to Severn Beach. Severn Beach, but there was no beach, just shingle and thick, sludgy mud. A new road leading to the second Severn crossing had been constructed but was not yet open to the public. 'Luke the wonderboy.' Frustrated, unhappy, with a husband who had retreated into his grief at the loss of his daughter, Brigid Jesty must have turned to her younger son. As a substitute lover? I pictured them together. Brigid with one of her headaches, lying down, resting. Luke sitting on the bed, stroking her hair, soothing ...

'Straight on to the roundabout,' said Michael, 'then take the M5 to London but leave it almost immediately. I'll show you when we reach the turning.'

The petrol gauge was registering nearly half-full. Michael leaned towards me.

'Want me to drive?'

I shook my head.

'Up to you.' He felt in his pocket and took out a couple of sweets. 'Oh, come on, you're a psychologist not a bloody saint. I've only done what hundreds of others dream about only they haven't the guts to make their fantasies come true.' He sat up straight. 'There, look, the turning to Thornbury. Now! There's a maze of roads leading all the way to Sharpness and beyond. Don't worry, I know the route like the back of my hand. Half an hour, bit less maybe, and you and your favourite client will be reunited.'

He didn't say what would happen after that.

The road ended in a rough pot-holed space with room to park three or four cars. For the last half-hour we had travelled in silence, although now and again Michael had invited me to ask if I needed him to fill me in on any particular points. I had declined his offer.

I pulled up, switched off the engine and sat staring straight ahead. Michael snapped his fingers in front of my face.

‘Out you get. Place is completely deserted, I doubt if we’ll see another living creature.’ He pointed to the grass where a dead crow lay on its side. ‘Funny, I wonder what happened. Sparrow-hawk maybe. Some noise disturbed it.’

I left the car unlocked and started walking towards the estuary. It was important to appear in control of myself. I wanted to work out exactly where we were as though somehow that might help. In the distance the docks at Sharpness could be seen through the thickening mist. A few drops of warm rain had started to fall. I felt one land on my head and put up my hand, feeling the dampness like a cut on my scalp.

Michael pointed to a dilapidated wooden board.

‘Unsafe for bathing,’ he read, ‘due to mud and currents.’ He laughed. ‘Too right it is. At low tide there’s a mass of whirlpools.’ He pulled at my arm. ‘Can you swim?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Not me. It’s safer to be a nonswimmer. Ask the local fisherman. That way you don’t become over-confident.’

‘We’re not the only ones here,’ I said, moving my head in the direction of half a dozen sheep grazing near the water’s edge.

‘Nor we are.’ He pressed his shoe into the soft, squelchy turf. ‘Look at all the little hoof marks. But I don’t see any human footprints, do you?’

Bone-dry seaweed, left there by the last high tide, lay strewn across the grass. Thistles grew in clumps and a few teasel heads stood out above the remains of a broken fence. The only other vegetation was the Dutch grass that waved about in the muddy water of the estuary.

When Michael put his hand on my shoulder I flinched.

‘Cold?’ he asked.

‘You said you knew where Luke was.’

‘I do. Look.’

The hut was small and had probably been used as a store. Once the wood had been painted with varnish but most of it had peeled off long ago and the walls were rotting from the bottom up. Michael started walking towards it, then stopped, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

‘Ready? You’ve seen a dead body before? Quite honestly I think he’d had enough. Can you blame him? Life a total mess, responsible for two fatal road accidents.’

He kicked at the door but it stayed put. Then he took hold of the rusty handle and pulled. The door opened with a jerk, dislodging dust and cobwebs. A smell of rotting sacks and something sharp and rancid made me cover my mouth and nose.

‘After you,’ said Michael, smiling. ‘Or would you prefer it if I went in first?’

My face felt stiff with tension. I pushed past him, anger overcoming my fear. Knowledge of an event, however terrible, is always a little better than uncertainty — but long before my eyes became accustomed to the dark I knew the hut was empty.

‘He’s not there,’ I said. ‘Nobody’s been inside for months, probably years.’

For a moment Michael seemed undecided what to do next. Then he grinned.

‘Idiot.’ He smacked the side of his head. ‘I can think of a much better place.’ He peered into the mist at a path leading back towards the estuary. ‘You saw those houses?’

I shook my head.

‘Yes, you did. Row of three. Executive, architect-designed. All unsold, never lived in. What could be better?’

He set off across the grass, glancing back to make sure I was following.

‘You weren’t thinking of making a run for it, were you?’ He dangled the car keys. ‘Come on, he’ll have climbed in through a back window.’

The track to the houses was pitted with holes that had been partially filled in with gravel. I could hear Michael giggling as though the whole thing was a wonderful game. Little boys playing hide and seek, cops and robbers.

‘You’ve no idea where he is,’ I said, catching up with him, breathing heavily. ‘He could be hundreds of miles away.’

‘Dad tried to stop these houses being built,’ he said. It was the first time I had heard him call his father ‘Dad’. I didn’t like it.

'They're supposed to be starter homes for the locals. Any idea how much they cost? View of the estuary. Unspoiled countryside.'

'Why would Luke choose a place like this?'

'It's one of Dad's favourite haunts.'

'But it's nearly a fortnight. He'd have nothing to eat. There's no electricity, water.'

He laughed, stuffing his fist in his mouth.

'He'll have bought packets of crisps on the way. Chocolate, cans of Coke.'

'You've no idea where he is,' I said crossly. He was insane but it was better to treat him as though he was a normal rational human being.

'You don't know Luke like I do,' he whispered. 'You don't know anything.' Then it happened. I saw him first. A head appeared at a downstairs window and Michael heard my small involuntary gasp.

'Which one?' He started running towards the nearest house. 'You go to the other end, cut him off.'

Someone was crossing the patch of grass in front of the houses. A tall, thin figure, dressed in jeans and a dark-coloured sweatshirt.

'Luke!' I called as loudly as I could but the figure kept on running.

I heard Michael snigger. 'He won't get far. The path leads down to the estuary. There's nowhere else he can go.'

It was nearly dark. I tripped over a pile of builder's rubble and fell, grazing the side of my hand. When I caught up with Michael he pulled hold of me.

'Look, there he is. No, there.' He twisted my head to the left. He was wildly excited. 'Luke, you idiot, you'll be sucked under.'

Luke was up to his ankles in mud, moving backwards with his arms held out like a tightrope walker.

'Luke,' I yelled. 'Luke, it's me, Anna, come back.'

Michael stood on a tussock of grass. He was gazing across the estuary, where visibility was decreasing fast. He called to me, cupping his hands to make the sound carry.

'Leave him. He doesn't want to be saved. He's got a death wish. Let him go.'

By the time I reached the edge of the water Luke was thirty feet away, still moving backwards along a wide inlet that led out to the estuary. The white skin of his face was splashed with mud.

'Luke, please,' I shouted, 'start walking towards me. It'll be all right, I promise. No, please, Luke, stop.'

Michael was approaching. 'There's a pit,' he called, 'under the water, over twenty foot deep. In the winter it fills up with mud but in the summer it's lethal.'

I saw Luke hesitate. When he stopped moving he began to lose his balance and his arms started flailing the air.

'Luke! Be careful. Just fix your eyes on me and start walking.'

'What you need,' said Michael, 'is a thick length of rope. Or a plank of wood would do if it was long enough.'

'Find something.'

'Me?'

'Please, Michael.'

'Please, Michael.' He imitated my voice, reaching out to touch my cheek.

'In the shed,' I said. 'There might be some wood or corrugated iron. Quick. Anything. Only hurry.'

He glanced over his shoulder. It was too dark to see the shed. 'The houses,' he said. 'Don't worry, I'll find something. Be back in a minute.'

Luke was standing still, swaying backwards and forwards. He seemed incapable of moving his feet.

'Lift your right foot,' I said. 'Slowly. Careful, take your time.'

'I can't.' No sound came out of his mouth but I could read his lips.

'Yes, you can. Come on, Luke.'

He seemed to be sinking lower. The water was almost up to his waist. I watched him struggling to raise his leg, heard the gurgling, sucking sound as he pulled a foot free.

'Good. Now the other one. Come on, keep going.'

Slowly, laboriously, he started moving towards me. Now and again his body leaned to one side and I expected him to fall and disappear beneath the water.

'Just keep your eyes focused on me. Come on, there's not much further to go.' I held out my hand. There was still a gap of several feet but he was no longer in any danger. I could tell his feet were on firmer ground. He moved like a sleepwalker. I wondered if I should wade in after him and if so was it better to keep my shoes on or take them off.

'That's it, Luke. Four more steps and I'll be able to catch hold of you.'

He lifted his head, leaning back slightly, staring at the darkening sky. The water was still above his knees and from the waist down he was caked in thick strong-smelling mud.

'Hold out your arm,' I said. 'Your arm, Luke.'

He stared at me, as though he was seeing my face for the first time. Then he reached out and took hold of my hand, allowing me to drag him from the water.

Michael sprang. He must have been watching from the dip in the grass. I saw the plank of wood in his hand and heard the thump as it hit Luke's chest. Luke fell on his back. As he struggled to his feet Michael jumped on him and started banging his head up and down on the turf.

'Stop it!' I shouted. 'Don't!'

I might as well not have been there. The two of them rolled over and over, tearing at each other. Michael caught hold of Luke's arm and twisted it behind his head. I heard Luke give a shout of pain, then he wriggled free and scrambled up so that the outline of his body was silhouetted against the estuary. I expected him to start running but he stood his ground. His height gave him a slight advantage but Michael was stronger and he wasn't covered in mud. For a split second the two brothers stared at each other, then Luke leaped forward and they fell to the ground once more, rolling backwards and forwards, pulling at each other's hair, scratching, biting, kicking.

There was blood on Michael's forehead but it could have come from either of them. Luke was on his feet again with Michael clutching at his ankles. Then Michael was up too. They were above the water, standing on a narrow piece of ground that jutted out, with a shallow gully on either side. The tide was going out. At the point where I had pulled Luke out the water had receded a little, revealing thick grey slime, but where the two of them now stood the water below them was deep and black. They had stopped fighting and

were eyeing each other, trying to work out what was going on in the other's head. Michael laughed, stepping back and touching the blood on his face. My car keys glinted on the grass. I edged forward and as I grabbed them I saw Luke relax.

'Luke, be careful!'

It was too late. Michael lunged forward, the palm of his hand held out in front of him. Luke saw it and dodged to one side and I heard Michael's shrill scream as he lost his balance and fell. There was no splash. I ran towards the edge and peered into the water. He must have slid down the muddy bank and been pulled out into the estuary by the current. At first I could see no sign of him; then I saw his head come up then disappear again beneath the surface.

I could have gone after him. Jumped into the cold, dark water and struggled, against all the odds, to drag him out of the maze of currents. Luke knelt beside me, his teeth chattering and tears running down his face.

'Don't. It's no use. There's nothing we can do.'

He was freezing cold. I took off my sweater, putting it over his head and forcing his arms through the sleeves, and for a few moments we crouched together, the air damp on our faces, below us the water quietly lapping against the bank.

My jaw ached and my teeth felt as though they were forced together.

'Come on,' I said softly, 'back to the car. I'll run the engine, turn on the heater, you'll be all right.'

He stared at me, then turned and started stumbling across the grass.

I thought about Michael. The Michael who had walked with me on the Downs, sat in the pub telling me about his parents and his dead sister. The Michael I thought I could have loved. Then I remembered Brigid Jesty, turning the pages of her photograph album. Your children are your whole world and you're just their boring old mother. Had Michael told me the truth about that afternoon when Faith Gordon had gone up to Brigid's bedroom? The letter that had fallen out of Luke's book. I had assumed it was from Paula ...

Luke had gone on ahead. I could see the outline of his body, the slightly stooping shoulders he had inherited from his father. I caught up with him, opening the car door and telling him to take off his soaking wet clothes and wrap himself in the rug that was lying on the back seat. Then I started the engine, switched the heater up to full and drove slowly down the bumpy track. There was so much I still needed to know: but now I was certain that, in time, Luke would tell me.

A CRUSHING BLOW

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Chapter One

You're tuned to Radio Bristol, coming up to news on the hour, but first a reminder of this afternoon's phone-in when ... Inside the car the air is stifling. Leigh Woods, a stone's throw away, looks cool, inviting. Sunlight filters through the lime trees, rare butterflies with white-streaked wings flutter above the wood anemones. *The Princess Royal on a visit to British Aerospace.* The newsreader's voice, keeping it light, keeping it bright. *A new production opening at the Old Vic on Tuesday ...* Then a sudden shift of tone. *News just in. The body of a man ... bludgeoned to death in the woods. Leigh Woods. Police withholding details of the victim's identity ... until the next of kin ...* The traffic slows to a halt, near the track through the woods that leads down to the Avon Gorge. *And now over for a check on the weather ... Clear skies with occasional cloudy spells. Cooler winds from the west later this evening: ...* Somewhere in the woods a heavy bloodstained corpse is lifted on to a polythene sheet, slowly, carefully so no damage can confuse the post-mortem. Lines of police scour the grass, searching for a weapon, the print of a shoe. *Plans for a new multi-storey car park ... A woman who lives in St Paul's has won the National Lottery ...* The lights turn green and the traffic moves on.

Chapter Two

It was one of those notices you know by heart but read over again each time you pass. *The Samaritans Care. Talk to us in confidence any time — day or night.* Then a Bristol phone number and a reminder of the telephone box at each end of the bridge.

The day had been burning hot but now, high above the city, the air felt cooler, less humid, free of the fumes from the traffic in Cumberland Basin. Halfway across the bridge a tall, thin girl stood staring down at the mud two hundred and fifty feet below. Her black jeans and sleeveless T-shirt contrasted dramatically with hair that was almost white, cropped short, apart from the long trailing strands at the back of her neck. A yellow and purple knapsack hung over her left shoulder. I guessed she was about seventeen.

She was very still, leaning forward a little, with one foot on the ground and the other resting on the toe of her boot, but as I watched she stepped back a couple of paces and stood with her arms hanging loosely away from her body, like a swimmer preparing to jump into an icy pool.

‘Don’t!’ I ran towards her, ignoring the traffic that was only a few inches from the pavement. ‘Wait!’

When I reached her side she stared at me, her pale face expressionless. ‘I’m not going to jump, if that’s what you’re hoping.’

Jerking at Aaron’s choke-chain I forced him to stay still and the girl bent down, rubbing her knees, then holding out her fingers for the dog to sniff. ‘Retriever, ain’t he? If I had a dog I’d have one like that.’

‘He’s not my dog,’ I said, wanting to keep the conversation going, wanting to see the colour return to her face.

'You mean like you've nicked him.'

'No, of course not. A friend of mine, a neighbour, he's sprained his ankle so I'm taking Aaron for a walk in Leigh Woods.'

The corners of her mouth moved a little. 'Not scared, then?'

'Scared? Oh, you mean the murder. That was nearly a month ago.'

'Haven't got him yet, though, have they?' She took the dog's lead from my hand. 'Old bloke it was, the one that got done in. I reckon he had it coming.'

'Why d'you say that?' But I knew what she was going to say next.

'I saw a flasher once. Running between the trees he was, hoping I'd see his whatsit and scream blue murder. If they catch 'em nothing happens. I reckon like they should lock them up and throw away the key.'

'Most of them are harmless,' I said, 'just sad, isolated people who've no one they feel close to.'

She snorted. 'Always talk that garbage, do you? If you want my opinion men should be castrated, then there wouldn't be all those wars and that.'

She glared at me, waiting for the obvious rejoinder. When it didn't come she muttered something about who wanted kids anyway then walked on ahead of me with Aaron trotting by her side.

I had wanted to distract her, make sure she left the bridge, but I had overreacted — because of the Suspension Bridge's reputation. Now it was proving difficult to get rid of her. When we turned up North Road she asked if Aaron could go off the lead.

'Not till we reach the woods.'

'Does what you tell him, does he?'

'I hope so.'

'I had a cat once,' she said, 'when I was a kid, but it died. Sat up all night, I did, but it wouldn't stop coughing. Reckon it'd swallowed its fur or something.'

'What was its name?'

'Eh?' She slowed down till we were walking side by side. 'Nobody asked me that before. Martin — that's what I called it, don't remember why.'

'I work with a man called Martin.'

'You've got a job, then. Mine's only part-time but if I play my cards right I reckon I can make it last most of the week.'

We were passing the Botanical Gardens. I made a mental note of the name of a side road that looked as though it might lead to the one where Sandy Haran lived.

'What are you looking at?' The girl was studying my face minutely.

'On my way back I have to call in on a friend, only I'm not sure where his house is.'

'Funny kind of friend.'

I took a scrap of paper from my pocket and she slowed down a little to read the address.

'Over there.' She pointed across the road, then stopped, leaning against the stile that led into the woods, short of breath but not nearly so pale. 'What's he called, your friend?'

'Sandy.'

She had a strand of hair wound round her finger. She gave it a twist, screwing up her face as though she was in agony. 'You an accountant?'

'Is that what I look like?'

She shrugged. 'Everyone's an accountant or a solicitor. What are you, then?'

'A psychologist.'

'Let him off now, shall I?' Without waiting for an answer she dragged the choke-chain over Aaron's head and he leapt the stile and bounded away into the undergrowth. 'Don't worry, still got his collar with his name and that. Dogs have to run free, it's cruel to keep them on a lead.'

It was pleasant under the trees, a relief to be out of the sun although now it was after six the temperature had started to drop. The girl walked on ahead, kicking a stone with the side of her boot, trying to keep it on the path, muttering under her breath as it bounced into the long grass. I thought about the last time I had walked in Leigh Woods. Strolling, with my friend Chris and her three young kids, passing the precise spot where only forty-eight hours later a middle-aged man called Walter Bury had been discovered with his skull smashed in.

Checking the time, I realized I was regretting my decision to call in at Sandy Haran's house, even though Aaron provided me with a ready-made reason for not staying too long. Why had Sandy invited me round? Presumably it was because he wanted me to see where he lived, a fairly impressive place if the address was anything to go by. I would say hello to his wife, exchange a few pleasantries, drink a quick cup of coffee, then leave.

I had known Sandy only five or six weeks. He was attending a counselling course where I had recently completed a series of lectures on Working with Groups. The first time I saw him he had been sitting in the second row — a rather unlikely looking candidate

for such a course, with his dark suit and small, neat moustache — but when it was time for questions I had been impressed by his shrewdness, his understanding of how counselling could all too easily become a self-gratifying power game. The third week he introduced himself — in the car park where I was trying to repair my windscreen wipers sufficiently to drive the two miles back to my flat — and when I discovered he was ‘good with cars’ it was such a relief that I remember telling him he was my friend for life. Later, I wondered if he had taken this meaningless remark literally. Waiting for me at the end of each lecture became a habit. Sometimes he had a particular question, other times he just chatted about this and that. There was something about him that intrigued. Some of the others, fascinated by the subject because they had so many problems of their own, appeared quite unsuited to the course. Sandy was sensible, down-to-earth, enthusiastic but realistic. He spoke in a straightforward, unpretentious way, explaining how he had made a fair amount of money as a property developer then become disillusioned with the business world and decided he wanted to do something entirely different. The counselling course was his first step towards a new way of life.

During the next few weeks his physical appearance had begun to change. The suit was replaced with the kind of leisure wear that features in the pages of the up-market Sunday papers, and his short, thinning hair was allowed to grow longer, bushier above the ears. At the end of my final lecture he had come up to me in the car park and invited me to dinner. I hesitated, unwilling to become too involved, seeing him almost like a client rather than a student on the course. It was ridiculous. In an effort to maintain so-called professional

boundaries I was in danger of cutting myself off from all but a handful of close friends and my colleagues at work. As a compromise I suggested that since I had to exercise my neighbour's dog perhaps I could drop by some time on my way home from Leigh Woods.

'When?' He wanted a date and time.

'Thursday? About seven, or is that too late?'

'Seven's fine, just right.'

'I won't be able to stay long, not with the dog and everything.'

He laughed. 'Using a dog as protection, eh? I'll leave that up to you, Anna, stay just as long as you want.' It was the first time he had used my name. He seemed pleased, out of all proportion, as though my visit meant a great deal to him, as though by agreeing to call round I had taken a great weight off his shoulders ...

The girl was standing on one leg, leaning against a tree, watching me. 'Two kids found the body,' she said, her eyes bright with excitement. 'Up the other end where you can look down at the Gorge. Cordoned it off, they did, so you couldn't get close but I got to know this policeman bloke. Only a kid he was really, told me all kinds of stuff. Like he was guarding the area.'

'From people like you,' I said, smiling, but she didn't smile back. 'You live near here, do you?'

She shook her head, screwing up her face in disgust. 'Do me a favour, think I'm made of money? Dressed in white overalls they was, with hoods over their heads and special shoes. Like they wear them so they won't leave their hairs and that muddled up with clues from the murderer.'

'You seem to know a lot about it.'

She nodded. 'Dogs they had too. German shepherds. I'd like to be a dog handler but I don't s'pose they have women doing it. Bloody typical.'

I pictured the pathologist crouching beside the dead man, a photographer making a video of the position of the body and the surrounding areas, taking stills with close-ups of the injuries. How long had the man been lying there? Two days, a week? The girl could probably tell me although I was sure she knew far less than she wanted me to believe.

'He come from Abbots Leigh,' she said, 'it was on the telly but only the local news. I s'pose there's murders every day so like it wasn't important enough for the other.' She stumbled over a rotten branch that had fallen half across the path. 'They'll never catch him now, it's too late, the scent'll have gone cold.'

'Oh, I doubt it. For all we know there's plenty of forensic evidence.'

'What kind of evidence? Oh, you mean blood and semen and that. Bits of skin under the fingernails, fibres in the wound.'

I laughed. 'You've been watching too many crime programmes.'

'No, I haven't. Anyway, the knife'll be in the river by now, or sunk in the mud.'

'I thought he was bludgeoned to death.'

She swivelled round on one foot. 'There you are, caught you out, tricked you into admitting you're as interested as I am. People love murders, what's the point in pretending to feel bad about someone you've never even met?'

There was no sign of Aaron. At the part of the woods we had reached the trees grew closer together, cutting out most of the light, making it impossible to see much beyond the path. I could try an ear-

splitting whistle but more than likely it would come out as a thin breathy puff which the girl would find highly amusing. She ran on ahead and I saw her bending over the sagging fence that protected a small murky-looking pond.

‘Can you see the dog?’ I shouted.

‘What?’ She had a length of slimy green weed in her hand and was swinging it round, threatening to let go so it hit me in the face.

A moment later Aaron bounded up and started pawing the sagging wooden struts that surrounded the pond. The girl held up the choke-chain triumphantly. ‘Think I’m daft or something?’ She returned the weed to the water. ‘If it hadn’t been for me he’d have jumped in, got his coat all mucky.’

‘Well done.’

‘Well done,’ she mimicked. ‘It was down there they found the stiff.’ She pointed at where the path split. ‘If we go that way I could show you.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Why not? Squeamish, are you? I reckon it was someone who lives close by, the one who done it. I reckon I know who it was.’

‘Better tell the police, then.’

‘Think it’s funny, do you?’ She spat out the words. ‘Think I’m joking? He’d only been there a few hours, not buried, just covered in branches and that. First you go stiff as a board, then it wears off and the maggots get started. Where d’you live?’

‘Cliftonwood.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Just up from Hotwell Road.’

‘Lived in Bristol all your life?’

'No, only a few years. You're not from round here either, are you?'

She pulled a face. 'South London, as if you didn't know. People like you, people who speak like the newsreader on the telly, no one knows where they're from so they can't be fitted into nice neat little slots.'

'Everyone fits into some slot or other.'

'Oh, very profound.' She stared into the distance as though she was thinking about another time. When I told her I was turning back she seemed not to have heard.

'I have to go now.'

'So you said.' She handed me the lead. 'Thought like you was visiting a friend.'

'Yes, I am.' I looked away, unnerved by her angry, staring eyes. 'Well, see you around I expect.'

'Maybe.' She took a tissue from the pocket of her shorts and blew her nose hard, contorting her face as if she was in pain.

It was crazy, we had only just met, but she was making me feel I was letting her down. Or perhaps it was all in my imagination. It was Aaron she liked, not me, she made a habit of attaching herself to people with golden retrievers.

'Where d'you live?' I asked.

'Southville.'

'Look, when you were on the bridge ...'

'What about it?'

'There are people who can help, people you can talk to.'

'What for? What's the point?'

'Sometimes telling someone else makes it seem less terrible, helps you to sort things out in your —'

‘Not if you’d done something really bad?’ The defiant expression had disappeared. She looked wretched, despairing. ‘Something you regretted but it was too late.

What good would it be just talking about it?’

She started walking away, then stopped, holding up her hand to shade her eyes from the sun. ‘Talking’s a waste of bloody time. Doesn’t alter the past.’ Then she turned, pausing for a moment as though she was listening for sounds in the woods, shook herself, like a dog, and began running down the track — back to the scene of the crime.

Chapter Three

The front door was answered by a woman in her late sixties with short thick grey hair, very pale blue eyes, and a round soft-skinned face. She was holding a baby on one hip.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I was looking for Sandy Haran.’

The woman hoisted the baby against her shoulder then, when it wriggled and let out a disgruntled squawk, turned it to face me, licking her finger to wipe something sticky off its mouth. ‘Round the back,’ she said. ‘There’s a door with one of those microphone things.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’ She seemed glad of the diversion. People who stay at home looking after babies probably are.

‘Lovely baby,’ I said, assuming she was the proud grandmother, ‘is it a boy or a girl?’

‘Girl. Seven months.’

‘Anyway, thanks, I’m sorry to disturb you.’

‘You didn’t.’ Then she called after me in a voice that seemed unnecessarily loud.

‘You’re a friend of Mrs Haran, are you? Give her my best wishes, the poor soul.’

Round the corner of the building, out of sight of the front door, I paused to take in the size of the place. Sandy had given the impression that he owned the whole house but it must be divided into flats with a shared garden. I knew the kind of set-up. Luxury apartments with an annual service charge as high as most people’s ordinary rent.

The house was late Victorian, with a steeply pitched roof and sweeping gables. There were masses of windows, all of them fairly small, and the one I was standing next to was round like a porthole, with green and blue stained glass and a central section in the shape of a bird of prey. When I looked up I could see the house consisted of two main floors but also had two attic windows in the large tiled roof. The three chimneys looked in need of repair but were probably perfectly sound or the bout of stormy weather back in April would have brought them toppling down.

I stepped back, almost falling over one of the grey border stones that ran along the edge of the lawn. Staring up at the first-floor windows I half expected to see Sandy's face pressed against the glass — he had been so keen for me to call round and already it was well past seven — but there were no signs of life apart from a pigeon perched on the parapet of a small balcony. What had the old woman meant when she described Geraldine Haran as a 'poor soul'? Perhaps she was an invalid, but wouldn't Sandy have mentioned it before?

The garden was small for a house that size. It looked as if it had belonged to a keen gardener who had tended it with loving care then suddenly lost interest or moved away. The nearest flower-bed contained about a dozen rose bushes, all with large overblown heads on weak-looking stalks, and in a border nearer to the house I noticed foxgloves with long blackened stems and a few shrivelled flowers. A sprawling St John's wort extended across a paved area, where someone had left a glossy magazine on an old deck-chair with a torn seat. Sandy's black BMW, with its distinctive roof-rack,

was parked on a strip of concrete that looked as if it had once been the base of a large garden shed.

Aaron, who had been sniffing the grass, suddenly leapt forward, dragged me several yards, and started digging at the base of a magnolia, desperate to unearth what looked like a knuckle bone but turned out to be a large piece of flint. Pulling him away I continued on round the building where I noticed another car, a grey Morris Minor, parked close to the hedge. It was in mint condition. A collector's item, used only for short weekend drives? Perhaps doing up old cars was one of Sandy's hobbies, or the car might belong to his wife.

A porch had been added to the back of the house, built to a design that matched the rest of the building, but of newer redder bricks. I stepped inside, holding open the outer door to provide more light, pressed the buzzer attached to the wall, and waited, listening for the crackle that would precede Sandy's disembodied voice.

'Yes?' The woman who answered sounded nervous, as though she had no idea who could be calling round at this time.

'Anna McColl,' I said, 'I've come to — ' I broke off as a hand clasped my shoulder.

'Good to see you, Anna. Geraldine's been looking forward to your visit all day. Sorry about the technology. We got a bit sick of running up and down the stairs.' Aaron was trying to jump up and rest his paws on Sandy's chest. 'Did I forget to explain which door? I was working in the shed, saw you having a look round. The house is far too big for us now so I arrange short-term lets for the ground-floor flat. Foreign visitors and such like. At present Bryan Sealey's staying here.'

'The Bryan Sealey?'

'His new play's opening in a week or two. I expect you've read about it. Actually they've been in the flat a couple of months, first on holiday, now for the rehearsals.' He held open the inner door for me to pass through, then took hold of Aaron's lead and started leaping up the stairs, two at a time.

They were not the usual dingy back stairs once used by the servants. When the house was converted it had been carried out in style. A banister rail ran up to a small landing with another round window, this time with orange and yellow glass. On the sill stood a green parrot with black beady eyes and claws that looked surprisingly real. I picked it up, nearly dropping it when it turned out to be much heavier than I expected, made of lead by the feel of it.

The stairs curved round again, finally arriving at a kind of entrance hall with a passage at either end and an open door straight ahead. I could hear Aaron's claws skidding on the polished wood floor.

'In here, Anna,' called Sandy and I entered a high-ceilinged room with two large windows with their shutters folded back. Aaron had jumped on to an armchair.

Sandy saw my face and laughed. 'Let him stay where he is. We don't mind, do we, darling?'

Then I saw Geraldine Haran. She was sitting near the fireplace and she made no attempt to stand up. Sandy went and stood beside her. 'Darling, this is Anna.'

'How kind of you to come.' She leaned forward a little, as though she wanted to do the right thing but was too weak to move from her chair. Her hands kept touching her hair, which was light brown and wavy but held in place stiffly with some kind of lacquer. Although she

was sitting down I could see that she was tall, elegant. Her large eyes were oddly expressionless, her nose slightly pointed but with wide, finely shaped nostrils. In spite of the warm weather she was dressed in a navy pleated skirt with a white sweater over a pale blue shirt. A matching jacket hung over the arm of a large leather sofa nearby. She reminded me of a personal assistant to an extremely high-powered executive, the kind of woman who lives through her boss and makes sure no unwelcome visitors pass through to the inner office.

‘I’ve been walking my neighbour’s dog,’ I said. ‘He fell down his basement steps and twisted his ankle.’

‘Poor man.’ Her voice was almost a whisper. Her carefully made up face seemed drained of all vitality. She was someone who had always taken good care of her appearance, whatever else was going on in her life, someone who rarely smiled, let alone permitted herself to laugh out loud or lose control in any way at all.

I held out my hand and she squeezed it lightly, gazing into my eyes for a moment, then turning towards Sandy although her words were still addressed to me.

‘Sandy’s told me so much about you. He found your lectures very interesting, didn’t you, darling?’

‘Certainly did. Have a seat, Anna. I’m afraid my wife’s been unwell.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I didn’t realize.’ The room had an almost museum-like feel. Table lamps with blue and white striped shades were spaced at intervals but there was no overhead lighting. A second sofa had biscuit-coloured loose covers over which had been draped an exotic-looking quilt, embroidered in greens and blues, with five or six small matching cushions. On the wall directly opposite a

picture of an over-stuffed pig with tiny pink trotters shuddered a little as a breeze blew in through the open fan light.

‘I went to the wrong door,’ I said, trying to lighten the slightly oppressive atmosphere. ‘I met a woman with a baby.’

‘Rona Halliwell,’ said Sandy. ‘When Helen was a child Rona was her nanny. Then when they adopted the baby Rona came back to look after her.’

‘Helen’s Bryan Sealey’s wife?’

He looked surprised, as though he thought the couple so famous everyone must have heard of them. ‘Helen used to be a model. For a year or two she was on the cover of all the glossy magazines.’ He opened a glass-fronted corner cupboard containing a range of bottles and glasses. ‘The pale and interesting type, a woman with her head screwed on, not one of those vacant-looking — ’ He broke off, wondering if he had said something offensive when what he had intended was exactly the opposite. ‘Now, what are you having? Sherry, gin, whisky, or would you prefer a glass of wine?’

‘Wine, please.’

‘In the fridge.’ He turned towards Geraldine. ‘Your usual, my love?’

She nodded, her eyes following him until he disappeared through the door, then she turned towards me but looked down at her hands.

‘I thought you’d be older,’ she said, ‘I don’t know why.’

On the mantelpiece a clock in a black wooden case struck the quarter. The grey marble fireplace looked cold but a brass jug filled with orange and brown dried flowers had been placed in the empty grate. Above the mantelpiece an oval-shaped mirror with a carved frame reflected most of the room, making it seem twice as long as it

actually was. Every surface seemed to be covered in ornaments, some china, some glass, some wood, all of them birds.

‘It’s a lovely flat,’ I said.

‘Yes, we’re very lucky.’ She glanced at the black Bechstein piano to my left and I followed her eyes and saw what she wanted me to notice — a studio photograph of a boy of about seven, dressed in a shirt and tie with his hair neatly parted on the left. He was smiling stiffly as though he loathed having his picture taken but knew the session would continue until he obliged with the right expression.

‘My son,’ she said. ‘It was taken nearly a year ago. He’s nine now, nine and a half.’

I stood up to have a better look. ‘Sandy told me you had a son. Thomas, isn’t it?’ She nodded, blinking several times in quick succession then touching the corner of her eye with her fingertip as if there was something in it. ‘He’s out at the moment, at his music lesson.’

‘He plays the piano?’

‘I beg your pardon? Oh, no, the violin.’ Then she started talking very fast but still in the same light, artificial voice. ‘You’re a psychologist, aren’t you, that’s not quite the same as a psychoanalyst. People are referred to you by their doctor, are they, or do you see hospital patients?’

‘Most people are referred by their GP,’ I said. ‘Or it could be a social worker or some other agency.’

‘Sandy’s told you about me, I expect. My doctor’s given me tablets but I’m afraid they don’t seem to be doing me any good.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry about that.’ I had no idea what was wrong with her and it seemed rude to ask.

We sat in silence for a few moments, then she looked up and did her best to smile. 'Sandy's fascinated by anything to do with the mind so I suppose I'm a gift from Heaven, not that he's unsympathetic, far from it, but I believe it's a difficult thing to cure — agoraphobia.'

'You're agoraphobic?'

She looked surprised. 'Oh, didn't you know? It came on a month ago. Since then I haven't been able to leave the house at all.'

'Yes, I see.' She made it sound like something infectious. 'I'm sorry, I didn't realize.'

She smiled, a brief twitch of her mouth, more like a nervous tic, then she picked up a pair of tinted glasses that were lying on a low coffee table and started swinging them round in her hand. 'You'd know all about phobias, I suppose. Fear of snakes, spiders, Siamese cats.' Her flat, lifeless voice continued listing all the phobias she could think of, expressing mild amazement that people could be so silly, so irrational.

I felt irritated. So this was why Sandy had invited me to the house. He could at least have warned me, although if he had I would have stayed well clear of the place. When he returned, carrying a tray of drinks, I frowned at him, conveying my disapproval but he avoided my eyes. There was something different about him. Not his clothes — he was wearing the same green cord trousers, check shirt, and black trainers he had acquired part way through the counselling course. His balding head had turned brown during the last couple of weeks and I noticed for the first time that the fringe of hair above his ears was flecked with grey. His moustache, that was what made him look different; he had shaved it off.

‘Last vestige of my old life,’ he said, putting down the tray and rubbing his upper lip. ‘Not that physical appearance has anything to do with spiritual well-being but I looked in the mirror the day before yesterday and decided it had to go.’ He grinned and I remembered how one of the first things I had noticed about him was that his front teeth were rather long and sloped back a little, like a guinea-pig or hamster. For some odd reason they made what was a rather nondescript face look quite attractive.

‘I’ve been telling Anna about my illness,’ said Geraldine. ‘I thought she knew already.’

‘Left that up to you, my love.’ He placed two glasses of wine on a small circular table. ‘If you want to talk about it that’s good, isn’t it, Anna?’

‘Yes, of course.’

He swung round, picking up the coolness in my voice. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, now you think I’ve asked you round on false pretences. Obviously we’ll welcome any idea you might have but I can assure you — ’

I turned to Geraldine. ‘So far you’ve just been given tablets?’

She opened her mouth to speak but Sandy interrupted. ‘Not right, is it. I tried talking to the GP but got nowhere at all. He seems to be treating it like a mild panic attack whereas — well, I don’t have to tell you: there’s a world of difference between feeling a little anxious and being unable to leave the house.’

‘Perhaps Geraldine could ask her doctor for a referral.’

‘What use would that be?’ he snapped. ‘She’s agoraphobic, she can’t go out to see someone.’ He sat down heavily. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude, it’s just such a worry.’

Geraldine was searching in her handbag. She produced two bottles of pills and held them up for me to read the labels. 'These are for if I can't get to sleep and the others are tranquillizers, aren't they? Sandy says they're addictive.'

'Only if they're taken long-term.' I put my glass down on the table and Aaron made a move to jump off the chair then closed his eyes and went back to sleep. 'How did it begin,' I said, 'this fear of leaving the flat?' I would ask a few questions, making it clear I was only talking as an interested friend, then suggest Sandy look for some professional help. 'Did something happen or was it just a gradual process?'

They were staring at me as though my question was incomprehensible.

'The shock,' said Sandy quietly. 'I thought you realized. An innocent man brutally murdered less than a mile away. Isn't that enough to make anyone lose their nerve?'

When I left Sandy insisted on accompanying me. 'At least as far as the Suspension Bridge, Anna. It's a lovely evening and I don't often get a chance to walk in that direction.'

We were standing in the garden, only a few feet away from the grey Morris Minor. Sandy patted the roof and began explaining how the car had been restored by a garage in Bath, how he had given it to Geraldine a couple of years back since he knew she was someone who would really appreciate it.

'She likes old cars?'

He laughed. 'Not as such, but her parents had a Morris, it was the first car she ever drove.'

He was talking fast, afraid he had angered me, wanting to make amends. As soon as we were away from the house he started apologizing. 'Look, I'd hate there to be any bad feeling between us. I suppose I just wanted to know what you thought. Would you say Geraldine's a typical agoraphobic? Is it usual for agoraphobia to be set off by a traumatic event?'

'In most cases the person already has a fairly anxious personality.'

'Oh, not Geraldine, she's tough as a horse.'

A small boy had come round the corner. He was carrying a violin case and a briefcase, both in the same hand so that his body was tilted to one side.

'Good,' said Sandy, rubbing his hands together, 'now you'll have met the whole family. Have a look at him, he's the image of his mother, hardly a trace of me apart from the ears and the large size in shoes.'

It was true. As Thomas drew closer I recognized the same wavy brown hair, although in his case it had been cut very short, the same light brown eyes and slightly pointed nose with flaring nostrils.

Sandy introduced me, rather formally I thought. 'Thomas, this is Anna McColl. You remember, I told you how she gave a series of lectures on my course. She just dropped by to meet your mother.'

Thomas put out his hand to touch Aaron, then withdrew it nervously.

'He's friendly,' I said, 'won't bite.'

He glanced up at me then placed his hand on the dog's head and started kneading the fur with his fingers.

'Thomas has always wanted a dog,' said Sandy, 'but unfortunately he's allergic to the hair, aren't you, old son?'

‘That’s a shame.’ I watched as the little boy gently lifted the loose skin above Aaron’s mouth and bent down to study his teeth.

‘He’s nine,’ I said, assuming dogs must be like horses. It was possible to tell their age from their teeth. ‘Quite old for a retriever but he’s very fit.’

‘Same age as me,’ said Thomas, then the colour rose in his face and he picked up his cases and started running down the road.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Sandy, ‘he’s rather shy. His age I expect, and of course he’s worried about his mother.’

‘Did the murder frighten him?’

‘Oh, not at all, took it in his stride, but Geraldine’s reaction — he wants to make her feel better but doesn’t know how, neither of us do.’ I knew what was coming next. ‘I know it’s a bit much to ask, Anna, but I thought if you could talk to her, just informally.’

‘She must have talked to you.’

‘Not much, you know what it’s like, confiding in people close to you can be the hardest thing of all. And besides, you’re an expert, you know how to go about it, use the right techniques.’

‘Thomas is musical, is he?’ I said, playing for time.

‘Seems to be. Good at most things as a matter of fact. Can’t think where he gets it from. Funny things, genes.’

I nodded. I was wondering if Sandy had told the truth about Geraldine’s normal state of mind. Was she just a highly neurotic woman, who had used the murder as a means of gaining everyone’s attention, or was her response quite out of character? I tried to remember if I had read any case studies where a single traumatic event had led to agoraphobia. But even if this did happen occasionally why had Geraldine found the murder so shocking? It

was not as though she had found the body, not as though the victim was a personal friend.

‘You didn’t know the murder victim, did you?’ I asked. ‘Perhaps you knew *of* him.’

‘Oh no, nothing like that. He lived in Abbot’s Leigh, off the A369. I’ve been there once but there’s no through road, you have to turn round and go back the way you’ve come.’

‘And before the murder Geraldine was perfectly all right? No worries, problems, psychosomatic symptoms?’

He thought about this for a moment. ‘No, I don’t think so. The odd headache but no more than the rest of us.’

‘Had anything happened to her before? Something similar? A violent death, an accident?’

‘Yes, that’s what I was wondering. She never talks about her childhood, says she can’t remember before the age of eleven or twelve. Her father was a strange man, quiet, almost withdrawn, but with occasional outbursts of anger that seemed quite out of proportion to whatever it was that had upset him. Of course, he never approved of me, thought I wasn’t nearly good enough.’

We had reached the bridge. Sandy gave the man in the toll box a couple of coins and we started across. I never look down for more than a moment or my legs turn to jelly, but a quick glance confirmed that the tide had risen, covering most of the mud. When Sandy leaned over the parapet to watch a boat coming up the river I kept on walking, still trying to recall everything I knew about agoraphobia. *The re-evocation of a fear of separation from an attachment figure in childhood? Anxiety about inter-personal relationships? Displacement: a defence against a wholly different fear?*

Sandy interrupted my thoughts. 'I'd be happy to pay, whatever's the going rate. More, since you'd have to come in the evening so it would be like overtime.'

'I'm on holiday next week.'

'Oh, I see, you're going away.' He sighed deeply. 'You see the trouble is I can't think who else to ask. You suggested the GP but he's the kind who closes his mind to anything in the form of psychological treatment, believes drugs are the cure-all, especially for his female patients.'

We were waiting to cross the road. I expected Sandy to turn back but as soon as there was a break in the traffic he shouted, 'Now!' and made a dash for the grass on the other side.

'So you'll think about it?' he said, folding his arms across his chest. 'Just an hour or two should do the trick, I'm sure it would.'

'No, I can't, Sandy, I'm sorry.'

His shoulders sagged. 'Fair enough. Right, well, I'd better go back. Geraldine likes to eat at eight o'clock sharp.'

'She still does the cooking?'

'Oh, yes, I help her of course but she's fine as long as she doesn't have to leave the house. We have a girl who does the shopping, a strange creature who seems too bright to be working as a kind of mother's help but I dare say she's filling in time, waiting to do a course or something.' He smiled briefly. 'No hard feelings? I shouldn't have asked, I can see that now.'

*

Back in the flat I poured myself another glass of wine and sat looking out of the window. Janos had wanted me to go down to his basement for a cup of coffee but I had declined the offer, explaining

that I was leaving for Wales first thing on Saturday so had clothes to wash and packing to sort out. His ankle was no better but while I was away Pam, who lived in the flat below mine, would take Aaron out now and again.

A truck, piled high with lengths of scaffolding, was coming down the road. The driver stuck his head out and I watched, holding my breath, as he steered past my car with barely an inch to spare. Still, anyone mad enough to live in Cliftonwood had to get used to scratches on their paint work and scrapes on the front and back bumpers. The road was too narrow to have cars parked on both sides, but what else could people do? I thought about the immaculate Morris Minor parked in Sandy's garden, contrasting it with my friend Chris's considerably newer but badly beaten-up Vauxhall estate, and wondered, not for the first time, why I had agreed to go on holiday with her and Bruce. It was kind of them to ask but part of me would have preferred to stay in Bristol, go out for day trips, take the dog for walks on the Downs. And why had Chris been so keen for me to join them? Because her relationship with Bruce couldn't take a whole week together with no one except the kids to relieve the tension?

On the pavement opposite, the tiny woman who wore a thick tweed coat, winter and summer, was talking to Pam. I caught a few words of the conversation, something about sub-post offices closing down and what would happen to the pensioners. Then the tiny woman asked after Pam's husband, Ernest, and agreed he was wonderfully cheerful in spite of his disability. Poor overweight Ernest, confined to a wheelchair and more or less housebound except for the rare

occasions when a special bus, paid for by a local charity, took him and five others for an outing to Weston-super-Mare.

Two teenage girls strolled up the hill, one of them carrying a transistor radio with the volume turned up full. I remembered the girl in Leigh Woods who had temporarily attached herself to me, then I thought about Geraldine Haran, housebound, like Ernest, but for entirely different reasons. Something must have been making her anxious or unhappy and the news of the murder had acted as a catalyst, causing her to withdraw into herself and escape from the outside world. Wasn't it sometimes the case with agoraphobia that the fear, rather than being one of leaving the safety of your own home, was a terror of encountering other human beings, people who made demands, people who criticized, people who could unwittingly arouse terrifying feelings of anger and aggression, feelings that had been denied for years, perhaps since childhood?

Chapter Four

Maeve sat a few feet away from me, taking in the fact that it would be three weeks until her next appointment.

‘But coming to see you is the first thing I’ve stuck at for ages.’ She pushed back her damp hair, then lifted her arms above her head to let the air in under her lilac top. ‘Phew, I can’t stand this weather.’

‘I did give you plenty of warning,’ I said. ‘Besides, sometimes missing a week or two can be quite useful.’

She sighed. ‘And when you say it’s time to stop that’ll be it, I’ll be on my own, sink or swim.’

‘You could make an appointment now and again, just to let me know how you’re getting on.’

‘Really? Could I? I handed in my notice on Friday morning, then I had to apologize to Mrs Garland and ask for my job back.’

Maeve’s problem was an inability to make decisions. She saw it as some kind of phobia but gradually she was moving towards an understanding that the real problem was low self-esteem, particularly focused on her physical appearance. With any luck her stop-start dieting regimes could be replaced by realistic plans to improve her life. The trouble was she was using coming to see me as a way of putting off even the most minor decision. *When I’m better ... When you’ve cured me ...* During the next couple of weeks I would have to think hard about what was going to help her. No, not during my holiday. During my holiday I was going to relax, forget about the clients.

After Maeve left I switched off the fan and flung open the window, letting in the familiar roar of traffic. Jotting down a few notes I

checked all my desk drawers were safely locked, then ran downstairs to the office to make sure Heather had remembered I was going to be away for the next two weeks.

Martin was coming out of his room, so lost in thought that I had to stick out an arm to prevent us crashing into each other. 'Oh, Anna, it's you.' He yawned, rubbing the back of his neck to ease the tension.

'Who else would it be, apart from Nick, and he's seeing that probation officer in Kingswood?'

'What? Oh, Kingswood,' he said vaguely. 'Listen, this girl's been referred, a self-mutilator, razor cuts on the back of her arms, nothing too serious but —'

'Sounds pretty serious from her point of view.'

'Yes, I knew you'd be interested, can you fit her in sometime next week?'

'Martin, I'm on holiday.'

'Are you? Oh God, so you are, what on earth's the matter with me?'

'Over-working?'

'Oh, it's not the work.'

In a moment he was going to drag me into his room and start telling me about Sue and the kids and how Sue was always so tired and how he kept going home from work later and later ...

'Anyway,' he said gloomily, 'have a good time. By the way, did Heather find you? Phone call from your inspector.'

When I pushed open the office door Heather was standing on a chair, fiddling with a window catch. 'Ah, there you are.' She was breathing hard. 'You know we really ought to have proper locks in

this place — although come to think of it there's not much worth stealing.' She jumped down, landing heavily, all twelve stone of her, and steadied herself on the desk. 'Howard Fry rang.'

'Yes, Martin said. You should have put him through.'

She handed me the phone. She had a stupid grin on her face. 'He said it was personal.'

I punched in the number of the local station and asked to speak to DI Fry. After a short delay he came on the line.

'Anna, thanks for ringing back, I wondered if we could meet some time.'

'Well — yes.'

'I need your advice.'

'Really? What about?' So that's what he meant by *personal*. I was going to be used as an unpaid forensic psychologist.

'Tell you when I see you. Would half eight be all right?'

'This evening?'

'That bar overlooking the Gorge?'

'Yes, all right.'

The line went dead. Heather was stuffing things into her handbag. Nail file, comb, bottle of aspirin, packet of indigestion tablets, herbal remedy for sinusitis.

'Been having a clear out,' she said. 'My bag fell open at the supermarket checkout. I felt a right idiot.' She looked tired, flustered, relieved it was the end of the week. 'My girls are having a party, turning the house upside-down, and I'll have to stay out till all hours so as not to cramp their style.'

'Like *Abigail's Party*,' I said. 'They repeated it on television not long ago.' Her face looked blank, then she slammed her hand down on

my shoulder. 'Oh, yes, I remember, the wretched mother who didn't know what to do with herself.'

Martin came into the office, still looking preoccupied. He stared at us for a few seconds as if he was trying to remember why he was there then put on his Head of the Psychology Service expression.

'Anna, good, you need a break. Going to Wales, aren't you, with Chris and Bruce?'

I nodded. 'Just for a week.'

'Oh well, enjoy yourself.' He crossed to the door, glancing briefly over his shoulder with an expression that implied it was all right for some. 'Talk to you when you get back.'

Heather pulled a face. 'Poor Martin, d'you think he should see a psychologist?'

'That's not funny.'

'No, of course it isn't.' She stuffed the last item into her bag, a leaflet I recognized at a glance, from a computer dating agency. 'Give Inspector Fry my regards.'

'It'll be about his latest case,' I said, 'the murder in Leigh Woods. He likes to keep things on a personal basis otherwise the Psychology Service might start putting in charges to the CID.'

I was buying milk from the shop at the petrol station when I saw her. She was crouching in the video hire section, with her head twisted to one side, studying the titles nearest to the ground. When she turned round she pretended not to notice me, although I knew she had.

'You're a long way from home,' I said, and her head jerked up with mock surprise.

'The bloke where I live's got a video recorder. I said like I'd pick something out.'

I opened my mouth to say surely there were plenty of video hire places in Southville then decided to take her explanation at face value. 'Found one you like?'

She held it up for me to see. *Killing Time at Bloodseye Bay*, with a picture of a semi-clad woman, her eyes stretched open in terror as a pair of hands closed around her throat.

'Hope you enjoy it.'

She laughed. 'Don't worry, we will.'

So she wasn't a poor lonely creature, contemplating a suicidal jump from the bridge. She shared a house with several others and came up to Clifton because she was bored and the walk filled up part of the day. It was pure coincidence that we had met for the second time in two days.

On my way back to the flat I stopped to look in the window of the Oxfam shop. Someone had left a grey bin liner in the doorway, stuffed with old sweaters and topped with a pair of fur-lined boots.

My imagination took over and I started concocting a horror story that began with one of the charity shop workers tipping out the contents of the bag and finding various parts of a human body. Then I thought about the body in Leigh Woods and the fact that whoever was responsible seemed to have made very little attempt to hide it. Perhaps there had been no time. Perhaps the killing had been the result of a fight and the assailant had run off, unaware that his victim was dead, or dying.

A car was coming up the road, travelling much too fast in a built-up area. It was a black BMW, with a roof-rack, but that didn't mean it

was Sandy Haran's. After all Clifton had never been short on Mercedes, Audis, and BMWs. As it turned the corner into Princess Victoria Street I caught a glimpse of the driver's suntanned balding head and a dark-haired woman in the passenger seat, her head leaning to one side, just an inch or two from the driver's shoulder. If it was Sandy the woman certainly couldn't have been Geraldine, not unless she was wearing a wig. In any case, Geraldine was incapable of leaving the flat.

*

Howard Fry was waiting for me. I could see the back of his head and shoulders, the neat dark red hair and thin strip of white skin between his hair line and the top of his shirt. He had found a table in the open air and seemed to be staring across the Gorge at the house in the trees on the other side of the Suspension Bridge. As I approached he swung round as if his policeman's ears had memorized the sound of my footsteps.

'Anna, how are you?'

I sat down opposite him, glad of the cool air coming up from the river. It was the first time I had felt comfortable all day. 'What's the problem? It sounded like something fairly urgent.'

He smiled. 'Not really, only once I've made up my mind I like to get on with things. I need your professional advice.'

'About a case?'

'No, something personal.'

He looked away. So did I. For the second time in the same number of days I felt exploited, this time by someone who usually treated me with more respect.

'Sounds interesting,' I said, trying to sound more friendly than I felt.

‘I’m not sure where to begin.’ He lifted his glass, then replaced it on the table.

‘Not like you to be at a loss for words.’ I had no intention of making things easier for him. ‘By the way, did you find that church register you were searching for last time we met?’

He looked up, surprised that I had remembered how he spent much of his off-duty time looking up old archives. He was tracing his family — the paternal line of course — and had reached the middle of the eighteenth century. Nice inanimate people like the murder victims whose lives he had to investigate. People who never made demands, never created awkward scenes with their unpredictable behaviour and embarrassing emotions.

‘No, I never found it,’ he said, frowning a little. ‘What’s up? Had a bad day?’

‘No. I was just thinking ... ’

He glanced through the door to the bar. ‘No crime in that, what are you having?’

‘Stay where you are.’ I picked up his empty glass. ‘Same again?’

When I returned with the drinks he began at once with what sounded like a prepared speech. ‘It’s about my son. Stuart. I think I mentioned — my ex-wife, she lives in East Anglia, near Ipswich, so I don’t see Stuart very often.’

‘Yes, I know.’ Why did he have to talk as though we hardly knew each other. ‘He’s nine, is that right?’

‘Ten in September.’

I thought about Sandy Haran’s son, Thomas, and wondered if Stuart Fry had the same sad eyes, the same worried expression. On

the face of it Howard's son had more to contend with — but things were never that simple.

'I took him on holiday in April,' said Howard, 'but I don't think he enjoyed it very much, we didn't really know what to say to each other.'

'No, I can imagine it must be difficult. You keep in touch mostly by phone, do you?'

'Yes, but phoning's never very satisfactory. In fact the way things are going we're in danger of becoming total strangers.'

'How often do you see him?'

'Not often enough.' He took his jacket off the back of the chair and began searching in the pockets.

'I know it sounds trite ... ' I was trying not to sound like a psychologist, but why bother? After all, it was my professional expertise that Howard wanted, nothing more. 'But the main thing is that he knows you care about him. Perhaps if you talked to him, told him what you've just told me.'

'He's a bit young.' He passed me a photo of a child about as different from Thomas Haran as it was possible to imagine. A big robust-looking boy, dressed in a Manchester United strip, with the same thick red hair as his father and the same narrow grey eyes.

'He's old enough to understand the problem,' I said.

'Yes, I suppose so. The thing is, if you don't see kids on a day-to-day basis they grow up, change, you make silly mistakes like assuming they're still mad on dinosaurs when really — '

'Is there something you're both interested in? Football? Cricket? Some other sport?'

He shook his head. 'You're thinking of Graham Whittle.'

DS Whittle was Howard's colleague, a keen supporter of Bristol City, married to a nurse at the Infirmary, easy to get on with, uncomplicated.

'Computers,' said Howard, 'would that do, d'you suppose?'

'You're interested in computers?' I sounded cross and was in danger of giving away the fact that I had hoped the invitation was a social one or at the very least a mixture of social and professional.

'Yes, computers would do.'

'I gave him one of those electronic notebook things.'

'Lucky boy.'

'He takes it everywhere, used to anyway, but I suppose he might enjoy a spell with the police computers.'

'Good idea, when are you seeing him next?'

'Oh, in a month or so,' he said vaguely, then he relaxed, leaning back in his chair and spreading his fingers on the table. 'Thanks, that's very helpful. Right, you'll want to know how the Leigh Woods murder inquiry's going.'

He had sensed that something had upset me but had no idea what. Now he was going to placate me by letting me in on a few trivial facts about his latest case.

'Walter Bury,' he said, 'does the name mean anything?'

'Only that he got his head smashed in.'

'He was a widower. Wife died two and a half years ago in a hit-and-run accident.'

'Poor man.'

He thought about this for a moment, as though he had never identified personally with the victim. 'His skull was fractured, not that a fracture itself is ever fatal. It's the damage to the cranial contents.'

He paused, checking to make sure I wanted to hear more. 'A heavy blow just beneath the left ear, administered with some kind of heavy hammer or mallet. Nasty. It damaged the vertebral artery.'

'So the attack was premeditated.'

He nodded. 'The chances of a random killer administering such a precise blow must be virtually nil.'

'And the body was found by some children. How long had the man been dead?'

'According to the pathologist, about thirty-six hours, maybe a little longer. It was hot at the time, even hotter than it is now, so the body had started to —'

'What happened to the two kids?'

'How d'you mean? Oh, they should've been in school. As far as I can tell they didn't look too closely, weren't even certain the man was dead.' Turning over a beer mat he examined the writing on the back: an invitation to take part in a competition, with a prize of two weeks in the Canary Islands. 'He lived in Abbot's Leigh,' he said. 'Walter Bury.'

'Yes, it said in the paper.'

'Seems to have been a loner, hardly any friends. The last person to see him alive was a neighbour who barely knew him. That's the trouble, nobody did.'

'Where did he work?' Against my better judgement I wanted to know more. Until recently it had been just another murder. Now I kept running into people who seemed to have been affected quite strongly in one way or another. Geraldine Haran, hibernating in her flat. The girl on the Suspension Bridge, morbidly obsessed with every detail of the crime, claiming to have inside information.

'He didn't have a job,' said Howard. 'Took early retirement eighteen months ago. Before that he sold insurance.'

'So you've no leads.'

'Nothing definite. There's a certain amount of forensic evidence, some interesting marks on the skull, but without a suspect or murder weapon it's not a lot of use. Two or three people have been brought in for questioning. A woman from the university was studying the plant life in the area surrounding the Gorge, although at the time of the murder she was working lower down, near the river. And a couple of men who Graham Whittle thought might be worth interviewing.'

I thought about telling him I had met a girl on the Suspension Bridge, someone he might like to interview. Then I decided against it. 'So enquiries have ground to a halt.'

'Not quite. There's a sister in Kent. The local CID went to see her but she was ill in hospital, recovering from a serious operation. When she's fit enough to be interviewed, who knows? Bury may have mentioned people he knew in Bristol, places he frequented.' He stood up, believing I had lost interest in the case. 'How's the Psychology Service?'

'OK. Good some days, frustrating others. Actually I'm on holiday for a couple of weeks, as of now.'

He nodded, smoothing back his hair with both hands. 'Good, I expect you need it. Anyway, thanks for the advice. I don't know if I can follow it but I'll have a go. Will a letter be all right or do I have to talk about the problem face to face?'

'Oh, face to face,' I said, managing a feeble smile.

‘By the way.’ He lifted his jacket off the back of the chair. ‘Walter Bury’s wife, the hit-and-run accident I told you about. According to his sister Bury was obsessed with what had happened, talked of little else.’

‘Wouldn’t you be?’

‘Yes, of course.’ He stared at me, wondering why I sounded so edgy — or still thinking about the murder? ‘The police never found the driver. There were no witnesses, nothing, just one of those random tragedies that make no sense to the bereaved person left behind.’

*

Chris phoned just after eight. She felt so awful, didn’t know how to break the news, but the doctor had just been round, Jack and Rosie had mumps.

‘Poor things,’ I said. ‘Still, it’s better to get it over with while they’re young, isn’t it?’

She groaned. ‘Look, Anna, you could always go on your own. It’s only a kind of chalet thing but you’d be all right, there’s three or four others nearby.’

‘No, don’t worry; but I suppose we’ll still have to pay for it, won’t we?’

She hesitated. ‘Well, if you really don’t want to go Bruce knows someone in the Housing Department who says she’ll take over the cost, go down on Saturday with her boyfriend.’

‘Fine, tell her that’s fine.’

‘You’re certain? I feel so bad about it.’

‘Well, don’t.’

‘You mean you’re not that disappointed?’ Had she sensed something in my voice? ‘Of course I’m disappointed, but we can go another time. Let me know how Jack and Rosie are and I’ll call round when they’re feeling better.’

The feeling of relief was overwhelming. How could I ever have agreed to a week in a chalet in west Wales? If I needed a holiday it had to be something expensive, exotic, preferably in the company of an attentive and exceptionally attractive man. Someone kind but independent, sensitive but not self-obsessed, someone with a trouble-free life, a fascinating job — and no wife.

When the phone rang again I thought for one awful moment it might be Chris saying the mumps was a lie and she had just been testing me out to see if I really wanted to go.

It was Sandy Haran.

‘Anna? I’m not interrupting anything, am I? Only I wanted to say how sorry I am. Putting all that pressure on you, it was very unfair, completely selfish. Just forget I ever asked. You must come round again, have a meal — when Geraldine’s better.’

‘Sandy?’

‘Yes?’ He sounded as though he was preparing himself for an onslaught.

‘If it’s what she’d like I’ll have a talk with Geraldine on Monday. Then decide if I think I can help.’

There was a slight pause. ‘What about your — ’

‘I’ll explain when I see you. Would eleven o’clock be all right?’

He breathed out deeply. ‘Anna, you’ve no idea. You’ll accept the going rate — if you decide you can help Geraldine? I’m willing to pay whatever it costs. More.’

'We'll discuss that when I see you.'

'Yes, of course, and there's something else I might be able to offer in return. I'm doing up a cottage out towards Clevedon. When it's ready I could let you have it at a very reasonable price.'

'Thanks, Sandy, but the country depresses me, all that peace and quiet.'

'I'll see you on Monday, then. You've just no idea how grateful I am. I can't thank you enough.'

Why had I given in? But in my heart of hearts I knew I hadn't given in at all. Geraldine Haran's agoraphobia had aroused my curiosity. There was something odd, even inexplicable about it. Could she really have been so shocked by the close proximity of the murder that she was now unable to leave the house? Of course, different people reacted differently to a traumatic event. According to Sandy nine-year-old Thomas had taken it in his stride, and as for the girl on the bridge, she had talked as though the whole gruesome business had no more reality to her than a TV movie. And Sandy himself, the property dealer turned counsellor, the leopard who'd changed his spots, he had been shocked by Walter Bury's violent death, but only for a day or two, only till the news had sunk in.

I pictured Geraldine Haran, sitting straight-backed in her chair by the window, and began ticking off a mental list of the conditions necessary for brief, intensive therapy, the kind that only requires five or six sessions. *The client's problem must be clearly identified. The client must respond positively to interpretations of how the problem may have come about. The client must have the motivation to focus on the problem and work hard to help herself.* Then I remembered Howard Fry's parting remark, about Walter Bury's obsession with the

hit-and-run driver that had mown down his wife. Was it possible Geraldine knew something about the murder but was too frightened to reveal it, even to Sandy? Did the girl on the bridge have something to hide? And what about the tenants in the ground-floor flat? Bryan and Helen Sealey with their newly adopted baby who was being looked after by an elderly nanny. There was something intriguing, and slightly disturbing, about the household. How much did the occupants of the two flats see of each other? Did the Sealeys guard their privacy or were Sandy and Thomas welcome in the ground-floor flat? Geraldine of course was housebound, alone for much of the time and showing no signs of wanting visitors to drop in for a chat. Before the murder had she talked to Helen Sealey, taken an interest in the baby? Then had something happened that made her want to cut herself off from the rest of the world?

If anyone in the house knew anything about the murder they were keeping very quiet. But the feeling of tension that surrounded the place was impossible to miss. Howard Fry had virtually admitted the police were getting nowhere, had no real leads. With any luck, working at the house might provide the opportunity to do rather better.

Chapter Five

‘How nice of you to come.’ Geraldine was perched uncomfortably on the edge of the window seat with her hands folded against her stomach. She was still dressed in navy blue but this time she wore loose-fitting linen trousers and a plain white shirt. Her rigid smile conveyed a considerable degree of anxiety — or it could have been resentment.

‘I feel such a fraud, so silly.’ She looked at her feet, waiting for me to tell her she wasn’t silly at all. When I said nothing her mouth tightened a little. ‘What would you like me to talk about? I had a friend who saw a counsellor once, marriage guidance or something. She was supposed to bring her husband with her but he refused.’

‘Did she find it helpful?’

‘Oh, I think so. She dreaded going, but afterwards ...’ She took a handkerchief from her pocket and held it close to her mouth. ‘Are you interested in colour? You’re spring, light and bright. You should wear clear blues, peach, apricot.’

‘Really?’

‘I’m summer, so my hairdresser tells me.’

‘It’s not something I know much about, I’m afraid.’

‘No, well why should you.’ She studied my face, avoiding any eye contact. ‘You’ve far more important matters to concern yourself with.’

‘How did you feel about me coming to see you?’

‘I beg your pardon? Oh, just terribly grateful of course.’

‘Why grateful?’

‘Well, you sparing the time, especially when you’re supposed to be on holiday.’

'It was my decision.'

'Yes, I suppose that's right.' She screwed up the handkerchief in the palm of her hand. 'Now what? I'm afraid I can't bear silences, they seem to affect my breathing, it's so ridiculous.'

'The murder,' I said, aware that visits to clients in their own homes were always in danger of turning into social occasions. 'It must have been a dreadful shock, taking place like it did, so close to your house.'

'Oh, it was quite a way from here really, the other end of the woods.'

'And you haven't been out at all since it happened?'

She shook her head. 'Lynsey does all the shopping. That's our helper. Lynsey Wills, she's called, but apparently she's not related to the tobacco people. Sandy's working on the cottage so he's much too busy, and in any case I'd hate to have him rushing round because of me.'

So that's where Sandy was. I had expected him to let me into the flat but it had been Geraldine who answered the intercom and released the lock. Perhaps, having fixed up the treatment, he thought it best to stay well clear in case he was accused of interfering. I had no knowledge of his financial situation but from hints he had dropped I was fairly certain *doing up the cottage* was more of a hobby than a necessity. Presumably he had made several lucrative property deals and decided to call it a day while the going was good. Sensible investments would provide him with a reasonable standard of living for the rest of his life.

'She's a wonderful worker,' said Geraldine, twisting her wedding ring round and round, then pushing her hand in her pocket. 'Lynsey,

she's a wonderful help.'

'Where did you find her?'

'She has a friend who works on a make-up counter in one of the stores. John Lewis or Debenhams, I forget. It's one of those franchises and Sandy knows the area manager.' She broke off, shaking her shoulders as if a shudder had run down her back. 'I'm sorry, I'm talking rubbish, it's just that I'm not sure what you need to know.'

I wanted to know more about Lynsey. 'So Sandy told his friend he was looking for someone to help round the flat and —'

'Sorry?' Geraldine was studying her fingernails, then she started rubbing her right index finger round the palm of her left hand. A rhyme from childhood jumped into my mind. *Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear. Upstairs, downstairs, and tickle him under*

...

'This Lynsey,' I repeated. 'This friend who works in one of the department stores knew Lynsey was looking for work so Sandy's friend arranged for her to come and see you.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'You hadn't advertised for someone?'

'No, it was all quite informal, just one of those lucky coincidences. Of course, her friend may have told her about the ground-floor flat being let to a playwright. People like to meet people in show business.'

'Lynsey said something about the Sealeys?'

She looked puzzled. 'No, nothing, only we wondered why a bright girl like her was prepared to do such a menial job.'

'Perhaps she'd been looking for work for some time.'

‘Yes, I suppose so. Sandy tried to take up references but I thought there wasn’t much point. After all I was only going to give her a shopping list, she didn’t even have to come inside the flat.’

‘She could’ve run off with the money.’

‘Could have,’ said Geraldine dreamily, ‘but everything’s worked out beautifully. She was so good with the shopping Sandy asked if she could do some cleaning too, and a bit of gardening although she’s not so keen on that. She doesn’t like the insects.’

I was thinking about Sandy. I had been thinking about him, on or off, all weekend. A well-constructed piece of research had demonstrated that when a group of agoraphobic women started to get better their husbands got worse, became anxious, depressed. It appeared that the stability of the marital relationships had depended on the men involved feeling needed, indispensable. When their wives recovered they felt insecure.

Still, in Sandy’s case this couldn’t be right — could it? After all, he had hired someone to help with the shopping, rather than doing it himself, and he had seemed desperate that I find a cure for Geraldine.

‘The murder,’ I repeated, hoping to jolt Geraldine out of her trancelike state. ‘Tell me a little about how you were feeling before it happened. Was there anything worrying you, making you feel more nervous than usual?’

‘Oh, no, nothing. As far as I know I was — well, normal.’ She smiled briefly, then the blank look returned. ‘Yes, I’m sure you’re right — about Lynsey. Her friend told her about a silly woman with agoraphobia and she thought there might be a little job for her. Very sensible, used her initiative.’ Nothing she said rang true. Beneath the

self-denigrating manner I sensed anger she was having difficulty in keeping under control. Now and again she glanced in my direction, mostly her eyes were fixed on a yellow lozenge shape in the centre of one of the Persian rugs. I wanted her to relax her stiffly held shoulders, to stop twisting the ring, to say something real.

‘This is difficult for you,’ I said. ‘You probably don’t know why you’re feeling so anxious.’

Her eyes met mine, just for a split second. ‘No, you’re right. As a matter of fact I’ve always seen myself as living a charmed life. Kind, considerate husband, wonderful son. I don’t know if Sandy told you but we used to have the whole house, when my parents were alive. After they died it was far too big for just the three of us so Sandy had it converted.’

‘How did you feel about that?’

‘I beg your pardon? Oh, I was in total agreement.’

She had a way of speaking fast, then pressing her lips together with a little laugh. ‘The ground floor’s only let on temporary contracts so there’s no fear of getting stuck with tiresome neighbours. You’ve met the Sealeys?’

‘No, just Miss Halliwell and the baby.’

‘Rona Halliwell,’ she said. ‘Imagine looking after a baby at her age. It must be so exhausting.’ She knelt on the window seat. ‘Do you have a garden? I used to love gardening, before all this. I planted wildflowers for the butterflies.’

‘You can’t even go out in the garden?’

‘Oh, that would be out of the question.’ Suddenly she swivelled round and there were tears in her eyes. ‘How will you decide?’

‘Decide?’

‘Whether I’m the right sort of person. Sandy said I’d have to be assessed to find out if I was suitable for treatment.’ She left the window seat and pulled up a chair so that she was only a few feet away from me. ‘Can you do it? Can you find a cure?’

‘I’m on holiday for two weeks,’ I said. ‘I want to make sure that gives us sufficient time, otherwise you’d have to be referred on, when I go back to work, and that would mean starting all over again.’

‘So that’s why you asked how I was feeling before the murder. You think I’m a silly neurotic woman who likes making a fuss. You think I’m doing this on purpose, just for attention.’ She gripped her knees with both hands and started rocking backwards and forwards.

What was it about her? One moment I felt edgy, frustrated, as if I was being manipulated by someone putting on an act, the next I felt myself warm to her. So far her main aim had been to give away as little as possible. But surely that was understandable. After all if this was my first and last visit she was hardly going to reveal much of herself to a virtual stranger. There was something about her that produced a strong reaction in me. Every so often the masklike expression on her face was replaced by a look of extreme sadness. Or was it fear? I wanted to know what had happened. I wanted to help. If I was brutally honest with myself I also wanted to keep the link with people who just might know more about the murder than they were letting on.

‘If it’s what you’d like I’ll see you each morning,’ I said. ‘We’ll concentrate on the present, your immediate feelings and how you felt the day the murder victim’s body was discovered in the woods.’

I waited several moments but she had her eyes closed. When I cleared my throat she jumped.

‘I’m so sorry. Thank you. I’ll do whatever you say.’ The expressionless tone had returned. ‘It’s such a worry for Sandy, I feel I should co-operate with anything that might help.’

‘Just one last thing,’ I said. ‘The fact that I knew Sandy before I met you might make things difficult. You might prefer to see someone else, someone completely unconnected.’

‘Oh no, I prefer it this way. Sandy and I have never had secrets. That would be awful, so lonely.’

Out in the street someone was trying to start a car, turning the ignition key again and again, flooding the engine. Geraldine made a move to stand up. ‘Would you like some coffee?’

‘Not just now, thanks. Did you hear about the murder on the radio or did someone tell you what had happened?’

She folded her arms. ‘Helen — I think Helen told me, or was it Bryan? No, Helen was coming back from the Downs. She’d been taking pictures from that observation place, the underground cave that comes out in the rock face, high above the Gorge. I’ve never been there myself, I can’t bear heights, but Sandy’s told me about it. He took Thomas once and — ’ She broke off.

‘Oh yes, I remember, I was in the garden, dead-heading the roses. Helen came across the lawn and asked if I’d heard. Then she told me it had been on the radio.’ She put up her hand and stroked her lower lip. ‘The day it happened. You want us to stick to ... It was a Thursday. I know!’ For the first time her face came alive. ‘It wasn’t the radio. Helen saw a poster outside the newsagent’s. *A body in Leigh Woods*. Sandy was back later than usual but I switched on the television news, the local bulletin, and they said — I can’t remember

exactly — there was no name or anything, just the body of a middle-aged man.’

‘How did it make you feel?’

‘Well, shocked, I suppose.’ She stood up and walked towards the piano, lifting the photograph of Thomas and running her finger along the frame.

‘And when did you find out who it was?’

‘I beg your pardon? Oh, next day, whenever the name was given to the newspapers. Helen says his skull was smashed. Crushed by the weight of a heavy blow. Think of it.’ She closed her eyes, clenching and unclenching the muscles in her jaw. ‘D’you suppose he died instantly or could he have been lying there, in agony, only half a mile away and none of us knowing what had ... ’

Her voice was steady but her hands were shaking uncontrollably.

‘I should sit down,’ I said, taking the photo from her hands and guiding her to a chair. ‘Tell me how you’re feeling. Now. This precise moment.’

She looked up at me, her eyes open wide and beads of sweat on her upper lip. This wasn’t an act. She was terrified.

‘What can I do?’ she whispered, wrapping her arms round her body and swaying from side to side. ‘Please tell me what to do.’

*

As I rounded the corner of the house two people came out of the ground-floor flat and started walking towards the dark green jeep I had seen parked in the drive earlier on. The man was of average height, with broad shoulders and a round amused-looking face. His hair was dark and wiry, sticking up on the top of his head.

'Hi.' He walked towards me, holding out his hand. 'You must be Anna McColl.'

'Yes, that's right.' It irritated me a little that he knew my name. Sandy must have told everyone, even his tenants, that I was coming to see Geraldine.

'Bryan Sealey. I don't believe I've ever met a psychologist before, although God knows plenty of the people I come across could do with some of your expertise.'

The woman, who I assumed was Helen Sealey, stood by the jeep, biting her lip impatiently.

'Sandy warned us you were coming,' said Bryan, 'in case we thought you were an intruder. Can't be too careful these days, and with what happened in Leigh Woods ... ' He stretched out an arm in the direction of his wife. 'Helen, come and meet Anna McColl.'

She moved towards us slowly, reluctantly, and shook hands without applying any pressure. 'You're helping Geraldine.'

It was a statement, not a question. Our eyes met briefly and against my better judgement I felt a twinge of envy. She was beautiful, with soft dark hair and large brown eyes, spaced wide apart like a baby seal. Since giving up modelling she must have put on a little weight, not that anyone would ever have described her as fat.

'I saw your baby,' I said, 'she's lovely.'

'Chloe.' She glanced at Bryan, then back at me. 'She's called Chloe.'

'Seven months,' said Bryan, 'we've had her since she was a week old. It's all official now, thank God — the adoption order I mean.'

'Must be a relief.'

He smiled. 'You have children?'

'No.' I turned towards the gate then, since he seemed in no hurry to leave, turned back deciding to try and extract a little more information. 'I met your nanny — Miss Halliwell — the first time I came to the house.'

'Really? Good old Rona. She's out at the moment, taking the baby for a walk on the Downs. For some obscure reason she dislikes crossing the Suspension Bridge but she can hardly walk right down to Ashton Gate and up the other side.' Turning to Helen he put his arm round her neck, attempting to draw her into the conversation. 'We're so lucky, aren't we, my darling? It's near impossible to adopt a tiny baby these days. They try to persuade you to take on a disturbed adolescent, very worthy of course but hardly the same proposition.'

Helen's expression altered a little but it couldn't be called a smile. Then she turned and walked across to the jeep, pulling open the passenger door and climbing inside, where she sat staring straight ahead, waiting for Bryan to join her.

'Interested in the theatre?' he said, not in the least put off by his wife's rudeness. 'If so I'll give you a couple of tickets — you and your husband.' He glanced at my left hand. 'Or whoever you want to take. The play opens in just over two weeks' time.'

'Thanks.'

He frowned. 'Your work — what kind of people would you see? Not the bad ones, I assume, not full-blown schizophrenics. Just ordinary people who have problems they need to sort out, am I right?'

'It depends.'

‘On what? I’m not so ignorant I imagine there’s a sharp division — between the mentally ill and the — well, the psychologically disturbed I suppose you’d call it. Tell me this, if someone had nightmares, recurring ones that woke them up night after night, would that warrant a visit to one of your profession?’

‘It might.’

‘What if someone had repressed all their feelings and it was affecting their health, really getting them down?’

‘You’re interested in that kind of thing. For one of your plays, is it?’

He laughed. ‘Right you are, no more questions. ’Bye for now. If I don’t see you again I’ll give Sandy the tickets.’ He started walking away, calling over his shoulder. ‘Amnesia, is there really such a condition? No, I don’t mean from a blow on the head. I mean from something psychological like a nasty shock?’ Then he climbed into the jeep without waiting for an answer, raising his hand in a brief wave as he started up the engine, and reversed out into the road.

Rona Halliwell was pushing the baby’s buggy across the grass. I watched as she forced her way between two bushes, elbowing away the brambles that were catching her hair and the collar of her dark blue jacket. The jacket was smart, almost like a proper nanny’s uniform, but her cotton skirt was flowered, reaching to just below the knee, and part of the hem had come adrift. She was approaching where I was standing, presumably on her way to the children’s playground although the baby was far too young for swings and slides. Perhaps she had made friends with some of the mothers, although this I doubted. She looked like a loner, the kind of person who puts up with the presence of other human beings as long as she can keep them at arm’s length.

‘Miss Halliwell?’ I expected her to stare at me blankly.

‘Oh, it’s you.’

‘I’ve just come from the house. I felt like a walk on the Downs.’

She nodded. ‘I expect you did.’ Sitting down on one of the wooden seats she patted the space next to her.

‘You’re sure you don’t mind?’

‘Why should I? You’ve been seeing Mrs Haran, have you, trying to throw some light on her self-imposed imprisonment? If you want my opinion someone should set fire to the place.’ She had her tongue in her cheek — literally. ‘Well, perhaps not actually set it alight. Just call “*Fire!*” and see if that got her down the stairs.’ She rubbed her hands together as if the thought of seeing Geraldine running into the garden gave her a certain satisfaction. ‘If you want my opinion, talking to people’s a waste of time. Action — that’s what gets results. If you want to understand a person don’t listen to what they spout, just observe their behaviour.’

Inside the buggy, protected by a white lace parasol, the baby slept fitfully, opening her eyes now and again to stare at the trees. She was a pretty little thing with thick brown hair and colouring not unlike her adoptive mother. I remembered reading how they tried to match the baby to the parents — physical appearance and general background — although with the shortage of babies up for adoption these days that was probably a thing of the past. I wondered if the Sealeys had pulled strings to find a child available for adoption. As far as I knew private adoptions were illegal, but perhaps there were ways round the law if you knew the right people.

Rona was easing the baby into a more upright position. ‘You live near here, do you?’

‘Cliftonwood.’

‘Don’t know it.’

‘The down-market end of Clifton.’

She yawned, covering her mouth with both hands. ‘You like Bristol?’

‘Yes, how about you?’

‘Oh, I just go wherever Helen and Bryan go. I looked after Helen, you know, when she was a little girl. Both her parents were professional people — doctors. Dead now. Cancer and heart disease, the usual.’

A boy of about six with a red and white track suit and untidy fair hair was talking to a young man who was leaning against a tree, eating a bag of crisps. I wondered if the boy was on his own, if the young man had an unhealthy interest in children. Then a woman, who looked like the boy’s mother, joined them and the three stood together laughing and talking. That was the trouble with all those television programmes and newspaper articles, they turned perfectly innocent people into potential child molesters.

‘It must seem strange,’ I said, ‘looking after Helen all those years ago, then coming back to look after her baby.’

The sun had come out. The baby turned her head away from the bright light and Rona leaned forward to adjust the parasol. ‘Good girl, there’s a good girl. Like talking to a dog, isn’t it, but I’ve never thought there was much difference. Dogs don’t smile of course, but they wag their tails so it comes to the same thing. Live alone, do you?’

‘Yes — yes, I do.’

'I'm surprised you're on foot. I thought you people went everywhere in cars.'

'I like the walk. Besides I'm on holiday, apart from seeing Mrs Haran.'

'As a favour to that husband of hers.'

'You were with the Sealeys in London?' I asked, changing the subject, determined to avoid any further discussion of Geraldine's state of mind.

'Sorry, what did you say? Oh, London. Yes, London, and before that ... a flat in Sutton. I've kept it on just in case.' She rubbed her eyes. 'Hay fever, nothing to worry about. Not the grass, the pollution.'

'Yes, it's bad round Cumberland Basin. Better up here.'

She wasn't listening. 'Of course Bryan drives everywhere in that ridiculous military-looking vehicle. Looks as though it's designed for the outback although on closer inspection it's fairly obvious it wouldn't stand up to a bumpy field let alone a stretch of rough moorland.'

'I met them when I was leaving the house.'

'On their way to the antiques fair, were they?'

'I've no idea.'

'Could be off to somewhere Helen wants to photograph. She doesn't drive so Bryan has to act as chauffeur.' She looked away, fiddling with the brake on the buggy. 'When he's free, which isn't often now they want more re-writes on the second act.'

'I'm not sure I'd like to drive that thing,' I said.

'Oh, it's not that.' Rona looked surprised as though she thought everyone knew. 'Helen hasn't driven for nearly two years.'

'Really? Why's that?'

She was watching the traffic queueing up to cross the bridge. 'Your guess is as good as mine, my dear, your guess is as good as mine.'

'Perhaps Bryan likes to do the driving. Crazy as it may seem some men refuse to be driven about by a woman. It undermines their self-esteem.'

She snorted, leaning across to undo the top press stud on the baby's pink and white suit. 'Yes, well, you know best.'

Across the other side of the grass a tall thin girl was arguing with the old man selling ice-cream from a dilapidated van. The sun was in my eyes but I recognized her at once.

Rona Halliwell half stood, screwing up her eyes. 'Isn't that Lynsey?'

'Lynsey? The Lynsey who helps with Geraldine's shopping?'

'Looks like her, and since she's giving that man what for I should think that just about clinches it. You haven't had the pleasure of making her acquaintance?'

'No. Yes. I've met her but I didn't realize who she was.'

'Dreadful creature, can't think why they took her on. Not that she'll be needed long now you're going to cure Mrs Haran of her *agoraphobia*.' She pronounced the word slowly, accentuating each syllable with heavy sarcasm.

'I get the feeling Lynsey may have had quite a hard time,' I said.

'Oh, you do, do you?' Rona Halliwell's eyes blazed. 'That's what she's told you, is it, or do you lot have magic powers that enable you to see the inside of other people's heads?'

Chapter Six

She was standing near the main road, at the bottom of Ambra Vale, a tall familiar figure dressed in black shorts that reached just below the knee and made her legs look absurdly long and bony. She saw me out of the corner of her eye but turned, pretending to be reading the graffiti on a row of garage doors.

‘Lynsey?’

She looked up but said nothing, just waited until I drew level, then took hold of Aaron’s lead. When I asked how she had found out where I lived she jerked her head in the direction of the dog. ‘How d’you think? Like I saw the address on his name tag. Where you taking him?’

‘Down by the river.’

She bent to re-tie one of her boot laces. ‘How d’you know my name?’

‘I saw you yesterday, up by the playground.’

‘I know. You were with that cow that looks after the baby.’

Since it was nearly nine thirty the worst of the morning rush hour was over but the lights for the pedestrian crossing had failed and we had to wait some time for a break in the traffic. On the other side of the main road the greengrocer was putting out trays of petunias and tobacco plants. An old actor I knew by sight emerged, bare chested, from the newsagent’s, his stomach bulging over the top of his tennis shorts, his feet flopping out of a pair of leather slippers with the backs stamped down. I nodded to him and he raised an arm.

‘Know a lot of people round here, do you?’ said Lynsey, staring at me, her face as near expressionless as she could make it. ‘S’pose

they tell you all their problems. I can't stand do-gooders.'

'I'm not a do-gooder.'

'Didn't say you were. Anyway if you don't do any good what's the point?'

'Now you've put me in a double bind. If I say I'm not a do-gooder you'll say — '

'I know what a double bind is,' she said scornfully. 'Come on, the dog wants to go on the grass.' She ran across the road, then walked ahead of me, with Aaron on her left, well away from the traffic. Every so often she glanced over her shoulder to make sure I was keeping up.

'So you work for Mrs Haran!' I shouted, my words half drowned by the noise of a bus pulling away from the stop in Merchant's Road.

'What if I do?'

'When I asked if you knew where the house was you never said you worked there.'

'Why should I?'

I sighed and she laughed, pulling on Aaron's choke-chain, waiting for me to catch up. 'Sandy said he had this friend, a psychologist. I put two and two together, took real brains that did.'

So she called the Harans by their Christian names. That was typical of Sandy. He hated all divisions — sex, age, social class. It was something that had come up on the counselling course and led to quite a heated argument about the necessity or otherwise for hierarchies and professional relationships.

We crossed the bridge over the floating harbour and turned right past the overgrown railway track and old tobacco warehouses.

‘Seagulls build nests up on those roofs,’ I said, passing on a recently acquired piece of information gained from Chris’s son, Jack, who had been watching a programme about bird migration.

Lynsey shrugged. ‘If you stand looking up it’s like the whole building’s leaning forward. Go on then, do it!’

I did as I was told, staring up at seven or eight storeys of sheer red-brick wall. ‘How long have you been doing Geraldine’s shopping?’ I said.

‘Why? Just since they found the stiff. Like I felt sorry for her — and I needed the money. It’s not just the shopping, there’s cleaning too, and Thomas. He had a wart on his hand so I took him to the doctor’s to have it frozen off.’

‘Why couldn’t his father take him?’

‘Thomas said he’d rather go with me.’ Two people were walking towards us. They looked very young, still in their teens, but the man was pushing a twin buggy and when they drew closer I could see that the children were different ages, one about two, the other younger, perhaps nine or ten months.

Lynsey stared at them with interest. ‘Poor sods,’ she muttered, ‘the parents not the kids. Poor bloody sods.’

We had reached the path by the river-bank and I started worrying in case Aaron jumped in the mud. I asked Lynsey to keep him on the lead but she ignored my request, releasing him as soon as we were well away from the traffic. When he looked down at the river she spoke his name threateningly and he returned to her side.

‘Got more sense,’ she said, reading my thoughts. ‘They’re like kids, if you trust them they behave OK.’

'Let's hope you're right.' I was torn between wanting to ask questions — what had she been doing before she worked for the Harans, why had she come to live in Bristol in the first place — and a feeling that it would be advisable not to become too involved in her life.

'You married?' she said, swinging her leg, kicking an imaginary ball.

'No.'

'Live with someone?'

'No.'

She laughed. 'Good. People who live on their own aren't so settled down. Have you noticed how couples sort of merge into one? Then they don't need anyone else.'

Fifty yards ahead two boys were throwing stones into the water. Lynsey saw them and started running flat out. I watched her catch hold of one of the boys, shouting at him until he wrenched free showing her two fingers.

'Bastards!' She hurled herself at the second boy and the two of them fell on the grass, rolling over and over. Then Aaron appeared, barking loudly, and the boy who was still on his feet threw a stone that bounced off the dog's hind quarters.

'Stop it,' I yelled, trying to catch hold of Lynsey's T-shirt but only ending up with a kick on the back of my hand.

The boy on the grass lay still, with Lynsey standing over him, breathing hard. For a horrible moment I thought he had been badly injured, then he struggled to his feet, rubbing his cheek, and moved off calling over his shoulder, a string of obscenities that faded in the distance as he ran down the path towards the allotments.

Lynsey sat with her knees pulled up to her chin. Her lip was bleeding. She licked it with the tip of her tongue, then glared at me defiantly.

‘Why didn’t you help?’ There were tears in her eyes. ‘There’s ducklings. He’s killed one of them. There were four, now there’s only three.’ Scrambling to her feet she started running towards the river. ‘Over there, by the tree, you blind or something?’ She started counting, slowly as if she thought I was too dense to take in what she was saying. ‘See, only three left. The dead one’s lying on the grass.’ Then she let out a shriek. ‘No, look, it’s still alive!’ She stumbled on a few steps, then crouched on her haunches with the tears streaming down her face. It was the first time I had seen her look genuinely happy.

Aaron was ominously close to the water. Lynsey caught hold of his collar and pulled him towards her, then sat down again with her arms round his neck.

‘That boy,’ I said, ‘you could have hurt him.’

She turned round, smiling. ‘I did.’

‘He wasn’t very big.’

‘Neither are the ducks.’

An elderly woman with a yellow straw hat was approaching. When she passed us she opened her mouth as though she was going to speak, then closed it again and walked on.

‘Friend of yours?’ I asked.

Lynsey nodded. ‘Lives at the top of the house.’

‘Your house?’

‘Had a heart attack. Like the doctor says she’s got to take more exercise, poor old sod.’

'She looks pretty old. Shouldn't she be in residential care?'

'Up to her. Don't s'pose they've got a place she can go. Walk along the Gorge, shall we?'

'If you like, but I can't go very far.'

'Suit yourself.' The sullen expression had returned. 'Whitchurch — d'you know it? I lived there when I first come to Bristol but like it didn't work out.'

'Why was that?'

'Ask a lot of questions, don't you? Got this friend, Deb. Used to get on OK but her boyfriend moved in. He's a right shit. Which d'you prefer, human beings or animals? If you ask me humans are the lowest form of life.'

'That's what you think?'

'It's 'cos they know how to cheat. That's why our brains evolved to be so big.'

'It's a theory.'

'It's a theory,' she repeated scornfully. 'I reckon if you meet someone who's really good at cheating and lying you've a duty to make sure they never get another chance.'

'You've had some bad experiences.'

'Not 'specially. Why d'you say that?' When I didn't answer she peered at my face. 'My mum died when I was a kid but I can't really remember so I don't s'pose it did me much harm.'

'What about your father?'

'What about him? Went to live in America, didn't he, married this rich bird, like he'd known her from before.'

'You couldn't go with him?'

'Didn't want to, did I?' She tossed her head, bending to pick up a branch that was lying in the long grass.

'So what happened to you?' She wanted to talk but she was going to force me to drag each crumb of information out of her.

'Went to live in a children's home, didn't I?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Why? Better than being fostered. They wanted me to stay on at school, do A-levels, but like I couldn't take it, not living in the home and that, so I went to London.' She slowed down until we were walking side by side.

'Go on,' I said.

'Why d'you want to know?'

'You've whetted my appetite.'

'I've what? Talk normal or I won't tell you no more.' She started swiping at the clumps of cow-parsley on either side of the path. 'Found a room in this place near the railway. Like it was cheap 'cos when a train went past the whole house shook.' She laughed, remembering. 'Oh, I wasn't laughing about the trains. The landlady, called Maureen she was, pathetic cow. Her ex used to come on a Saturday and take the rent money off her. Then she'd cadge cigs off Deb.'

'Your friend in Whitchurch.'

She nodded, looking into the distance, thinking about London. 'I knew this bloke. Ray. Black hair he had, all sleeked down, and like a flat kind of face that made him look foreign, Czechoslovakian or something. You listening?'

'Yes.'

'Three suits he had and a gold watch he wore down the end of his wrist, almost on his hand.'

'You liked him.'

'He was all right.' She stopped to look up at the Suspension Bridge high above us. 'Don't know why I'm telling you all this crap.'

'What happened to him?'

'How d'you mean? Had a car crash, didn't he? Wasn't his fault. None of it was his fault.'

The tide was coming in, lapping against the bank. Soon the Avon would look like a respectable river, not just a narrow trickle flowing through the mud. The swing bridge would open to allow boats to leave the floating harbour and make their way down to the open sea.

'So you moved to Bristol,' I said, 'lived in Whitchurch for a time, then came to Southville.'

'Put his lead on again, shall I?' She took hold of the thick fur on the back of Aaron's neck. 'Don't want him running up into the woods, never know what he might find.'

We were approaching the path that led up to Leigh Woods, a steep track, made almost impassable by tree roots and deep gullies where the rain had run down earlier in the year.

'What d'you think of that Helen Sealey?' said Lynsey. 'Right stuck-up cow, if you want my opinion.'

'I don't know her at all, we only met briefly.'

'Got stacks of clothes — and shoes. Don't know how she finds the time to wear all the bloody things.'

'She used to be a model.'

'So what? I reckon she should never have been allowed that baby. Doesn't really want it, does she? Can't do if she pays someone else

to look after it. Like I don't see the point.'

The thought had occurred to me but I had pushed it out of my mind. People gave birth and handed the baby over to a nanny. Why shouldn't adoptive parents do the same?

'There's millions of people want babies,' said Lynsey. 'Really want them, I mean. Anyway that Rona's too old, doesn't look after her properly, doesn't play with her enough, read stories.'

'Chloe's a bit young for stories, isn't she?'

Lynsey looked at me pityingly. 'You don't know about kids, then. I could tell you things about that Helen, information the police'd pay a fortune for.'

'What kind of information?'

Suddenly she thrust the lead into my hand and started walking back the way we had come. When she was about fifty yards away she turned and shouted over her shoulder. 'You seeing Geraldine today?'

'Yes.'

'What d'you do, make her lie on her back and tell you about her deprived childhood?'

She didn't wait for an answer. I watched her getting smaller and smaller, then she climbed the steps that led up to the fly-over and disappeared out of sight.

*

Sandy let me into the house. He looked strained, as though he had slept badly or was feeling unwell.

'Not working on the cottage today?' I said.

'Later. Things to do in the garden now Geraldine can't manage it.'

I wanted to ask how much Geraldine had told him about our previous sessions. He would be eager to know what I thought about her agoraphobia, how serious it was, how long it would take to cure, but he wouldn't ask, that would be breaking the rules.

Geraldine was not the first client I had seen in her own home but there was something about this particular setup that made me a little uneasy. It was neither informal nor formal, the professional boundaries were too vague, the nature of my relationship with Geraldine and Sandy too ill defined. Still, it was only for another week and a bit.

Halfway up the stairs Sandy felt in his trouser pocket. 'I'll give you a key, Anna. Save trouble all round, wouldn't it?'

'Yes, if you like. Thanks.'

When I took the key he hesitated for a moment. 'Find your own way up, can you?'

'Yes, of course.' We looked away from each other, aware of the tension between us. Sandy saw himself as a friend, wanted us to remain friends, but during the next few days I would get to know Geraldine far better than I was ever likely to know him.

'I'm so grateful,' he said. 'It's all been such a worry. Five weeks ago we hadn't a care in the world. Now ...'

'Yes, I know, but when you think of it a strong reaction to a murder close by ought to be seen as perfectly normal. Maybe the rest of us can block things out of our heads too easily, dehumanize the victim, turn him into just part of the crime statistics.'

'Thanks.' He took my hand for a moment, then let it go, and started back down the stairs. I listened to his footsteps leaving the building, then continued on up and knocked lightly on the living-room door.

'Come in.' Geraldine was sitting very still. When she saw me she rose a little, then sank back into her chair.

'Anna, so kind of you to come, and on such a lovely day.'

The same feigned surprise, the same attempt to turn the session into a social visit. Or was I reading too much into her remark, was she simply making an effort to be pleasant, appreciative?

'It's extraordinary,' she said, 'I feel better already. One of these days I might even venture out into the garden.'

'Good, I'm glad.' *One of these days*; why not now; but perhaps her announcement that she was virtually cured was simply a way of persuading me, and Sandy who had hired me, to leave her in peace.

This was our third session. The second had gone badly with Geraldine apologizing for her *silly demand that I tell her what to do*, then spending the rest of our time together trying to tell me about other people's problems.

'Last time you were here,' she said, loosening her belt a notch, then returning it to its original hole, 'I made you angry. Yes, I did. I'm not an interesting person, I'm afraid, very dull, very ordinary.'

'It can be hard talking about yourself if you're not used to it.'

'Oh, it's not that, it's just that I feel such a fraud. You hear of people with the most terrible lives and here I am taking up everyone's time when I really ought to be able to pull myself together. I mean what would I do in an emergency, if Thomas was ill or the water-tank burst?'

It all sounded rather familiar. I wanted to ask if Rona Halliwell had been up to see her but as far as I could tell she had no visitors, preferred to be on her own, apart from when Sandy and Thomas were at home.

For the next half-hour I tried to focus her attention on how she had been feeling before she heard about the murder, and immediately afterwards. On when it was she had realized she was unable to leave the flat.

She found it hard to remember, she had such a bad memory.

'All right, then, before all this,' I said, spreading my hands as though Geraldine and the room we were sitting in were one and the same thing, 'how did you spend your time, what kind of things did you do?'

'Well,' she said slowly, 'there was my French class. Once a week, on a Thursday, an extra-mural course organized by the university.'

'French conversation?'

'I beg your pardon? Oh, yes, that's right. I did the beginner's course last year. This was a little more advanced although I'm not sure I was really ready for it.' She laughed, a brittle, false little sound. 'What else? Shopping, coffee with friends although I try to get out of all that as much as possible. Such a waste of time, just silly gossip, discussing whoever happens not to be there. Some of them are quite malicious.'

'Some of your friends?'

'I suppose they're friends. Of course when Sandy was still in the property business he had colleagues he had to entertain.'

'Yes, I see.' And now she was left with no role to play, only the realization that she had devoted herself to being a good hostess and missed out on a career of her own? Wasn't that enough to make anyone feel depressed? 'So things are rather different now Sandy's embarked on a new way of life.'

She ignored my comment. 'Then there were Thomas's open evenings, sports days, concerts, you know the kind of thing.' She cocked her head on one side. She had so many irritating mannerisms. 'Thomas,' she said suddenly, 'he's never been a good eater but recently ... I wondered, I haven't eaten a great deal myself since ... D'you suppose he's picked up my lack of appetite? I wouldn't like to think —'

'I expect he's worried about you,' I said.

'Yes, that's what Sandy says, that's why I want to get better.'

We looked at each other. 'I saw Lynsey this morning,' I said.

'Oh, did you, it's her day for cleaning the ground-floor flat.'

'She cleans for the Sealeys?'

'It was Bryan's idea. Rona Halliwell's got quite enough to do looking after the baby. How old do you think she is, getting on for seventy, wouldn't you say? Of course, Lynsey's glad of the extra money so it all seems to have worked out rather well.'

'How do you get on with her?'

'With Lynsey?' She thought about this for a moment. 'She's a strange creature, I didn't take to her at first, but apart from the hair and those depressing black clothes she's really rather ... Well I suppose I've just got used to her.'

'Before the murder,' I said, changing the subject again, hoping to catch her unawares, break through her defences, 'I expect you used to walk in Leigh Woods.'

She turned her head away from me but her voice was perfectly steady. 'Actually I prefer the open country. I always find woods rather gloomy. Do the police know what weapon was used?'

The question surprised me. I had thought she preferred not to talk about the murder except when I tried to 'force' her to face up to her fear.

'They think it was a hammer,' I said.

'Just an ordinary one? The kind anyone could have in their tool box?' For a moment she sounded quite excited, then the flat voice returned. 'Oh, I can't bear to think about it. Whoever did it still on the loose. I can't sleep at night, unless I take two of my tablets but I don't want to become dependent on them, that would be so stupid.'

With half an ear I listened to her describing articles she had read in women's magazines — about the inadequacy of some family doctors, about housewives on sleeping pills and tranquillizers ... Now she had mentioned the murder weapon, quite calmly, almost objectively, was it possible to believe her when she still insisted it was the memory of Walter Bury's violent death that was making it impossible for her to leave the flat?

'Right,' I said, trying another tack, determined to discover what was really going on in her head. 'I want you to lean back in your chair and close your eyes.'

'Like this?' She did as she was told, squeezing her eyes shut and clutching the arms of the chair.

'No, try to relax. Start with one foot and try clenching and relaxing the muscles in your ankle, then your calf, then your thigh. Then do the same with the other leg.'

She opened one eye to see if I was watching her, then closed it again. 'I'm afraid I've always been rather tense. I think some people are born that way. I had a friend who used to listen to a tape of the

sea, waves lapping on the sand, but I don't think it did her much good.'

I made no response and she continued with the technique, clenching and unclenching her legs, her arms, her stomach muscles, chest muscles, neck. Finally she sat up straight. 'D'you know, it really works. What a clever idea.'

'Just stay leaning back,' I said softly, 'close your eyes again and try to remember the time when Helen told you a body had been found in the woods.'

Her breathing became uneven, strained. 'Try to breathe from low down, not up near your breast bone. Place your hands on your rib cage and feel the air going in and out of your lungs. Now think about that day. The weather — was it hot like today or dull and wet? How did you spend the morning? What was Sandy doing?'

'It was very warm,' she said slowly, 'but overcast. Sandy drove to the Do-It-Yourself place to buy some wood. Then what? Oh, I know, Thomas had forgotten his swimming trunks so I had to call round at the school.'

'In the car?'

She nodded. 'I had lunch on my own. I suppose I did. I was reading a book, a spy story, but I decided to take it back. It seemed silly, out of date, now the Berlin Wall's come down.'

'So you went to the library?'

'Oh, not that day. Sandy took it back later.' Her face was screwed up, trying to remember. She looked younger, almost childlike, and for the first time that morning I felt genuine empathy. Beneath all the superficial chatter something was making her terribly unhappy.

For a moment I thought she had fallen asleep, then she raised an arm to smooth her hair. 'Can I sit up properly now?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Did I do that right?'

'How did it make you feel?'

'Tired,' she said, 'and sort of light headed.' She stood up, steadying herself on the arm of the chair. 'Before you go would you like to see Thomas's room?'

'Well, yes, but — '

'I'll show you.' She was across the room in an instant, holding open the door, smiling brightly. 'Up a short flight of stairs. It's in the roof. Thomas loves it.' The stairs were steep and we had to bend to avoid banging our heads on the ceiling. When we reached the top she pulled open the door and flattened herself against the wall so I could pass in front of her. 'After you, Anna.'

It was the first time she had used my name. 'I suppose in the old days a kitchen maid slept here. I expect it was freezing cold and very uncomfortable.'

The room had a sloping ceiling and two small dormer windows and at first sight it was the kind of room a child dreams about. Shelves full of toys and games and books, a complete set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, models of ships, planes, dinosaurs. But there was something too perfect. The walls were papered with what looked like children's drawings but turned out to be the imitation stick men that graphic artists produce for advertisements for chocolate buttons or appeals for Great Ormond Street Hospital. Thomas's bed was covered in a patchwork quilt with two Steiff teddy bears placed side by side on the pillow. Even the rocking horse was an antique. In

fact the only newish pieces of furniture were a pine desk and a matching chair. On the desk was a computer, and next to it a printer with a toy penguin propped against it, its orange felt beak hanging in tatters as though it was taken to bed regularly and chewed for comfort.

'Lucky boy,' I said.

Geraldine smiled. 'Yes, isn't he? Of course when my parents were alive this room was only used for storage. They lived on the top floor and we had the part where the Sealeys are staying.'

'It worked well, did it, having your parents in the same house?'

She turned her back on me. 'Has Sandy been saying something? He disliked my father but I never really understood why.' She picked up a pair of expensive-looking binoculars and held them to her eyes. 'Over there,' she said, 'beyond those tall trees, that's where they found him.'

'The murder victim? Yes, Lynsey showed me the place.'

'Lynsey?' The binoculars clattered on the window-sill. 'Was Thomas with her?'

'No, it was the first time I came here, when I was taking the dog for a walk.'

'Oh.' She stared at me for a moment, sucking her bottom lip, then rubbing between her eyes as though she had the start of a bad headache. 'Lynsey, she's sweet with Thomas, awfully kind, but she does tend to put ideas into his head, all kinds of silly things.'

*

When I left Sandy was waiting for me in the garden. 'In a hurry, are you, Anna?'

'Not specially.'

‘Only if you’re free I wondered if you’d like to see the cottage.’

‘Oh.’ I hesitated.

‘Perhaps you’re thinking Geraldine wouldn’t like it. Patient confidentiality and all that. Don’t worry, I cleared it with her before you came. She knows I won’t ask what the two of you have been discussing, that would be entirely counter-productive.’

The tired look had disappeared. Time spent in the garden had restored his good spirits. Why did he want me to see the cottage? Maybe he was just being friendly, or perhaps he had information he needed to pass on. Or some kind of confession?

‘All right,’ I said, ‘yes, I’d like that, as long as you can bring me back again in an hour or so. Where is this cottage?’

He pointed to his car, parked ready to leave. ‘Not far, just off the Clevedon Road. Jump in.’

There was no sign of the Sealeys or the Japanese jeep. Through an open window I could hear the sound of a vacuum cleaner. Lynsey busy with her cleaning duties? Was Thomas with her and if not where was he? Did Rona take the baby for a walk as soon as Lynsey arrived, or did they edge past each other, united in their mutual hostility, moving from room to room making sure they avoided each other’s company as far as possible? I wondered if Helen looked after Chloe some of the time or whether she was out every day trying to establish herself in a new career as a photographer.

As I climbed into the passenger seat of Sandy’s car something clicked in my brain. The woman in the black BMW going past the Oxfam shop — I had only caught a glimpse but there was something about the back of her head, the long elegant neck. If it had been

Sandy driving — and I was almost certain it was — the woman with him could have been Helen Sealey.

Chapter Seven

The cottage was at the end of a lane that had started out as a proper made-up road then gradually turned into a grassy track. Sandy steered the car through the narrow gap between the gate posts he said he was going to demolish once the work on the house had been completed, and switched off the engine.

‘The kind of person likely to buy this place is sure to have a whacking great car. I’ll probably advertise it in one of the Sundays. The way I look at it a young local couple could never afford it, not in a position like this with the woods up there at the top of the hill and the sea only a couple of miles away.’

‘I thought you might want to live here yourself.’

‘It’s an idea. See how it goes.’

From the outside the cottage looked in pretty good condition but once inside it was easy to see how much work needed to be done. Most of the floorboards in the entrance hall were rotten. Some had been pulled up but a walkway had been left and Sandy assured me it was perfectly safe. In several places the plaster had fallen off the wall, exposing the wooden laths underneath. Bags of cement lay in one corner, along with various tools, paint cans, and general rubble.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘what d’you think? Looks a mess but it’s structurally sound. Eight or nine more months and it’ll be as good as new.’

I followed him into a room at the back of the house that had a glass-panelled door leading out to the garden.

‘I’d have thought after all your property deals you’d have had enough of the housing market.’

He picked up a tin of nails and started sorting through with his finger. 'Oh, this is totally different. Something real, down-to-earth. I remember reading about Tibetan monks who make pottery while they meditate. If your hands have something to do it allows your brain to run free.' He laughed, nodding in the direction of the stairs at the far end of the room. 'Go on up, have a nose round. I just want to measure the skirting board, then I'll show you what passes for a garden, see if you've any ideas what I could do with it.'

Leaning out of an upstairs window I tried to work out exactly where we were. Trees obscured most of the view but in the distance I thought I could see the start of the flat marshy land between Tickenham and Yatton. That meant Bristol was more or less directly on my left and the sea was to the right.

Down in the garden a black cat with a red flea collar was sitting on a stretch of broken wall swishing its tail, watching for birds. With the sun shining the whole place was idyllic but what would it be like in winter with rain streaming down and the lane turned into a sea of mud?

There were three bedrooms, all of them small but large enough at least for a bed and one or two other pieces of furniture. Each room had a standard Victorian cast-iron fireplace and the biggest one had fitted cupboards, badly made, out of wood that had warped so the doors wouldn't close properly. No doubt Sandy would strip out the cupboards and build new ones. He seemed to know what he was doing.

In the largest of the three bedrooms a new window frame rested against the wall and a plank of wood lay supported by two trestles. I sat down on a dusty-looking bean bag and tried to imagine the room

in a finished state — sanded floor, brass bed, Laura Ashley curtains, goatskin rugs — and became aware that I was picturing Geraldine living there. Did the lane qualify as open country or would she find the thick trees on two sides of the garden too gloomy, too oppressive? The morning session had left my brain racing. Had the visit to Thomas's room had some special significance? Several times during the last few days I had wondered about the efficacy of brief, intensive therapy — surely anyone who was prepared to get to grips with their problems that quickly didn't need a psychologist to help them — but Geraldine seemed to be starting to trust me. Any guilt I had felt about my dual wish — to cure Geraldine of her agoraphobia while at the same time trying to find out if she knew something about the violent crime in Leigh Woods — was fading fast as I came to realize that while Geraldine's problem might be only loosely connected with Walter Bury's murder, discovering the identity of the killer would certainly help her to come to terms with her anxiety. So far I had learned nothing that provided even the smallest clue. Perhaps there was nothing — that Geraldine could tell me. But I still felt certain there was.

Sandy's footsteps squeaked on the stairs and his head came round the door. 'Ah, there you are. Seen the bath yet? Great huge enamelled thing, you can't buy them like that these days. No, stay where you are a moment.' He sat on the edge of a rickety table. 'Lynsey — I wanted to ask what you thought of her? According to Geraldine she's spending more and more time with Thomas. Is that a good thing, d'you suppose?'

'As long as she gets her work done.'

‘Yes.’ That wasn’t what he had meant. ‘Thomas is on holiday of course but he still has to practise his violin, keep up with his studies.’

What studies? Surely teachers didn’t set work for the summer holidays, not for a nine-year-old. ‘Does he have many friends?’

‘Oh, plenty, but none that live nearby. He used to go to the local primary school but it didn’t stretch him enough so we had to find somewhere private. You probably disapprove.’

‘Perhaps he and Lynsey are both a bit lonely.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you’re right, although what a nineteen-year-old girl has in common with a small boy ... Listen.’ He looked a little embarrassed. ‘There’s something else, something I really wanted to talk to you about.’

‘I thought you were going to show me the bath.’

‘In a minute. Oh, now you think I’ve done the same thing again, dragged you out here on false pretences. But it’s not like that, I promise.’

Part of a spider’s web had attached itself to the bushy strip of hair above his left ear. He bore little resemblance to the smartly turned out businessman I had first noticed sitting in the second row at the counselling course. Whereas Geraldine struck me as being a nervous person but with a hard core of strength, Sandy’s whole bearing exuded confidence but something told me he could well have spent his life struggling against underlying feelings of insecurity. A person’s eyes tell you a great deal. That’s why so many people find eye-contact lasting more than a split second too threatening to bear.

Sandy’s eyes met mine. He smiled, then turned his head to stare through the dusty window-panes.

‘The thing is,’ he said, running his finger across the place where he had once had a moustache, ‘what I really want, a fairly long-term aim of course, I realize that ... what I would really like is to become an analyst.’ The colour seeped into his face. ‘You’re laughing at me.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘You think I’m too old?’

‘Not at all. I think it’s a good idea.’

‘You do? I thought you’d see it as some kind of mid-life crisis, one of those crazy plans like selling up and sailing to Tahiti. I don’t know about you but I feel I’m more in tune with Jung than with Freud. Freud was such a pessimist, whereas Jung believed in the need to develop the more spiritual side. I’ve found out what’s required — a full training analysis lasting several years — but to have any chance of being taken on in the first place I’ll need to have had some relevant experience.’

‘So that’s why you enrolled for the counselling course.’

He nodded. The red spots on his cheeks were fading and the nervousness had disappeared. He seemed wildly excited, his eyes open wide, his lips slightly parted. ‘It was so amazing. One day — I forget exactly what was going on — I was meeting an architect I think, who was going to convert a row of terraced houses into flats. It suddenly came to me. I knew I couldn’t spend the rest of my life just making money out of property. I had to do something — something more ... ’

‘Fulfilling?’ It was a word I disliked but just at that moment the only one that came to mind.

‘Exactly that.’ He clasped my arm, then let go and picked up an electric drill that was lying on the table. ‘You’re not a Jungian, are

you?’ He clicked the switch on the drill so that the deafening noise of the motor cut out the end of his sentence, then switched it off again. ‘Sorry, can’t think straight. I don’t know why it was so difficult to tell you. I suppose it’s almost like admitting you want to take holy orders.’

‘Not quite,’ I said, ‘but I know what you mean. No, I’m not a Jungian, I don’t believe one form of treatment’s suitable for all — ’

‘Analysis is for the idle rich, is that what you think?’

‘No, I think it helps some people and if that’s how they want to spend their money ... ’

He couldn’t stop smiling. ‘You’ve no idea how important your lectures were. Oh, not what you said so much, although obviously that was very useful. No, it was more your attitude, the way you talked. Some people reduce everything to learning a few techniques and applying them as though people were inanimate objects. You really seemed to care.’ He glanced at my face. ‘No, don’t look like that, I’m not trying to flatter you, I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done.’

Outside a bird was letting out a series of high-pitched squawks, probably a response to the black cat. I started moving towards the door but Sandy stopped me. ‘Freud thought if you didn’t sort yourself out when you were young there was very little hope.’

‘Whereas Jung thinks life begins at forty.’

‘Exactly. *Individuation*, the process by which a person becomes whole.’ He broke off, squeezing the side of his hand between his finger and thumb, searching for a splinter beneath the skin. ‘I don’t know if you agree but I think in order to achieve enlightenment you

need a fairly settled way of life. A family, job — well, this is my job now.’ He gestured towards the walls of the cottage.

‘Seems ideal,’ I said, ‘renovating properties and training to be an analyst — although you’ll probably have to go to London for part of the week.’

‘Oh yes, I know. I realize how lucky I am, having the funds.’ He looked almost ashamed. ‘I’ve changed so much during the last few months. If you’d known me before I doubt if you’d have wanted anything to do with me.’

‘When you were the big property developer. I don’t suppose you were that different underneath.’

‘Oh, I was. I had to be.’

For some reason it was important to him to believe he had changed completely. Seen the light, mended his ways. St Paul on the road to Damascus.

He sighed. ‘I just want Geraldine to be back to her old self. Before it happened, before the murder, I keep wondering if she was really as happy as I thought. She’s very intelligent, you know, should have had a proper career.’

‘You thought she might have been feeling a little frustrated?’

His head jerked up. ‘Frustrated? Yes, I know what you mean. Sometimes — oh, I’m sure it was nothing serious — but she’d have these outbursts of anger.’

‘Like her father.’

‘Her father? Oh no, nothing like that. She’s such a gentle person, wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

For the first time it occurred to me that Sandy might actually think Geraldine had something to do with Walter Bury’s death. Perhaps he

believed she had inherited a 'bad gene' from her father. But surely he knew better than that. Because her agoraphobia was so inexplicable he had gone over and over in his mind every possibility, however crazy. Knowing was always better than not knowing. That was why he had been so keen for me to talk to Geraldine. He wanted me to find the real cause of her anxiety, then he could relax.

'The trouble with all this counselling and psychotherapy,' I said, 'it breaks down the defences, makes people start thinking thoughts they normally suppress.'

He smiled at me, as though I had picked up accurately how his imagination had been running away with itself. 'We all have a persona, don't we,' he said. 'A mask, the outward face we present to the world.'

'If we didn't we'd never survive.'

'No, I suppose not.' He crossed to the fireplace, bending down to look up the chimney as though he thought the squawking bird might be up on the roof. 'Sorry to go on like this, it's just, no one else would understand. Most of my friends and acquaintances would think I was mad. I have a sister, unmarried, a consultant paediatrician who works in Birmingham. She takes after our father, he was scientifically minded, a nuclear physicist.'

'Really?'

'The typical self-absorbed boffin. Brilliant but rather remote. I take after my mother, never much interested in school, exams, that kind of stuff, more of an organizer, interested in people not things.'

'Show me the rest of the cottage,' I said, reluctant to hear his whole life history just at present, tired after my session with Geraldine and

by the intensity of Sandy's feelings. 'Someone's going to love it. Bryan and Helen, perhaps, they seem to like the south-west.'

He searched in a box of tools, selecting a large chisel and testing the sharp end against his hand. 'Now there's a thought.'

'You mean they've never seen it?'

He shook his head, unwilling to change the subject and give up talking about his plans. 'Have you noticed how often people say exactly the opposite of what they really mean? They tell you they don't care when really they care like hell.'

Who was he thinking about? Geraldine, or perhaps he meant Helen Sealey. 'Or they say they want pornography banned when really they're obsessed with sex and violence.'

He laughed. 'Exactly that. Fascinating, isn't it? Oh, I'm sorry, you look tired, let me buy you some lunch, there's a pub down the road that's not too bad.'

I had my hand on the door.

'Just before we leave,' he said, 'I wanted to ask you. Obviously anything Geraldine's told you is completely confidential, but now you've seen her a few times I wondered if you could tell me the best way I can help.'

'Just be your usual self.'

'Yes, of course, but it's not that simple, is it? I mean should I encourage her to talk or just carry on as though everything's normal?' He thought for a moment. 'The day it happened, the day they found the body, I came home at about ten to seven. I'd been to visit a friend in Portishead. Geraldine was watching the local news, an item about the Kennet and Avon Canal.'

'You've got a good memory.'

'Those kind of associations tend to stamp themselves on your brain. Hang on.' He placed his hand on the bald patch on the top of his head, rubbing it round and round. 'She was sitting on the window seat like she often does, with her shoulders slightly hunched, not looking at the television. I went up to her and kissed her on the back of the neck and she jumped, almost as though she had been unaware I was in the room.'

'Go on.'

'Then she told me what had happened. She's a very sensitive person but not neurotic, that's quite different isn't it? I think she imagined it could have been Thomas in the woods.'

'On his own?'

'No, of course not, but she's always had a very vivid imagination. Tends to speculate about what might happen, then upset herself quite needlessly. Once when we were on holiday in East Anglia a child swam out too far and had to be given artificial respiration. For months after she kept going over and over it in her mind, almost as though the child had drowned. Supposing it had been Thomas, supposing ...'

'I expect all mothers are the same.'

He stared at me. 'She hasn't said anything, then, nothing that would explain why she feels so afraid?'

So Sandy had noticed it too. Perhaps when they were alone together she dropped her guard, admitted her fear. 'If there was anything I'm sure she'd tell you,' I said. 'Just try and be a good listener.'

'Oh, I'm that all right. You see the thing is, she can't look after Thomas the way she usually does, play with him, have games of

backgammon and so on. I do my best to make up for it, of course, even asked if he'd like to help with the cottage, but it's not really his kind of thing and I'm not very good company at present. I suppose that's why he's attached himself to Lynsey, she's more fun to be with than either of his parents, poor little chap.'

'Children are very resilient,' I said, 'and in any case it won't go on like this for ever.'

'No, of course not. Thank God we met when we did, Anna. One of those strokes of luck that only happen once in a life time.'

I wanted to ask him about the woman sitting next to him in the car. I had to ask him.

'Helen Sealey,' I said. 'What do you know about her? Rona Halliwell says she refuses to drive the car.'

'That's right.' He looked a little surprised but his voice was perfectly calm. 'Something happened I suppose and she lost her nerve. She's a beautiful woman but I wouldn't say she was terribly happy, would you? Perhaps she was pinning all her hopes on the baby, but having children never solves anything, does it, just produces a new set of problems, wouldn't you say?'

'Before the murder did Geraldine see much of the Sealeys?'

Sandy pushed his hands in his pockets. 'Why d'you ask? I think she talked to Helen sometimes — in the garden. Helen's interested in plants, has a big garden of her own back in Wimbledon.' He gave me a long questioning look. 'There were no problems, if that's what you're thinking. I mean, we all get on together pretty well, just as I hoped we would.'

'Apart from Lynsey and Rona Halliwell.'

‘Yes.’ He attempted a grin. ‘Well, that’s something they’ll have to sort out between themselves. Not the easiest person, that Rona. If you ask me there’s something odd about her, not quite what she seems.’

There was a play on the radio — about a shipwreck. Either it was a memory, in the narrator’s head, or it could have been going on in the here and now. I listened for a couple of minutes then switched it off and picked up my jacket, the one with the broken zip that I had dropped on the floor in exasperation earlier in the day. The events of the day were going round in my head. Sandy’s plan to train as a Jungian analyst. His remark about Rona Halliwell. Geraldine taking me up to see Thomas’s room and dropping the binoculars on the window-sill when I mentioned how Lynsey had pointed out the place in the woods where Walter Bury’s body had been found. Had Thomas told his mother something important? Something about Lynsey? It seemed unlikely since both Geraldine and Sandy appeared only mildly concerned about the time Lynsey and Thomas spent together.

The phone started ringing. Expecting it to be Chris with the latest bulletin on the children’s mumps and yet another apology for the ruined holiday, I wedged the receiver against my ear and continued to tug at the maddening zip.

‘Anna?’

‘Yes.’ The voice was familiar but for a moment I couldn’t place it.

‘Owen Hughes.’

‘Owen? I thought you were still in America.’

‘Got back two days ago.’

Only two days. So he wanted to see me. I was pleased. Or was I? Why had he waited two days? 'Did you have a good time?'

He coughed. 'Sorry, brought a cold back with me. Not too bad, glad to be home. Look, you got my card, did you?'

'Yes, but I couldn't reply, there was no address.'

'Oh, I didn't expect a reply. I was moving round, visiting various universities, plus a week's holiday in Colorado. Anyway, the thing is, I wondered how your research was going, thought you might like to come round to the Unit and tell me about it.'

'Ah. Yes. Well, I've done a lot of reading and made plenty of notes.' This last wasn't true but there was still time during the next day or two. 'I'll come next week, shall I? Actually I'm on holiday at the moment so I could —'

'What about Sunday?'

'Sunday? You'll be working at the Unit on —'

'I was thinking of a drive through the Forest of Dean. Still, it's probably an area you know well. Not exactly an exciting afternoon out.'

I thought fast. 'I've only been there once,' I said, annoyed with myself for inadvertently sounding too enthusiastic. 'And it was raining so I didn't see it at its best.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line and for a moment I thought he had rung off.

'Pick you up at two o'clock, then,' he said softly. "Bye for now.'

Chapter Eight

'Agoraphobia,' said Ernest, clapping his huge hands together, then resting them on the wheels of his chair, 'chance would be a fine thing.'

I leaned across the table to look through the windows of St Mary Redcliffe. The church seemed to be constructed entirely out of matchsticks and tiny pieces of coloured glass. 'It's fantastic,' I said, 'must have taken you ages.'

'Finding the right glass can be a problem but Dave Redwing from number thirty-one's discovered a shop near Christmas Steps.'

'Oh good.' I tried to remember if I knew anyone called Dave. Ernest and Pam had moved into the ground-floor flat quite a time after I moved into mine above them but because neither of them went out to work they knew everyone in the surrounding houses, whereas I still felt like a newcomer.

'Go ahead,' said Ernest, 'open the doors, it won't fall to pieces.'

I opened the door to the north porch, making a mental note as I did so to tell Howard Fry about Ernest's handiwork. Howard had once described St Mary Redcliffe as the best parish church in England. He was well up on that kind of thing and on several occasions had expressed surprise, in the maddening tone of voice he had perfected, at my ignorance of Bristol's architecture.

Ernest was moving his wheelchair closer, negotiating the gap between the sideboard and sofa with an expertise that came from daily practice.

'When it was nearly finished a violent storm shattered the roof,' he said. 'No, not this thing, the real one, built in the fifteenth century.'

'It's brilliant, must be worth a lot of money.'

'Keeps me occupied. Once it's finished I lose interest but Pam likes them put on display.' He looked thoughtful. 'So this agoraphobia you were telling me about, mostly women that suffer from it, is it? Why would that be, d'you suppose?'

'Not easy to say. Women often feel isolated, sometimes they lose confidence, lose their sense of their own identity.'

'Staying at home with the kids.'

I nodded. 'Some women feel they have to live up to a particular image of how they ought to look, behave. They're afraid of criticism, they feel insecure.'

'Yes.' He looked a little sad. 'Pam and I never had any kids. Wanted them but they never came along. These days you can get treatment, they work miracles. What's the cure for it, then, this agoraphobia?'

I thought about it for a moment. 'Well, some people use desensitization techniques. Reducing the fear little by little. First the patient imagines herself walking out of doors, later she's escorted a few yards down the road.'

'But it doesn't always work.'

'No, usually it's more complicated than that.'

I stood up, not wanting to become embroiled in a long discussion. It was only ten to but Owen might be early. He wasn't the kind of person who always has to appear desperately busy, too important to be on time. Not that I knew all that much about him, only that he worked at the university and had lived on his own, since his wife had died a few years ago, in a flat in Cotham. Just when I was starting to think our friendship had possibilities, and didn't depend simply on the

fact that he was supervising my research project, he had announced that he was off to America. And it was not as though it was something that had cropped up out of the blue. He had known about it for several months but never bothered to tell me. I had missed him, a little, then put him out of my mind. The postcard from Colorado had been a pleasant surprise but for all I knew he sent cards to all his postgraduate students.

Someone knocked on the front door, then pushed it open and called Ernest's name. Janos, dressed in a kind of boiler suit covered in zips and pockets, limped into the room. 'Anna, good, I see you come down your steps and come to tell you my leg is OK, there is no need for you to take the dog out any more.'

'You don't look OK,' I said.

'Only a little stiffness. The doctor agree. Exercise is best, not sitting about watching silly rubbish on the television.'

'Well, if you're sure, but if you need any help I'm on holiday for another week.'

'The children still have mumps?'

'Oh, I expect so but in any case it's too late to go away now.'

'You need proper holiday, doesn't she, Ernest, somewhere to relax by the sea.' Ernest glanced at me, then reversed his wheelchair, spinning it round till he was facing Janos. 'Nice to talk to you, Anna. Off you go or you'll miss your boyfriend. Leave us two old codgers to talk about our aches and pains.'

'He's not my boyfriend,' I said.

*

Halfway across the Severn Bridge a light drizzle started to collect on the windscreen, blotting out the view of the south Wales coast.

Owen switched on the wipers and as the screen cleared I turned to look across the other side of the estuary at the western reaches of Gloucestershire where, according to Janos, a member of the royal family had a large country estate.

‘So,’ said Owen, ‘you had a holiday arranged, then your friend’s child went down with mumps.’

‘Children. She’s got three but only two of them have caught it so far.’

‘Live locally, do they?’

‘Near Blaise Castle. We passed the turning on our way out of Bristol.’

The traffic on the bridge had slowed down almost to a standstill. Owen wound down the window and the smell of the sea came in, a mixture of salt and mud.

‘I expect you’ve got plenty of friends in the area,’ he said.

‘Not really. I met Chris and Bruce through Martin Wheeler.’

‘The head of the Psychology Service.’

‘Oh yes, I’d forgotten you knew him.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. Bump into him now and again. Bit of a cynical character, isn’t he?’

‘He’s all right when you get to know him,’ I said, feeling protective, almost as if Martin was a member of my family who could be criticized by me but not by outsiders.

‘Rain coming in on you?’ said Owen.

‘No, I’m fine, looks like it’s going to clear up soon.’

Once over the bridge we took the left-hand lane that left the motorway and joined up with the roundabout and the turning to Chepstow. It was the first time I had been so close to Owen. I could

smell the newness of his shirt and hoped, absurdly, that he had bought it specially to impress me. He was whistling something Bach-like through his teeth. So far there had been no mention of my research and I was beginning to think he had forgotten all about it. Perversely, having dreaded his questions, I now felt slightly put out.

‘I was rather busy while you were away,’ I said.

‘More than usual?’

I nodded but he was looking in the driving mirror, monitoring the sports car that had crept up behind us far too close. ‘We’ve had more referrals this year. I’m not sure why.’

‘Most people like talking about themselves, don’t they.’ He smiled to himself. ‘Oh, not me, I’m the archetypal academic. Have you ever met anyone less able to ask for help than an experimental psychologist?’

‘I haven’t done much work on my research,’ I said, ‘just some reading and a few notes.’

‘Thought you might’ve gone off the idea altogether. So many people have higher degrees these days I often wonder what they’re worth.’

‘All right for you,’ I said.

‘What’s all right for me? Anyway they’re setting up a top-up course for you clinical lot. Research project, carried out part-time, a few seminars, lectures, and you’ll have your doctorate, no trouble at all.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘I forget. They’ll send you details I expect, when it’s finalized, approved by the powers that be.’

I turned my head to look at a couple of hitchhikers who wanted a lift to Aberystwyth. They were laughing and talking, the boy holding a

can of Coke above his head and the girl leaping up to snatch it from his hand. Then I glanced at Owen who had stopped whistling and was tapping his fingers on the steering-wheel. It was all such hard work getting to know someone, finding out their interests and opinions, how they reacted in particular situations, whether they were placid or volatile, radical or conformist. No wonder people hung on to hopeless relationships. It was the loss of familiarity they dreaded, the realization that they would have to start all over again from square one.

Perhaps if I asked a few questions it would speed up the process a little. I cleared my throat. 'Where did you work before you came to Bristol?'

'London, Dundee, a year in Birmingham.'

'Why did you choose Bristol?'

'I didn't. The job came up, seemed like a good opportunity.'

'To do the kind of research you were interested in.'

'Yes.'

We were by-passing the centre of Chepstow, taking the road that follows close to the estuary, through Blakeney and Newnham, and eventually on to Gloucester.

'We'll turn off at Lydney,' said Owen. 'Let's hope the rain's cleared by then.'

So we were back to talking about the weather. I wanted to ask him about his wife, cut through the small-talk and get on to the important things, but it was difficult enough to persuade him to tell me about the Research Unit let alone anything personal, painful.

'You've lived in Cotham some time now, have you?' I said.

‘Two years.’ He pointed towards a group of beech trees. ‘Thought it was a merlin but I think it’s only a sparrowhawk.’

‘You like bird-watching?’

‘I like birds. Wouldn’t make a special trek to see some rarity that had been spotted in the back of beyond.’

‘My father likes the countryside.’

‘But you prefer the town. Where do they live, your parents?’

‘Kent. My mother died three years ago. I’ve a brother in Australia.’

We continued in near silence for almost an hour. Now and again Owen pointed out something of particular interest — a lake, just visible between the trees, a place where he had once seen two fallow deer. When we stopped for a cup of tea, at a small, rather scruffy place with two flimsy tables only a few feet away from the road, he asked where I had done my first degree.

‘London.’

He nodded. ‘Did I ask you that before?’

‘I don’t think so. You might have done that first time I came to the Unit.’

Changing the subject I started telling him about the house the other side of the Suspension Bridge, mentioning no names of course, until I came to Bryan and Helen Sealey.

‘A new play, is it,’ he said, ‘and his wife, she’s an actress? Should I have heard of her?’

‘No, she’s a model, used to be.’

‘And you say they’ve adopted a baby?’

‘A little girl. She’s seven months.’

He thought about this, picking up a teaspoonful of sugar and letting it drop back into the bowl. ‘And in spite of being on holiday you’ve

taken on an agoraphobic woman? Workaholic are you, like me?’

‘Not really, it just seemed an interesting case.’

His face showed all the signs of someone who has suffered badly, but would I have interpreted it that way if Martin hadn’t told me about his wife? Perhaps he just had a melancholy personality. He was quiet, too quiet, but wasn’t that better than the kind of person who says anything that comes into his head, just to keep everything light, cheerful, effortless? I noticed a few dark hairs on the back of his hand and just for a moment I was reminded of the bears at the zoo.

Sensing my change of expression he looked up. ‘What’s the joke?’

‘Nothing. I was just remembering how I took a friend’s children to the zoo.’

‘The ones with mumps?’

I nodded. ‘D’you wish you’d had children?’

‘Me?’ He looked as though I had asked the most astonishing question. ‘No, I don’t think so. I’m too impatient, too intolerant.’

Then he pushed back his chair. ‘Ready to go?’

We returned via Monmouth, taking the road along the Wye Valley which meant we would have completed more or less a circular tour.

‘Did you read about the murder a few weeks ago?’ I said, choosing a subject he couldn’t possibly object to. ‘I’ve a friend in the CID who’s working on the case.’

‘Which murder’s that?’

‘In Leigh Woods, quite close to the house I was telling you about. The police don’t seem to have any real leads. According to Howard Fry, this friend of mine, there’s a certain amount of forensic evidence but without a suspect or a murder weapon it’s not getting them very far.’

'You're interested in forensic science?'

'Yes, I suppose I am. They have all these new techniques. DNA sampling, chromatography, something called electrostatic detection apparatus that allows you to read the imprint of handwriting on another page.'

'Oh yes, checking up on police notebooks to see if they've fabricated evidence. I remember reading about it.'

'Not just that,' I said crossly, reacting as though it was my job to defend the integrity of the whole police force. 'Apparently a man pushed a note through a building society door, warning it was a hold up, and his address was imprinted from a letter he'd written on a previous sheet.'

Owen laughed. 'Your friend told you this? I'm no expert on crime but they say the average criminal has a fairly low IQ.'

'The average one, maybe.'

'But not the kind that interests you. You prefer the evil sociopath.'

'The murder victim in Leigh Woods,' I said, ignoring his gibe, 'no one seems to know much about him. He was on his own, unemployed, his wife had died three years ago and he'd never got over it.'

I stopped. It was one of those times when you say the one thing you swore to yourself you would never mention. The Polish have a word for it but as far as I know there's no equivalent in the English language.

Owen was staring straight ahead. 'Anyway, I expect they'll find the killer sooner or later,' I said feebly. 'Of course it could be someone with a psychiatric history, just a random killing, the hardest of all to

solve unless someone informs, although Howard's pretty certain it was premeditated.'

He turned his head, wondering why I was gabbling on like an idiot. 'My wife was interested in crime,' he said. 'Fiction more than fact although towards the end of her life she turned to true life cases, *crimes passionnel*, that kind of thing.'

When we reached Tintem Abbey the traffic started to build up. Owen coughed several times as though he had something to tell me and was preparing himself for what was going to be an unpleasant few minutes. He would say how much he had enjoyed the afternoon but suspected I had found him rather dull company. He disliked talking about himself whereas I was obviously interested in what made people tick. Then he would suggest I made an appointment to see him at the Unit, if I was still interested in going ahead with my research.

'I was offered a job while I was in America,' he said. 'Better salary, plenty of money for research, hardly any teaching.'

'But you turned it down?'

He nodded.

'Why?'

He changed down to overtake a cyclist, then glanced at me and smiled, his eyes meeting mine for a brief, intense moment before he looked back at the road ahead. 'I've no idea.' he said.

*

Circling the traffic island at the top of Whiteladies Road I noticed a black BMW with a roof-rack. When the lights changed and the car passed within a few yards of us the driver turned his balding head to face the woman in the passenger seat. She was nodding in

agreement, leaning forward to point in the direction of the private hospital. That gave me a chance to see her face properly. It was Helen Sealey.

*

I was half asleep with my head resting on a cushion, watching a French film I had wanted to see for ages but having difficulty keeping my eyes open. When the phone rang I hauled myself into an upright position, glanced at the clock — it was getting on for midnight — and snatched up the receiver, worried in case my father had been taken ill.

The voice at the end of the line sounded serious, official. ‘Anna, Howard Fry. That house you told me about, the one near Leigh Woods where your friend lives, there’s been a break-in.’

‘When? What happened?’

‘The nanny apprehended an intruder. She’s none the worse but it could have been nasty.’

‘He attacked her? You’re sure she’s all right?’

‘A young man broke in through the kitchen window. Miss Halliwell was getting ready for bed but she heard him and was foolhardy enough to pretend she had a gun.’

‘A gun?’

‘Her hairbrush in fact but it was dark and the intruder chose the wrong door to escape. She locked him in the utility room.’

I laughed. ‘Good old Rona.’

‘Oh, you know her? She could have been badly injured.’

‘That wouldn’t put her off. The Sealeys were out, were they?’

‘That’s right. Apparently the baby slept through the whole thing, all the banging and shouting. Look, the reason I’m phoning at this late

hour, the young man's name is Dean Koenig. He lives in Whitchurch, with a woman called Deborah Cavendish. Mr Haran says she's a friend of Lynsey Wills, the girl who's been helping his wife. I remembered your involvement and wondered if there was anything you could tell us.'

'What kind of thing?'

'We'll question Miss Wills in the morning but — '

'You think she had something to do with the break-in?'

'Not necessarily, but she could have told Dean Koenig where the Sealeys were staying.'

'She dislikes him.'

'Oh, you've been talking to her, what did she tell you?'

'Nothing much.' Surely it could have waited till the morning.

'Nothing that would be any help.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line then he started talking less formally. 'Look, Anna, I wasn't going to mention it but the young man was carrying a club hammer. Short handle, heavy head, you know the kind of thing.'

'What for? To break open the window?'

'He said not, claimed it was planted on him.'

'By Rona Halliwell? That's crazy.'

'Of course. After questioning he said he found it lying in the grass near Leigh Woods.'

'And you believed him? When was all this? How long have you had him at the station?'

'An hour or so. Hang on a minute.' His voice faded, there was someone else in the room, I could hear papers being shuffled, drawers opened and closed. 'Anna, are you still there? Look, the

reason I phoned — the hammer — it'll take time to check but there's blue paint on the head and there's just a chance it's the same as the paint collected from Walter Bury's skull.'

Chapter Nine

Lynsey blamed herself. She was thick, an idiot, deserved to be given the sack. Wasn't she the one who had told Deb where Bryan and Helen Sealey were staying? Then Deb must have told Dean and the stupid bastard had thought the Sealeys were loaded, enough to make a break-in worth his while, enough to set him up with CD players and video-recorders for life.

I could see that Geraldine had heard the story several times over but when I suggested Lynsey tell me about it later she said it was all right, Lynsey needed to talk, wasn't that how people came to terms with traumatic events? 'What d'you think, Anna, this young man must've watched the house, waited till he knew the Sealeys had gone out, then forced open the kitchen window.'

I thought about it. 'But only an idiot would have risked waking a baby.'

Lynsey sighed. 'I don't suppose Deb mentioned Rona and the baby. Dean works shifts, for British Telecom, those numbers you ring for special offers and that.'

'Apparently he'd lost his job,' said Geraldine, 'but not told his wife.'

'Oh, they're not married,' said Lynsey, 'always lies to Deb, he does, that's one of the reasons I moved out.'

The police had come and gone. Yesterday evening it had been Sergeant Whittle and a WPC with a name Geraldine had forgotten. This morning they had returned, but this time with Inspector Fry, who Geraldine had been rather taken with but Lynsey described as a *hard-faced* pig. As far as I could tell nothing had been said about the hammer in Dean Koenig's pocket. Sandy had told Graham Whittle

about the connection between Dean and Lynsey. How he knew about it I had no idea but presumably Lynsey had talked about Deb's friend Dean and Sandy had remembered the name and put two and two together.

It was one of the days Lynsey fetched the shopping but all that had been forgotten for the time being. She sat on the floor with her knees pulled up and one of her legs swinging backwards and forwards. She had a heavy cross hanging from a thick silver chain round her neck. It looked expensive.

The break-in seemed to have had a good effect on Geraldine. She was in better spirits than usual, quite enjoying dealing with Lynsey, calming her down as you might an over-excited child.

'Find yourself a chair,' she said sharply, 'you're making me dizzy, with your leg moving about like that.'

'Sorry.' Lynsey pulled herself up on to the sofa, dragging off her boots and hoisting her legs up under her. 'Expect he's done it before, expect that's where he got his money from, not that he ever had much. Good looking, he is, if you like that kind of thing, flashy but dead boring and thick as a plank.'

'Anyway,' said Geraldine, stretching out a hand to pat Lynsey on the shoulder, 'there's absolutely no reason you should feel responsible, is there, Anna?'

'No, of course not.' But already a number of possibilities were circulating in my brain. Did Lynsey really feel so outraged, or was she just putting on a convincing act? Had she and Dean, as Howard Fry clearly suspected, planned the break-in together, hoping to share the cash from the sale of stolen goods? And what about Lynsey's friend, Deb, was she involved in some way? It occurred to me that

Deb might have asked Lynsey to move out, not because she and Dean were at each other's throats but because they were becoming attracted to one another.

'D'you know what I reckon?' said Lynsey. 'I reckon like something happened in this house hundreds of years ago. Something so horrible it's never been mentioned since.'

I glanced at Geraldine but she was smiling faintly. She was used to Lynsey's fantasies and had no intention of allowing herself to be affected.

'Anyway,' said Lynsey, glaring at each of us in turn, 'I saw that inspector before, at the time of the murder. I was going to tell him what I knew only like he wouldn't listen to someone like me.' She jumped up, nearly knocking a glass off the table. 'Right then, I'll take Thomas to the shops, shall I, so he can buy his comic.'

'Yes, all right.' Geraldine's cheerful mood seemed to have evaporated. 'But it's such a bloodthirsty thing, couldn't you help him to choose something more ... '

'Something more what? They don't do any harm — comics, horror films, that kind of stuff.' She turned to me. 'You tell her. They get it out of your system, don't they, should be handed out free then there wouldn't be so much violence in the world, so many muggings, knifings, bashing people over the head ... '

When I made no comment she laughed. 'After the shopping I promised to look after the baby for a bit. Rona's going out and Helen wants to see some stupid exhibition.'

Geraldine frowned. 'Helen's asked you to look after the baby?'

'Why not? Nothing to it. Anyway it likes me. Funny-looking thing, keeps pulling faces and grabbing hold of your hair.'

After she left Geraldine seemed agitated, moving round the room, picking up ornaments and putting them down. 'It's poor Miss Halliwell I keep thinking about although apparently she's none the worse for her adventure. I think if I'd heard an intruder I'd have kept very quiet, pretended the place was empty.'

'That's what the police advise you to do.'

She wasn't listening. 'Helen's going out, then,' she said, 'and Rona. Wouldn't you think they'd have stayed at home today?'

I shrugged. 'Probably best to carry on as normal. Sandy's at the cottage, is he?'

She turned round sharply. 'He was here when the police came back. He told them everything they needed to know. After that there didn't seem much point.'

'No, of course not.'

She stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. 'I'm going to make more coffee,' she announced. It was like a challenge. I was there this morning on her terms, not mine. 'You don't like us drinking coffee, do you?' she added for good measure. 'It makes things too informal.'

'Perhaps today we could make an exception.'

I had expected Sandy to stay at home, making sure everyone was all right, that the window had been repaired. But all that must have been attended to before I arrived. I wondered how Lynsey's friend Deb was feeling. Dean would be kept in extended custody, questioned at length. Had Deb been told about the hammer in his pocket? Had the police searched the house in Whitchurch, letting her think they were looking for stolen goods when, in fact, they were hoping to discover something that could connect Dean with Walter

Bury's murder. I remembered Lynsey, the first time we met, hinting that she knew more than she was letting on. At the time I had ignored her remarks, seeing them simply as a way of drawing attention to herself, keeping my interest. I tried to recall her actual words, but it was impossible. She had tossed out so many remarks, that day and since, but nothing Howard Fry needed to know about; after all he had questioned her himself and could do so again if he felt inclined.

Geraldine came back into the room, carrying a small circular tray. 'Poor Lynsey, it's a shame she feels responsible. Did Sandy tell you, he gave her a lift to London the week before last. Well, Reading actually. He has an old uncle in Henley-on-Thames so he dropped Lynsey off at Reading station, then collected her later in the day.'

'That was kind of him.'

'Oh, it was no trouble.' She held her cup to her mouth but it was too hot to sip. She was waiting for me to ask why Lynsey had wanted to go to London but already too much time had been taken up talking about Lynsey and the break-in. Now it was up to me to salvage what was left of our morning session.

'Tell me about when you and Sandy first met,' I said.

'I thought we had to concentrate on the day the poor man's body was found.'

'We'll return to that later.'

She stared at me. 'So you don't think it was the murder that did it — made me like this?'

'I just think it would help if I knew a little about your past history. When you got married, when Thomas was born, some of the significant events in your life.'

She pressed her nails into the palm of her hand. 'I had a friend once, we were at school together. Later, when we were grown up, we'd meet occasionally for lunch. Then she left her husband and moved to Chester. Oh, I'm sorry, you don't want to hear about my friend.'

'Perhaps it's relevant. Perhaps there was something you wanted to tell me.'

'No, I don't think so. She had twins, two little girls. They stayed with their father now and again, I think it all worked out quite well.' She laughed, the way people sometimes do when they're preparing themselves to talk about a painful subject. 'I had so much trouble getting pregnant and it took an age to find out what was wrong. Nothing very serious, as it turned out, but of course by then I was in my mid-thirties. They say you've less energy as you get older, find a small baby too much like hard work.' She glanced at the door almost as if she thought someone was outside, eavesdropping. 'Sandy was wonderful, changing nappies, bathing, preparing bottles, there was nothing he couldn't do. I don't know how you feel about all those single parents but I think a boy needs a father.'

'Would you have liked more children?'

She thought about this, as though it was something that had never occurred to her before. 'I just think how lucky we are having Thomas.'

'Yes, of course.'

She was smiling to herself. 'Lynsey,' she said dreamily, 'she does like to gossip but I suppose it's harmless enough. She's fond of Sandy, took to him straight away, but then most people find him easy to talk to, he listens, doesn't criticize.'

'Lynsey's been gossiping to Sandy?' I should have been steering her back to talking about herself, but I was curious. More than curious. There were too many unanswered questions floating around.

'Oh, nothing important. She's got it into her head that Bryan's carrying on with some actress in the play. Absolute nonsense, as if he would.' She looked at the clock. 'I do hope I'm not taking up too much of your time. You will tell me when it's time to stop.'

'What d'you think of Bryan Sealey?'

'Me?' She spoke so quietly I only just caught the single word. 'Does it matter what I think about anything? I'm sure he's a very clever man but being clever's not enough, is it? People need someone close, someone they can rely on.'

She was walking backwards and forwards. When she crossed to the window I joined her, looking out at the back garden, the part she had told me she liked best. Coltsfoot and willow-herb grew in the long rough grass. A tree with silvery green leaves had a clematis wound round its branches that had recently been in flower but was now almost over.

'I miss the garden,' she said softly, her voice calm now, her feelings back under control.

'But you don't feel you can go down there, even for a few minutes?'

'Sometimes I do.' She put her head on one side. She was teasing me, leading me on. 'But it wouldn't be any use. Long before I reached the bottom of the stairs the feelings would take a hold.'

'What kind of feelings? Tell me about them.'

'Shaking all over and a sensation just under my skin, as though insects were crawling, as though ... Is it possible to die of fear?'

Rabbits do, they freeze to the spot and their hearts stop beating.’ She had one knee on the window seat. Suddenly she lost her balance, lurching towards me, but managing to avoid any contact by almost throwing herself against the folded shutters.

‘Come and sit down,’ I said, ‘in five minutes we’ll have to stop but just before we do ...’

She sat on the biscuit-coloured sofa, something I had never seen her do before, with one of the small cushions clutched against her stomach. ‘What would you like me to say?’

‘Nothing. Don’t say anything at all.’

She closed her eyes, then opened them again. ‘I can’t just sit here.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s not fair.’ She was almost shouting. ‘Because you’ve no right to play these tricks on me. I don’t know how you do it, I don’t understand!’

*

On my way home, I decided to take the long way round. The sky was dotted with broken cloud, a mackerel sky as my mother used to call it. As I was passing the entrance to Leigh Woods I saw Lynsey sitting on the grass, surrounded by bags of shopping, with her eyes fixed on the upper branches of a tree. A moment later Thomas dropped to the ground, rubbing his elbow.

Lynsey saw me and waved. ‘Wasn’t my idea. He said he could climb to the top. Some hope.’

The trauma of the break-in seemed forgotten, ancient history. She rolled on her back, catching hold of Thomas’s plimsoll and pulling him down with her. He didn’t complain, just wrenched his foot free and stood up again with his back turned.

Lynsey felt in the pocket of her shorts and pulled out two five-pound notes. 'You going to the shopping centre?'

'I wasn't. Why?'

'Wondered if you could give this to Deb? I'd go myself but I don't think she'd want to see me, not after last night.'

I hesitated then took the money from her outstretched hand. 'All right, I'll see if I can find her.'

Lynsey grinned, guessing correctly that I was unlikely to miss an opportunity to meet Dean Koenig's woman. 'Blonde hair, she's got.'

'Like yours?'

'Do me a favour?'

'Don't you think in the circumstances she may have taken the day off work?'

'You can give it her tomorrow, then, whenever.'

Thomas was digging a hole in the dry earth with the toe of his shoe.

'Enjoying your holidays, Thomas?' I said, leaning over the fence that sectioned off that part of the woods, trying to see his face.

He turned his body a little but said nothing.

'Ah,' said Lynsey, mocking, 'he's shy. Not shy of me, though. You'd be surprised the things he tells me, wouldn't she, Tommy Tucker? He looks through windows, sees all kinds of things.' I started walking away but she hadn't finished. 'Wait, you'll want to hear this. Stuffing a handkerchief in her mouth, she was. Isn't that right, Tommy?'

'Who was?'

'Shall we tell her? Shall we, Tommy Tucker?'

Thomas had a stone in his hand. 'Don't call me that,' he muttered, hurling the stone into the undergrowth.

'He does judo,' said Lynsey, 'and drama group, and gym club. But he's hurt his knee so he can't go this week.' She scratched her head. 'Your friend with the dog, he's all right now, is he?'

'More or less, if he doesn't walk too far.'

'So you won't be taking Aaron anymore.' She stood up in one quick movement without putting her hands on the grass. 'Come on, Tommy Tucker, we've got to mind the baby.' She handed him a bag of shopping and I watched them set off in the direction of the house. I couldn't see much wrong with Thomas's knee.

*

A tall woman, with her dark glossy hair swept back into a long thick plait, fixed her gaze on my forehead and asked if I was interested in the Skin Care Event. She could book me in for Thursday, with the money refunded if I bought a selection of beauty products. When I declined the offer she turned away, her face an expressionless mask.

'I'm looking for Deb,' I said.

She pretended not to hear, then thought better of it. 'Who? Oh, Deb Cavendish.' She gestured in the direction of a display of anti-wrinkle moisturizer.

A blonde-haired woman was bending down behind the counter, reaching something off a low shelf. When she straightened up she started talking encouragingly to a middle-aged woman dressed in a long black skirt and a cheese-cloth shirt. The woman seemed to be apologizing for the state of her skin and Deb Cavendish was making reassuring noises as she consulted some kind of colour chart.

I waited, leaning against a display cabinet. A card propped up against a well-known brand of after-shave informed me that if I

bought a set of men's toiletries I could have a free baseball cap to go with it. The heavy smell of contrasting perfumes was starting to give me a headache. I wanted to get out of the place, back in the fresh air, but this wouldn't take long. As soon as the middle-aged woman had made her purchase I walked across to the counter and spoke Deb's name.

'Yes?' She had very white but slightly protruding teeth and, in contrast to her ash-blonde hair, her eyes were dark brown and strongly accentuated by black liner.

'Sorry to bother you,' I said, 'but I'm a friend of Lynsey's.'

'Lynsey?' Her hand went up to her cheek.

'There's nothing wrong,' I said quickly, 'but she asked me to give you this.'

'Oh.' She looked slightly puzzled, then took the two notes and held them in her fist. 'Thanks. What kind of a friend are you?'

'Just a friend.'

She looked doubtful. 'When did you see her?'

'About an hour ago. I know the people where she works.'

'Up at the house.' Her eyes darted round the make-up department, alighting on the security man who had unclipped his walkie-talkie and was shaking it up and down. 'So you know what happened?'

'Yes.'

'Dean's still at the police station, been there hours. He didn't harm the old lady.'

'No, she's fine.'

'You've seen her, then?'

'No, but I know she's all right. Actually I didn't expect to find you here today. I thought you'd have taken time off.'

She sighed. 'Wouldn't do any good, would it.'

'No, I suppose not.' We stared at each other for a few moments. 'Lynsey's afraid you'll blame her for last night.'

'Is that what she said? You a social worker or something?'

'No, I told you, just a friend.'

The muscles in Deb's face relaxed and she looked older than I had first estimated, perhaps about thirty-five or -six.

'My name's Anna McColl,' I said, 'I'm a psychologist.'

She stood on her toes, looking over my shoulder, watching for customers. 'Lynsey and Dean,' she whispered, 'I knew it wasn't going to work. Even so I wanted her to stay on a week or two, till she was more settled, but she wouldn't hear of it.'

'You knew her in London.'

She looked at me cautiously. 'What's she said?'

'Not much.'

'Look, if there was anything I could do, but with Dean and everything ...'

'Lynsey's all right,' I said, 'I'm sure she'll be in touch.'

'Yes.' She looked doubtful. 'That man they found in the woods. You heard about it?'

'What about him?'

'Lynsey, she wasn't working for Mrs Whatsemame at the time but she made a special journey, just to see the place where it happened.'

'It's not uncommon,' I said. 'People take a morbid interest.'

She nodded, opening a drawer behind the counter to indicate that the conversation was at an end. 'Tell Lynsey thanks for the money. I'll say this for her, she always repays her debts.'

I left the store, wondering why on earth Deb Cavendish's remark about Lynsey's visit to the scene of the crime had come as a surprise. Of course Lynsey couldn't have been working at the house at the time of the murder. After all it was only when the shock brought on Geraldine's agoraphobia that she had needed anyone to help.

A six-foot youth on roller-skates shot past, nearly knocking me against the plate-glass window. I jumped back, then stood for a moment, allowing the crowds to pass. The fresh air I had looked forward to was thick with the smell of petrol fumes and human bodies. I walked a few yards in the direction of Union Street, then changed my mind and re-entered the store through another door. While I was there I might as well have a look round. After all I was supposed to be on holiday, there was no urgent reason to return to the flat, no reason at all.

The lift was descending from the top. It stuck on the third floor, then rushed straight past to the basement. When it came up again and the doors finally opened the people inside looked distinctly bad tempered. A woman was trying to force a baby's buggy to the front but was being frustrated by an elderly man who wanted his wife to step out ahead of him. Suddenly I spotted a familiar figure, carrying a large, awkward parcel. Rona Halliwell, her grey hair dishevelled and her shirt unbuttoned almost to the waist, had her head down and was turning the cardboard box this way and that, trying to ease her way through the crowd.

'Rona?'

She looked up, her face red from her exertions. 'I wouldn't take the lift if you value your life.'

She put the box on the floor and started doing up her buttons with shaking hands.

Twelve felt pens, I read, a set of animal stencils, two tubes of glitter, twenty sheets of coloured paper.

Rona picked up the box and leaned against the wall trying to regain her composure. 'I came on the bus, they run every fifteen minutes but charge an exorbitant amount for such a relatively short distance.'

'I heard about last night,' I said. 'I'm glad you're all right, it must have been a nasty shock.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that. They never catch them, you know, not unless you can capture them red handed.'

'How did you manage it?' I wanted to hear more about the hold-up with the hairbrush.

'Nothing to it. If you ask me, the poor lad was none too bright.'

'Even so, it was quite an achievement locking him in the kitchen.'

'Scullery,' she corrected, hoisting up the box until it covered part of her face. 'Utility room, as they call them these days. He thought it was a way out, didn't realize he'd chosen the wrong door.'

'Anyway you were very brave.'

She snorted. 'Not brave at all, just extraordinarily angry. Anger gives you the strength of ten. It's a well-known fact.'

Chapter Ten

Geraldine's eyes kept darting round the room, focusing on one bird ornament after another, rubbing her hands together, studying her nails. Suddenly she lifted a small pile of cards lying face down on the coffee table and handed them to me.

'Would you like to see these?'

I turned them over in my hand. 'It's your birthday? You should have said.'

'Have a look.'

The first card was from Lynsey. A picture of a caveman dragging a near-naked woman by the hair. Inside was a neatly printed inscription: *Another birthday, what a drag!*

'Typical,' I said.

Geraldine smiled a little. 'She means well.'

Thomas had made his card himself. Strips of sticky-backed paper, some of them curling up at the edges, had been formed into the shape of a boat. It looked like the work of a much younger child, but perhaps art wasn't one of his strong points; after all he couldn't be brilliant at everything.

Sandy's card was a reproduction of a painting by Kate Greenaway: a small boy dressed in a sailor suit and cap bowling a hoop down a picturesque village street. It felt like an invasion of privacy reading the words inside but that seemed to be what Geraldine wanted me to do. *For Geraldine, with all my love as ever. Sandy.*

'Lovely,' I said, and she stood up and crossed to the other end of the room where a pale blue sweater had been draped over the back of a chair.

'From Sandy. Isn't he clever? He bought it all by himself, the right size and everything.' She held it up and I saw that it had two pink birds knitted into the pattern, one sitting down, the other standing on thin, strutting legs.

'It'll suit you,' I said.

'Yes, I think it will. Sandy always goes to so much trouble. It's the same for Thomas's birthday. When he was nine he bought him a telescope so he could study the night sky.'

'Thomas is interested in astronomy?'

'Oh, he's interested in everything, but Sandy's encouraging him to work specially hard at the science subjects. After all that's where the future lies.'

She sounded like a robot, repeating the words that had been programmed into its computerized brain.

'What did Thomas give you? For your birthday?'

She looked at me a little oddly, as though she had picked up something in my voice, then she lifted a box off the top of the corner cupboard. 'I was saving this to last.' She put it in my hands and nodded, indicating that in spite of the sticky tape that had been smoothed back into place I was to open it and look inside.

Wrapped in several layers of tissue paper was a large owl, about nine inches tall, carved out of dark heavy wood with etched-in feathers and beak and a neck with small brass hinges.

'Open the head,' she said, 'but be careful!'

Someone had stuffed the body full of crumpled up pieces of newspaper. Some of them fell on the carpet and I bent down to retrieve them.

'Lynsey's idea,' said Geraldine, putting her hand up to cover her mouth. 'She and Thomas tip it up and pretend the owl's been sick.'

'Little things please little minds.'

'Oh, Thomas was delighted,' she said. 'I haven't seen him laugh so much for ages.'

'Good, well I wish you'd told me it was your birthday. I'd have brought something to add to your collection.'

'Oh no, I wouldn't want that, you've given me quite enough. Besides, I've never liked birthdays. So embarrassing unwrapping the presents, hoping you'll make a suitable response. Sandy usually takes me out to dinner but of course this year we'll have to find some other way of celebrating.'

Somewhere in the flat a metallic door banged shut, followed by the sound of swishing water. Geraldine looked at the clock and sighed. 'That's Lynsey. I asked her to clean the bathroom and bedrooms while you were here, leave the washing till later on. She's a good worker but she can be a little noisy.'

'Where's Thomas?' I said.

'In his room. He's supposed to be practising his violin but he won't, not when Lynsey's around.'

'She and Thomas seem to get on well.'

She swallowed hard. 'Oh, yes, isn't it a blessing? D'you think we could stop now, it's nearly ten to.' She opened the door letting in the rumble of the washing machine. 'At the weekend he's travelling to Plymouth, to play in an orchestra. It's quite an honour.'

'He must be good!' I shouted above the noise.

She put her hands over her ears. 'Yes, I suppose he is.'

When I left Rona Halliwell was hanging a tiny pair of flowered dungarees on the line. She caught sight of me out of the corner of her eye and raised an arm. 'Hang on a minute, can you?'

Close by the baby, Chloe, was lying on her tummy with her head held up and her legs making scrabbling movements as she attempted to move across the grass. Frustrated by her lack of success she began experimenting with a range of high-pitched sounds. Eee-oi. Dow. Bah!

Rona turned away from the clothes line and collapsed on to a garden seat. 'Wanted to ask you something.' She looked exhausted, as though it was an effort keeping her eyes open.

'Oh, yes, what was that?'

'Psychologists — what are they exactly? Like psychotherapists or more like doctors?'

'Psychotherapy usually takes quite a long time,' I said. 'Counselling and other forms of treatment tend to be briefer. It's really a question of economics.'

'Oh, more than that surely, I should've thought anything long term could be counter-productive, make the patient too dependent.'

'That's what some people think.'

'But not you.' She lifted the baby and dragged her pink joggers over her soft padded bottom. 'Too hot, these outfits, elen buys them by the score. You know the trouble with your job. No moral values. Everyone bending over backwards to avoid any concept of good and evil.' She rubbed her knee, grimacing with pain.

'Rheumatism?' I asked.

'Huh, what would you know about that? At my age you can take your pick. Tell everyone about your aches and pains and have

yourself described as a dreary old bat, or carry on as per normal and endure people telling you how wonderful you are.’ She sat the baby on a play mat and handed her a brightly coloured rag book. ‘The latter course is marginally preferable but you have to give up any notion of sympathy for the fact your physique seems to be deteriorating by the day.’

I laughed and she pretended to be offended, then joined in briefly. ‘D’you go in for bereavement counselling? There’s counselling for everything these days. In my day trials and tribulations were just seen as part of being alive.’

‘People only need bereavement counselling if the normal process of grieving becomes blocked.’

‘Blocked? I’m afraid you’ll have to give me a dictionary of psychology if you’re going to use all that jargon.’

‘Have you lost someone?’

‘Me?’ The red clothes-peg held between her finger and thumb snapped and fell to the ground. ‘Oh, only my sister.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘She was younger than me, seventeen years, born when my poor mother was in her forties, a mistake.’ She sighed, ‘People tell you all kinds of things, I suppose. Great long-winded tales of woe. I don’t know how you stand it.’

‘When did she die?’

‘Bidly? Oh, months ago. She was christened Bernadette but they changed it to Bidly when they realized she had a screw loose. They were going to put her in an institution but somehow nobody got round to it and really she was no trouble, a sweet child, apart from

the tantrums. Of course by the time Mother died Bidy was in her late twenties but still with a mental age of about three or four.'

'What happened?'

'How d'you mean what happened?' Chloe was starting to complain. When I offered to pick her up Rona seemed not to hear so I hauled her into the air and sat her on my knee with her back resting against my stomach.

'After your mother died. What happened to your sister?'

'I had three elder brothers but they were married and in any case they wouldn't have known how to handle Bidy.'

'It must have been hard.' I picked a daisy, handed it to the baby, then removed it hastily when she tried to stuff it into her mouth.

'Of course, by then I'd been more than twelve years with the Richardsons — Helen's parents — but Helen had started at boarding school and there was no real reason for me to stay.'

'So you left to look after your sister.'

'We lived in my father's house for a time, then after he died I sold up and bought a flat in Sutton. That way, when I departed this world at least there'd still be money invested for Bidy's future. Am I boring you? Do say so if I am.'

'You're not. What about your brothers, couldn't they help?'

'Oh, it was all perfectly fair. Father left the house to me on the understanding that — '

'I didn't mean just money. It's not right the way it's always women who have to act as carers.'

She raised her eyebrows, implying that I might have no sense of duty but she was different. 'I wasn't married,' she said, 'and besides I was used to looking after people. Who else could have done it?'

Then her mood changed suddenly and she smiled to herself. 'Poor Biddy, she had very little in the way of language. Just a few key words. *Now. More. No. Won't.*'

'Like a baby.'

'What?' She screwed up her face, then decided to ignore my rather insensitive comment.

'She loved shopping. Sending tins of baked beans crashing to the supermarket floor, jumping up and down in delight while I attempted to explain, although people are very good about that kind of thing once they realize.'

Chloe had a fistful of my hair. I extracted it as best I could and began bouncing her up and down on my knees.

'Television was a blessing,' said Rona. 'She could hum the jingles, catching every pause, every intonation. I used to wonder why the skill had failed to generalize and allow her to carry on a relatively normal conversation.'

'You must miss her.'

'And quiz shows. She loved the buzzers and bells. After she died I used to hear them in my head. High-pitched like a bicycle bell if the answer was right. Low and flatulent if it was incorrect.' She made a kind of sucking sound, putting her hand up to her face as though afraid the memory of Biddy might reduce her to hysterical laughter. 'Quite attractive to look at, she was. Those children never seem to age. I suppose it's because they experience very little, have no awareness of the tragedy of human life. Blue eyes, a beautiful dark blue, nothing like mine, and very fine hair that had to be held back with a clip or it fell over her eyes and made her toss her head repeatedly. Why is it, d'you suppose — toddlers are demanding,

uninhibited, but people worship them like gods, whereas an adult like that is a source of embarrassment all round?’

‘I suppose people are afraid,’ I said, ‘not sure how to react.’

Rona snorted. ‘Like they’re afraid of death, you mean. Walter Bury, the poor creature who came to a sticky end, I asked Bryan if the police had any leads and he told me off for mentioning the subject in front of Helen. What are we supposed to do? Forget it ever happened? Forget the fact that the killer could be living a stone’s throw from here and might strike again when there’s a full moon?’

‘You don’t believe that.’

‘Oh, don’t I just. Ah well, can’t sit here all morning. What day is it? Not Tuesday anyway. Helen goes up to London every Tuesday — to see her friends, I suppose, have her hair done. Isn’t life cruel? We all pretend it’s jolly good fun with the occasional misfortune but if you want my opinion it’s the other way round, a vale of tears with the odd diversion that convinces us we ought to be gloriously happy and content.’ Her hand came down on my shoulder. ‘Oh, take no notice, touch of the sun. Next time you’re seeing Mrs Haran drop in for a cup of tea — if you’ve nothing better to do.’

A car stopped by the gate, out of sight but with its engine running noisily. Then it moved away and a moment later Helen Sealey appeared, carrying two stiff, shiny carrier bags. She stood in front of the house for a moment, shading her eyes from the sun, then she walked up to us and dropped the bags on the grass.

‘Is Bryan back?’

‘Not yet, my love.’

‘Shit.’

'I expect he'll turn up soon.' Rona's voice was soft, soothing, like a mother reassuring a spoilt but adored child.

'He hasn't even phoned?'

'Probably stopped off to buy some raspberries. He knows you love them.'

Helen frowned, then turned towards me. 'Sorry, am I interrupting something?' She touched the baby lightly on the cheek. 'Have you been a good girl for Nanny?'

'Don't call me that,' said Rona crossly.

'Oh, now what? She's Chloe's nanny, aren't you, sweetheart?' She took the baby from me, holding her awkwardly as though she was a doll that didn't bend in the middle. 'Well, what should we call you, then?'

Rona shrugged. 'By my name?'

Helen glanced at me, wondering what I was making of the little charade. She was wearing the same white trousers as before, but this time with a red and yellow shirt and a floppy cotton sun hat. There was no sign of any photographic equipment.

'There's this shop in Clifton Village,' she said, 'one of those wildly expensive places with designer clothes for babies. So extravagant but I couldn't resist.' She looked inside one of the carrier bags, then lifted out a pale lemon outfit and held it up for us to admire. 'Isn't it amazing. It's got special padded knees for when she starts to crawl.'

'It'll show every mark,' said Rona, standing up and taking the baby.

'Oh, don't be such a killjoy. Lynsey's wonderful at washing and ironing, just like a professional laundry.'

So Lynsey was taking over more and more of the chores in both flats. I hoped they were paying her properly, not using her as cheap

labour. Not that Lynsey was incapable of demanding her rights although it would be typical of her to gain an absurd satisfaction from feeling exploited, hard done by.

Rona was walking towards the house.

Helen gazed across the lawn at the flowering shrubs as though she thought someone might be lurking in the garden. 'Poor Rona,' she said, 'I was afraid looking after a small baby might be too much for her. But she was absolutely adamant. D'you think it's too much?'

'I think it's what she wants to do,' I said, wondering as I spoke what right I had to feel confident to speak on Rona's behalf.

'Has she told you about her sister?' said Helen. 'I didn't know what had happened — not until I phoned to tell her about the baby.'

'Some people like to grieve alone, for a time.'

'Do they really?' She stared at me, as though I had imparted some highly technical information. 'I'd love a job like yours, something worthwhile, but I'd be no use to anyone.'

*

Chris phoned at nine o'clock. The children were in bed at last and Bruce had some stupid meeting, couldn't I come round and tell her all about my trip to the Forest of Dean with Owen Hughes.

'There's nothing to tell.'

'Liar, you just want to keep it to yourself. Oh, don't tell me you're still hankering after that policeman.' I heard her lighting a cigarette. So the resolution to *absolutely, definitely* give up had lasted less than a week. 'Has he phoned? Owen whatever his name is — has he phoned?'

'We're going to the cinema tomorrow evening.'

'Well, come round in the afternoon.'

'How's the mumps?'

'Bloody awful. Oh, you're not afraid of catching it. Haven't you had it? Of course you have.'

'Not as far as I can remember.'

'Liar. By the way, that murder in Leigh Woods, have the police got any nearer to finding who did it?'

'Not as far as I know.'

'Not as far as you know,' she repeated. 'Is that a way of saying your inspector hasn't been in touch, or have you signed the Official Secrets Act?' She snorted. 'Anyway I met someone who knew him, the guy who was bashed over the head.'

'Who?'

'A friend of a friend who does photography. Arty pictures of early morning mist, the fog over Avonmouth, you know the kind of crap.'

'What did she say about him?'

'Oh, nothing really, just that he'd had some kind of breakdown, then recovered and taken on a new lease of life.'

'What kind of new lease?'

'Oh, I don't know. Isn't it just typical? Struggling on, wanting to top himself, then as soon as he's feeling a bit better someone smashes in his skull.'

'This friend of yours,' I said, but she laughed and put down the phone. If I wanted to know more I would have to call round at the house. I doubted if there was any more.

Chapter Eleven

‘Bryan Sealey,’ said Owen, ‘I saw one of his plays in London, something about the hypocrisy of rich left-wing liberals, not too bad if you like that kind of thing.’

‘This one’s about relationships between the sexes,’ I said irritably, ‘traditional values — marriage, security — or a series of relationships, job changes.’

‘And he’s given you a couple of tickets for the first night. When is it?’

‘So you want to come?’

‘Of course.’

The evening had started badly. After waiting fifteen minutes outside the book shop at the bottom of Park Street it had suddenly struck me that Owen had meant the one nearer the university. It was my fault, not his. That made it even worse.

Now we were on our way to the cinema. Owen had asked if I liked Chinese films. When I hesitated he had laughed and said neither did he but we could see some gruesome thing about a serial killer that was on at the Odeon. Outside St Nicholas’ Market a boy was sitting on the pavement playing a wooden flute. Owen put his hand in his pocket and dropped a coin into the nest the boy had made out of a grubby cotton scarf.

‘You surprise me,’ I said, ‘I thought you disapproved of begging.’

‘What gave you that idea?’

‘You did. You said the welfare state had undermined people’s self-respect.’

He laughed. ‘Oh, I say all kinds of things.’

‘Just for effect.’

‘I expect so.’ He took a battered diary from his inside pocket and flicked through the pages. ‘Right, then, when’s this visit to the theatre, I’ll make a note of it.’

As we walked up Vine Street I told him about my phone call from Chris and how she had met someone who had been a friend of Walter Bury.

‘The man they found in Leigh Woods?’

‘Actually I think it was a friend of a friend. This person, whoever he was, is interested in photography.’

‘That’s significant, is it?’

‘I shouldn’t think so.’

He peered at my face. ‘You’re angry with me.’

‘No. Something happened at the house but I’ll tell you about it later.’

‘Tell me now. You’ve no idea what a frustrating day I’ve had.’

The cinema queue stretched up the street but it was moving, we wouldn’t have to wait long. In front of us a couple were arguing about where they had left their car, the woman insisting parking was allowed there after six o’clock, the man muttering about what would happen to her if she had got it wrong and they returned to find it had been wheel-clamped.

‘The day we went to the Forest of Dean,’ I said, looking round guiltily as though I was giving away classified information, ‘someone broke into the Sealeys’ flat.’

Owen stopped consulting his diary. ‘Really? Get away with much?’

‘No, but the guy who broke in was a friend — well, an acquaintance — of the girl I was telling you about.’

‘Which girl is that?’

‘The one I met on the Suspension Bridge. The girl who cleans the Sealeys’ flat and does the shopping for the woman — ‘

‘She had something to do with the burglary? Rather stupid to risk losing her job.’

‘She may have told the guy who broke in that the Sealeys lived there. As far as I know she had nothing else to do with it.’

‘That’s all right, then.’ He searched in his pocket and found a crumpled piece of paper. ‘I was supposed to phone someone at UC. University College.’

‘Yes, I know what UC stands for,’ I said. ‘The point is, the intruder was carrying a hammer and it’s just possible it’s the same weapon that was used on Walter Bury.’ I pulled myself up short. ‘Only I don’t think the police have released anything yet so — ‘

‘But your inspector friend’s given you the low down. By the way, what’s his name?’

‘Howard Fry.’

‘Married?’

‘Divorced.’

He nodded. ‘And he tells you about his cases.’

‘I met him a couple of years ago when I was receiving threatening letters — well, post cards as it happened.’

‘Ah, that would explain it. The inspector came to the rescue of the fair maiden and you’ve never looked back.’

Two and a half hours later we came out of the dark air-conditioned cinema and stood in front of the windows of Mothercare, taking a few moments to adjust back to the real world, staring at the display of child-sized dolls, dressed in brightly coloured jogging pants and

sweatshirts. Then the lights changed on the pedestrian crossing and Owen set off across the road.

‘Was the film as bad as you expected?’ he said, walking fast, with his head turned towards the shop windows.

‘Yes but I enjoyed it, especially the part on the scenic railway.’

‘Good, well, I suppose we ought to find something to eat. Any particular place you like?’

‘Not really, I don’t usually eat out in this area.’

‘Prefer Clifton?’

‘No, it’s just nearer.’

In the end we abandoned the idea of a restaurant and decided on a pub near Bristol Bridge. Owen offered to buy the drinks and I forced my way through the crowd and found a couple of seats at a table where a gloomy-looking couple looked as if they were about to leave. The place had a nautical flavour. High on the wall, sticking out several feet, was a carving from the prow of a boat — a poker-faced woman with breasts like grapefruits — and close by on a shelf set into the corner near the fireplace lay an old-fashioned sailor’s hat and a ship in a bottle.

‘Been here before?’ said Owen, splashing beer on the table, his voice muffled by the bar menu he was holding between his teeth.

‘Once or twice. I came here for lunch with Martin and Nick when it was Nick’s birthday a few weeks back.’

‘The people you work with. You like pubs?’

‘Why? You don’t.’

‘Oh, I’m not bothered where I go.’ He was looking all round, pretending to take an interest in the decor. He seemed on edge.

Perhaps the film had bored him stiff. He would have preferred the Chinese one but had gone along with what I wanted.

‘Don’t know about you,’ he said, ‘but that ice-cream at the cinema’s ruined my appetite.’

I nodded. ‘Wait a bit shall we, see how we feel?’

‘Good idea.’ He yawned, putting his hand over his mouth. ‘Sorry, I’m rather tired, had a frustrating day.’

‘Yes, so you said.’

‘Did I?’ He smiled but it was to cover a look of anguish that had passed across his face.

I had no idea what he was thinking about but suddenly my mood changed dramatically and I warmed to him, wanted him to tell me all his darkest secrets. He looked at me, started to speak, then broke off as the door of the pub crashed open and a group of people who looked like actors pushed their way in and crossed to the bar, talking in loud voices. Two others came in after them, a man in a leather jacket with his arm round a woman with short dark hair. I recognized them at once. Both looked grim faced, the way people do when they want to have a fight, but not in front of friends.

‘The Sealeys,’ I said, ‘over there by the fruit machine.’

‘Where?’ Owen craned his neck to see and at that moment Bryan noticed me and raised an arm.

‘His wife doesn’t look too pleased with life,’ said Owen.

‘No. I’d have introduced you but it doesn’t seem a very good time.’

But Bryan had broken free from Helen and was walking towards us. ‘Anna, didn’t expect to see you here.’ He squeezed my arm, greeting me as though I was a long-lost friend.

‘This is Owen,’ I said. ‘He works at the university.’

‘Really? I’ve a friend in the Drama Department, an expert on Restoration comedy, you know him I expect. Hang on, I’ll just buy us some drinks, then we’ll join you if that’s all right.’

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ I said, when Bryan was out of earshot. ‘I couldn’t very well tell him to go away.’

‘Why should I mind? You seem to know all kinds of exciting people. Playwrights, detectives ... ’

Over by the bar Bryan was trying to talk to Helen but she had her head turned away. Her shoulders were moving up and down as though she was breathing hard, trying to gain control of herself, and in spite of the fact I had never really taken to her I had some sympathy. How typical of a man to pre-empt a row by using any means at hand. Would she refuse to join us, or would she join us but refuse to speak? If Owen did the same that would leave Bryan and me to keep things ticking over. It was going to be tough.

But it didn’t turn out that way. Bryan, who had insisted on buying more drinks although our glasses were still full, sat down and immediately started complaining about his re-writes. Owen seemed surprisingly interested, encouraging him to talk about previous plays, even managing to remember the name of one he had seen a year or two back.

Helen looked at me and jerked her head in Bryan’s direction. ‘As long as he’s under pressure, running out of time. Deadlines, that’s what he likes, the closer the better.’ She was wearing a dusty pink shirt, open at the neck so the sharp ridges of her collar bone were clearly visible. As she talked she stroked the back of her hand and I noticed that her nails were surprisingly short and her hands rather large and square. I remembered, uncharitably, how the hands shown

in close-up for washing-up liquid commercials belong to models hired specially for the purpose, not to the beautiful creature standing at the sink.

‘How’s the photography?’ I said.

‘Sorry? Oh, that.’ She glanced at Bryan, who was laughing at something Owen had said. ‘My camera, I’m going to have to change it. It’s supposed to be the best but nothing turns out — ’ She broke off. Someone was coming into the pub, a girl with long fair hair that hung down her back, reaching almost to her waist. Helen watched her, like a cat watches a bird, with her head perfectly still but her eyes moving between Bryan and the girl.

‘Someone you know?’ I asked, and she jumped slightly, then turned to face me.

‘No one important. You’re on holiday, aren’t you? It’s very good of you to see poor Geraldine. I hope she’s getting better.’

‘I’d planned a week in Pembrokeshire but it fell through.’

‘Oh, that’s a shame.’ She had no interest in my ruined holiday. ‘I used to go abroad all the time but after a bit one country seems much the same as another.’ As she talked she edged towards Bryan until her body was only a few inches from his. Suddenly he stood up and moved his chair round the end of the table.

‘Sorry, my darling, not a lot of room in this place.’ He smiled at her, then at me, then resumed his discussion with Owen, something about the Arts Council and the way they allocated resources.

Owen’s sweater had a splash of ice cream down the front. I wanted to lick my finger and rub it off but that would give the impression that the two of us had a close relationship. Helen was running her finger round the rim of her glass. I dredged my brain for something to talk

about, something to break the tension, and came up with the subject women always fall back on. 'Chloe's a lovely baby, isn't she? I expect she'll be crawling soon, I'm not sure what age they start.'

She stared at me and her hand returned to her throat. 'Bryan says we'll have to have gates fixed at the top and bottom of the stairs — when we go home.'

'To Wimbledon?'

The muscles in her face stiffened. 'Oh, you know where we live.'

'I expect Rona told me.'

'What else? What else did she say? Did she tell you I go back much too often? It's only to see friends. If you don't keep in touch people soon forget you exist.'

Bryan was listening in on the conversation. 'Helen wishes we were back in London, don't you, my darling?' He ruffled her hair in a way which would have irritated me considerably and seemed to have the same effect on her. 'She finds it difficult being away from home for so long.'

'No, I don't,' she said angrily, 'as a matter of fact I prefer it in Bristol, at least during the summer.'

Bryan laughed. 'You live in Cliftonwood, don't you, Anna? I haven't discovered it yet. There's such a maze of streets to the south of Clifton Village I daren't venture too far.'

Helen curled her lip. 'I shouldn't think your great ugly vehicle would get between the parked cars, would it, Anna?'

The effort the Sealeys had made when they first sat down was beginning to collapse. I looked at Owen, willing him to finish his drink so we could make an excuse and leave. But he was staring at Helen, with a stupid smile on his face, so I spoke to Bryan instead.

'You're pleased with the new play?'

'Never pleased,' he said, 'but it'll do.' He pushed back his chair, almost knocking into an old man who was dragging a Jack Russell terrier across the floor. 'I hear you've been having a chat with Rona. She seems to have taken a liking to you.'

'Really? I thought she disapproved of psychologists.'

'Oh, I'm sure she does. Speaking professionally, would you say she's coping all right — with the baby and everything?'

Helen had asked the same question, yesterday in the garden. If they were worried about Rona why didn't they ask her themselves?

'Seems to be,' I said. 'I'm not an expert in that kind of thing.'

'No, of course not. I didn't mean the day to day care. What I meant, is she happy?'

I thought about it and he waited impatiently, as though my reply was of the utmost importance. 'It's possible she's finding it hard to come to terms with the death of her sister,' I said, 'I really don't know.'

Owen was talking about the murder. I could hear him asking Helen how close to the house the body had been found, whether the police had made house-to-house enquiries.

She looked flushed, uncomfortable. 'Oh, it was at least half a mile away. I'm not sure exactly, I don't know the woods very well, only the path that leads down to the Gorge.'

'What about it?' Bryan picked up the end of her sentence. 'Amazing, that Gorge, used to be a cliff railway, shame it doesn't run anymore.'

'Owen was talking about the murder,' said Helen coldly. 'He wondered if it took place close to our flat.' She smiled at Owen,

turning on the charm. 'Bryan likes to pretend it never happened. He thinks I'm of a nervous disposition.' Beneath the table Bryan was gripping his knees. 'I don't suppose it's something any of us want to dwell on too much. Lynsey's the one who can't leave it alone. She's the one responsible for all those nightmares you've been having. Wouldn't you say that's right, Anna, wouldn't you say that's the most likely explanation?'

*

Out in the street a man dressed in track suit bottoms and a Bristol City football shirt was bending over the gutter, wiping the vomit off his lips. Owen didn't seem to notice. He had his diary out again and was holding it under a street lamp, trying to decipher a few squiggles on the back page. I walked on ahead, pausing outside the theatre to look at the posters for Bryan's new play and the photographs in framed cases, one of a fairly well-known actress who was playing the lead.

'Interesting man,' said Owen, shoving the diary in his jacket pocket. 'Bit full of himself but I suppose you have to be if you want anyone to take you seriously.'

'What did you think of Helen?'

He frowned. 'She's rather beautiful, isn't she?'

'Yes, but pretty neurotic.' I turned away, angry with myself for my pathetic attempt to diminish her good looks by casting aspersions on her personality.

'I don't think she's happy,' said Owen, studying one of the photographs, then bending down to hoist up one of his socks.

'What makes you say that?'

'Oh, nothing in particular, just a feeling you get. Did she give up modelling or did modelling give her up? I know they like them young but with a face like that I would have thought she'd be in demand all over the world.'

'I've no idea,' I said, 'maybe she just tired of the life.'

He laughed. 'Slow down, I'm obviously not as fit as you are. What time is it?'

We walked down King Street in silence and crossed the road without looking at each other. Did Owen expect me to invite him back to the flat or would we go our separate ways, him up Park Street, me across College Green? As we turned the corner I noticed a figure sitting on the pavement, with her back leaning against the statue of Neptune.

'Lynsey? What on earth are you doing?'

'Same as you, I expect, passing the time.'

'On your own?'

'That's a crime, is it?'

I introduced Owen and she jumped up and held out her hand. 'Welsh, are you? Owen Glendower, we did him at school.'

'We've been to the Odeon,' I said, 'then we ran into Bryan and Helen.'

'That was a treat for you.' She lifted her bare foot and studied the sole, picking off pieces of dirt. 'This statue was erected in 1949 and over there it tells you all about John Cabot and how he sailed to America, discovered it or something. He had a son — Sebastian. D'you like the name Sebastian? If I had a kid that's what I'd call him and if anyone called him Seb I'd do them in.' She took hold of my arm. 'Look, Samuel Plimsoll, the one that invented the plimsoll line.'

Before his ships got overloaded and like sank to the bottom of the sea with all hands on board.'

'You're a mine of information,' I said. 'I'd no idea you were so interested in Bristol's history.'

'Yes, well, there's plenty you don't know about me.' She waved to two men who were walking towards the Watershed. 'Did you give the money to Deb?'

'Yes.'

'What did she say?'

'Nothing much, I told her you'd probably be in touch quite soon.'

She stared at me. 'I might.'

'Right then, we'd better be off. See you tomorrow, I expect.'

As we crossed the road she shouted after us. 'Hey, Anna?'

'What?'

'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

I turned to wave and she looked as pale and lost as the first time I had seen her on the bridge.

Chapter Twelve

'It's the kind of hammer you can buy in any ironmonger or DIY place,' said Howard, 'costs about a tenner. Everything rested on whether the traces of paint were the same as those taken from the victim's skull.' He closed his eyes for a moment.

'And?'

'They match exactly.'

'But that doesn't prove ... '

'On its own it doesn't prove a thing but you must admit it's something of a coincidence. Incidentally, a friend of Walter Bury's has just returned from New Zealand. They used to watch cricket together, meet up occasionally for a coffee.'

'He only found out what had happened after he got back?'

Howard nodded. 'There's a cafe in the museum, at the back behind the fossils and stuffed birds. The friend's name's Colin Elliot. Mean anything to you?'

'Should it?'

'Not really. He lives quite near you, one of those roads off Clifton Vale.'

As usual Howard's office was spotlessly tidy. A place for everything, and everything in its place. I found myself comparing it with Owen's room at the university, where papers lay in unsorted piles on the desk, filing cabinets, and floor. I had called in at the police station to try and find out the latest developments on the Dean Koenig case, not that it was any of my business but Geraldine seemed obsessed with what was going to happen to him. Obviously, after what Howard had just told me there was no need to ask if Dean

would be kept in custody. Still, there were other questions I wanted to ask, although it could be difficult, persuading Howard to provide me with the answers without letting him think I was becoming too involved in the case — and possibly keeping something back.

‘Dean Koenig still insists he found the hammer lying in the grass, does he? But you don’t believe him.’ When Howard made no comment I tried again. ‘Who’s going to leave a murder weapon in a place where it can be spotted so easily?’

‘We don’t yet know if it was the weapon that killed Walter Bury. Koenig panicked. First he said he didn’t even know there’d been a murder, then he said he might have read something in the evening paper but he didn’t know where it had happened.’

‘So he’s a liar.’

‘Wouldn’t you lie in his situation?’ Graham Whittle’s head came round the door. ‘Just going to check on — ’ He broke off, seeing me but failing, for a couple of seconds, to take in who I was. ‘Anna, didn’t expect to see you here. Oh, the break-in. Howard says you’ve been working at the house even though you’re supposed to be on holiday. Never switch off, eh, just like us lot.’

He hovered in the doorway for a moment, wondering if Howard was going to suggest he join us. When no invitation was forthcoming he nodded in my direction, then left, pulling the door shut behind him.

‘This friend of the victim,’ I said, ‘how much does he know about Walter Bury’s past life?’

‘Elliot? Why d’you ask? Very little, as it happens. Apparently Bury used to work part-time for an organization that provided outings for the handicapped. Days at the sea-side, you know the kind of thing.’

‘Yes, I’ve a neighbour, paralysed from the waist down. A minibus collects him — ’

‘Oh, it wasn’t in this area. That was when he lived in Kent. His sister in Canterbury’s been interviewed again but nothing came up of any significance.’

‘And the hit-and-run accident — his wife?’

‘Happened in Richmond — not Yorkshire, the one in south-west London. According to Elliot — he couldn’t be certain but he had an idea Bury was on to something. Apparently he’d seemed happier than he’d been for ages, was even planning a holiday in the Dordogne.’

‘By himself?’

‘That we’ll never know.’ He leaned back, clasping his hands behind his head. That was all he was going to tell me, unless I had some information to give him. ‘I haven’t ruled out Koenig altogether,’ he said, ‘but there’s no motive.’

‘Robbery? A mugging that went too far?’

‘And he used the same instrument for a petty break-in? As unlikely as Graham Whittle’s hypothesis that the killer was the kind of person you’d know about, someone who should have been kept locked up permanently instead of returned to the community.’

‘Don’t blame me,’ I said sourly.

‘I wasn’t.’ He opened the door but blocked my way out. ‘My son’s coming to stay at the weekend.’

‘Good.’

‘It’ll give me a chance to have a talk with him — or it would have.’ He fiddled with the knot in his tie. ‘His mother’s bringing him. Her friend appears to have cleared off, returned to his wife.’

‘Really?’ My first reaction was surprise. ‘I thought your wife had remarried.’

‘Not as such.’ He crossed to a filing cabinet, pulling open one of the drawers and taking out a thick folder of notes.

‘Any chance of the two of you getting back together again?’ I said. ‘Not that it’s anything to do with me. I was just thinking about Stuart.’

He had his back to me. ‘I know you were,’ he said.

*

I phoned Chris. It rang for a long time and when she answered she was still talking to one of the kids. ‘It’s broken. I said — it’s broken! Yes. What?’

Was she speaking to me? ‘It’s Anna.’

‘I know that.’ In the background someone was making a noise like the mating croak of a natterjack toad. ‘If you’re ringing to find out more about that bod who does photography forget it. It was Bruce told me and I wasn’t even listening properly. Anyway he’d only heard of Walter Bury, never met him. Actually it was just a way of trying to lure you round to the house. I’m bloody bored, can’t you come now?’

‘Soon. I promise. Listen, you know that friend of yours who adopted a baby not long ago. How much do they go into the parents’ backgrounds?’

‘Why? You’re not thinking of ... No, I don’t blame you. They were interviewed dozens of times — well, at least six — and the social worker talked to relatives and had a look at the house and where the baby was going to sleep and all that kind of crap. Anyway you don’t need me to tell you the procedure.’

‘But they can’t find out everything — about the adoptive parents.’

‘No, of course not.’ She broke off to yell up the stairs, threatening someone with no television and nothing to eat for a week. ‘Why should they unearth all the skeletons in the wretched people’s whatsits? The most Godawful people have kids without anyone asking for references or making them fill in questionnaires. Anyway why d’you want to know?’

*

Lynsey and Thomas were playing boules on the lawn. Thomas was complaining that she had thrown the jack into a patch of rough grass and Lynsey was laughing as she tossed a heavy metal ball in the air.

‘No good making excuses. Let’s face it, you’re hopeless at ball games, too uncoordinated.’

Presumably she had completed her duties for the morning — or perhaps one of them was keeping Thomas amused. I had no idea how many hours she worked but the house seemed to have become a second home for her and if all she had was a small badly furnished room in Southville I could understand why. The two of them seemed such unlikely companions, Lynsey so wild and uncontrolled, with her black clothes and white-blond hair, Thomas so neat and silent, dressed in red shorts and a T-shirt with a picture of Rupert the Bear. These days most boys his age wore great baggy trousers, covered in pockets, and oversize trainers with the laces trailing on the ground — or was it just the ones who lived near me? I couldn’t see Thomas fitting into the local comprehensive but for all I knew Sandy and Geraldine had different plans altogether. A place at the cathedral choir school, or was he already too old?

The sky had cleared but thundery showers were forecast for later in the day. My shirt stuck to my back uncomfortably and a horsefly

bite on my ankle had swollen up and started to itch.

'Talking about you,' said Lynsey. A long piece of dried grass stuck out of her mouth and her hands were smeared with earth.

'Oh, yes?'

She grinned but said nothing. Thomas wandered away in the direction of the garden shed.

'Funny kid,' said Lynsey. 'I read in a magazine that shyness is just being selfish, thinking about yourself instead of other people. Cobblers. People can't help being shy. Anyway, how many people d'you know who don't spend most of their time thinking about themselves?'

'He's not shy with you.'

'Ah, that's 'cos I understand him.'

'Good. His mother asked me to give him a message. Time for his music practice.'

'It's the holidays. Anyway I have to go to the shops in a minute so he can do it then.'

'You work here every day now, do you?'

'Just do whatever's needed. Sandy tells me what's wanted — or Geraldine. Mostly it's Sandy, before he leaves for that cottage of his. I'd like a place like that, out in the country, miles from anywhere with no one to tell you to turn the sound down.'

'You've seen the cottage?'

'What? Sandy says it's up the end of a lane with the next house nearly half a mile away. He's all right, is Sandy.'

'I thought you hated all men.'

She laughed. She seemed in good spirits, excited. Her black shorts looked as if they had been hacked at with a pair of blunt nail

scissors. She was wearing a man's white shirt with a fraying collar and the sleeves rolled up. Most of the buttons were missing and she had nothing on underneath.

'Thomas isn't what you think,' she said. 'Just 'cos he's little for his age doesn't mean he doesn't notice things.'

'What kind of things?'

'Ah, that'd be telling.'

I turned towards the house but she called me back. 'Proud, aren't you? I was going to say if you'd give me a chance.'

'Yes, well, I don't think you should if it's something you were told in confidence.' She came closer and lowered her voice. 'Anyway I expect you know already — about him being adopted. Only like you're s'posed to tell kids when they're little, not just let them find out by mistake.'

I glanced towards the shed. 'Thomas isn't adopted, whoever told you that?'

'He overheard them. They was having a row, thought he was tucked up in bed, only like he was listening outside the door.'

'I expect he misunderstood. Children often fantasize about such things.'

'Why would they do that?'

'It tends to happen round about the age they start to have mixed feelings about their parents. I expect it's something to do with Chloe's adoption. The idea appeals to him, makes him seem more mysterious.'

She wasn't listening. 'You heard about Dean?' she asked.

'What about him?'

'No, I mean d'you know anything, is he going to court and that? S'pose I ought to see Deb but I should think I'm the last person ... '

'I'm sure she'd like to see you.'

'You reckon?' She looked at me with her head on one side and the silly smile that seemed designed to invite people to treat her like a troublemaking adolescent. 'I heard Bryan Sealey,' she said, 'on the phone, checking up on Helen.'

'You and Thomas seem to be good at eavesdropping.'

'No, I wasn't,' she said angrily. 'I was in the kitchen mopping those horrible stone tiles. He asked if there was any news.'

'How d'you know who he was talking about?' I should have walked away, told her to mind her own business. 'How d'you know he was talking about Helen?'

'They don't get on, can't stand the sight of each other. Fancy letting people adopt a baby when they'll most likely be divorced in a year or two. Anyway, I reckon she's a nutcase, not fit to look after a little kid. And another thing ... ' She smiled to herself, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. 'No, I shouldn't break a confidence, should I, although I was thinking of telling that nice Sergeant Whittle.'

'Telling him what?'

She laughed. 'Oh, things, just things. Anyway I might join the police one day, reckon I'd make a good policewoman, don't you?'

*

Rona called to me as I was passing the kitchen window. When I walked through the open door she was bent double, reaching into a cupboard under the sink unit. She straightened up, holding a sponge in her hand, staring at it as though she had forgotten what she

needed it for. 'Want that cup of tea I promised or do your sort only drink coffee?'

'Tea would be good.'

'Right you are.' She was dressed in a brown skirt, made of some stiff canvas-like material, and a green hand-knitted jumper with a pattern of holes round the neck. She looked hot but more cheerful than the last time we had met. Perhaps talking about her sister had made her feel a little better.

'You could have a sandwich,' she said, 'but there's only ham and it's dry at the edges.'

'No thanks, just tea would be fine.'

'That Lynsey,' she said, opening the fridge and taking out a thick earthenware jug, 'I've got used to her rough tongue but there's something I can't quite put my finger on, she makes me uneasy.'

'She's harmless enough,' I said, wondering who I was reassuring, Rona or myself. 'Know anything about her background?'

'Very little. She lived in London.'

'Yes, I know that much. Did quite well at school then dropped out like so many of them do these days, ruined her chances. If you ask me she missed out during the early years. Nothing anyone can do later makes up for it, the lack of love and affection at a time the child can't put its misery into words.'

I nodded. 'I've just been reading a book about that very subject.'

'Oh, books.' She turned her back on me and I cursed myself for coming out with the one remark guaranteed to cut short whatever she was going to say next.

'Lynsey's fond of animals.' I started to tell her about the incident with the ducklings, but she made no comment and I was not even

sure if she was listening. She still had her back turned and was busy spooning tea into a teapot. Suddenly she sat down heavily and the look of desperation I had noticed before returned to her face.

‘Is something the matter?’

When she didn’t answer I crossed to the draining board and finished making the tea. She was breathing hard, sitting bolt upright with her hands resting on the table, exceptionally large hands, with shiny knuckles. I thought about how she had watched Dean Koenig opening the wrong door, desperate to escape, then given him a shove in the small of the back and locked him into the utility room.

‘You’re still grieving for your sister?’ I said, assuming that was why she looked so distraught, why she had invited me into the flat.

She shook her head. ‘No, no you’ve got it all wrong. Oh, why do we do these things? What’s the matter with us, why can’t we use the brains God gave us?’

In a room at the back of the house the baby was starting to wake from her morning rest. A series of hiccuping noises were followed by louder sounds which would soon turn into wails. Rona seemed not to have heard.

‘Shall I fetch her?’ I said, remembering how Chris’s youngest, if left to yell, turned purple in the face and had to be comforted for up to half an hour.

‘What?’ She stared at me blankly. ‘Oh, yes, if you like.’

The passage was dark, airless, but it was better in the nursery where a window, with a chicken-wire frame to keep out neighbouring cats, had been left wide open. When I lifted Chloe out of her cot I expected her to protest loudly, but she showed no surprise that a

virtual stranger had appeared in her room. Perhaps she recognized me, perhaps babies took in more than I imagined.

The cot was a new one, supplied by Sandy no doubt, with a yellow sheet and a matching blanket that was folded at one end. On the wall above a picture of four rag dolls sitting on a shelf had slipped to one side. I straightened it with my free hand, taking in the general decor, the yellow light shade with its pattern of brown teddy bears, and suspended from one end of the cot another bear with its head sticking out of a shiny brown honey pot. When I pulled the string that hung from the bottom of the toy a jangling tune began to unwind. *If you go down to the woods today you'd better go in disguise. If you go down to the woods ...* As the sound started to fade I turned and saw Rona standing in the doorway.

'The bedding doesn't get soaked through like it used to,' she said flatly, 'not these days, not with the new disposable nappies.'

'That must save a lot of bother.' Automatically I felt the baby's lower half She looked up at me and smiled — she had two tiny front teeth — and I smiled back, remembering how some psychologists had tried to condition babies by smiling at them, then realized it was the other way round: the babies were conditioning the psychologists.

'She needs a bath,' said Rona. 'I'll do it this evening. Bidy used to love her bath. Hated having her hair washed, though. I had to bribe her with chocolate buttons popped in her mouth between rinsings.'

'You must miss her,' I said. 'Don't tell me if you don't want to, but what did she die of?'

'Oh, didn't I say? She was killed — in an accident.'

'How dreadful.' I had assumed Bidy's condition meant that she had not been expected to live beyond a certain age.

'The mini-bus,' said Rona. 'They'd gone to Hastings for the day, an afternoon by the sea.' She paused to make sure I was listening properly and not playing with the baby. 'On the way back a lorry jack-knifed across their path. I suppose the bus driver didn't react quickly enough.'

'Perhaps he had no chance.'

She ignored this. 'I used to read to her, you know, every evening between seven and half past, it was the only time I insisted the television was switched off. *The Secret Garden*. *The Little Princess*. I doubt she took in much but I enjoyed it.' She stared through the window, her jaw clenching and unclenching. 'Anger,' she said, rubbing the side of her face, 'love's supposed to be the great motivating force, but it's anger that makes you strong.' Then the tension seemed to leave her body and she turned towards Chloe.

'She's a pretty baby, isn't she? Helen's afraid she'll turn out to be plain. You know what she and Bryan are like, always assessing people for their physical characteristics as though they were dogs at a show. Smooth-coated hounds. Roughhaired bitches.' She touched the baby's cheek. 'Seems to have taken a fancy to you.'

'She's sweet.'

Rona snorted. 'Better have one of your own, then. Better not leave it too late.' She thought for a moment, running her finger up and down the baby's leg. 'When I criticize Helen I don't mean it, you know, it's just ... if you love someone you don't have to pretend they're perfect. D'you understand what I'm saying?'

'Yes.'

'Bryan's very attractive, isn't he? Oh not his looks, his personality, and that's much more important in a man. People used to wonder

why Helen married him but I knew. He made her feel safe, secure. At the time I was convinced he was the answer to her prayers.'

Chapter Thirteen

Pam was poking a stick into the drain at the front of the house. Ernest watched from the window, calling instructions. 'You'll need something longer than that. If you can't get it clear you'll have to buy some caustic soda.'

Pam looked at me and winked. 'No problem, just full of leaves and muck, happens regularly. I try to do it without him seeing or he gets in a fuss.'

'Let's have a go.' I took the rod from her hand and started jabbing through the metal grid. 'Pam, I was meaning to ask, you don't know someone called Colin Elliot, do you?'

She thought for a moment. 'Should I? An actor, is he?'

'No, nothing like that. He lives near here, somewhere off Clifton Vale. Only a friend mentioned him and I just wondered if — '

'What does he look like?'

'I don't know. Middle aged, maybe a little older.'

'There's no one of that name comes to the Centre.' She was talking about the community hall where coffee mornings and various other events were held each week. 'Isn't he in the telephone book?'

I turned round and shook my head, and whatever was blocking the drain suddenly gave way, allowing the filthy water to rush through the hole with a satisfying gurgle.

'Janos might know him,' said Pam, 'the trouble is round here people move house such a lot it's difficult to get to know your neighbours.'

I crossed the road and knocked on Janos's door but there was no reply. If the newsagent in Hotwell Road had never heard of a Colin

Elliot I would give up and leave well alone. In any case, what did I expect to find out that Howard Fry wouldn't have discovered already? Even if someone told me where Elliot lived I could hardly knock on his door and ask him to tell me everything he knew about Walter Bury.

Outside the newsagent's Aaron stood wagging his tail as he sniffed round the bottom of a rubbish bin. His lead had been attached to a hook in the wall. Inside the shop I could see Janos talking animatedly to the old woman behind the counter and a moment later he came out, carrying his copy of the *Daily Express* and a large Danish pastry sticking out of a paper bag.

'Janos, I was looking for you.'

'Good, I do not see you for days.' He started to cross the road and I followed, dodging dangerously between two cars coming in opposite directions.

'What's the hurry? You're cross with me. I've been meaning to call round but —'

'Not you, Anna, one of my tenants. I had such hopes for him but now he lets me down. So stupid, breaking into a parked car and taking a doctor's bag.'

'The doctor shouldn't have left it there.'

'You want to blame the doctor? Ah well, you lose some, you win some. How is your holiday? How is the lady you try to help?'

Janos had Aaron to pull him up the steep hill. I was having trouble keeping up. 'Listen,' I said, 'you don't happen to know someone called Colin Elliot?'

'Colin? You heard then. Terrible thing. Terrible shock.'

'What? What happened?'

'Knocked down yesterday evening crossing the bottom of Hope Chapel Hill. One of those joyrider people. Ought to be put inside for life.'

'Was he ... ' I could hardly bear to ask. 'No, but his leg, I doubt it'll be the same ever again. Perhaps he must walk with a stick.'

Walking through the shopping galleries, searching for get-well cards for Rosie and Jack, I caught a glimpse of Bryan Sealey coming up the escalator with a girl dressed in a long brown skirt, a brilliant orange shirt, and enormous dark glasses. She was very small, not much over five feet, so that although she was in front of Bryan on the escalator their heads were level. She turned to face him and I couldn't see the expression on her face but Bryan looked strained, worried.

As they stepped on to the third floor the girl removed her glasses and pushed them in the pocket of her shirt, and I realized she was older than I had thought, about twenty-six or — seven. Bryan nodded to her, then walked up to one of the food counters and ordered two coffees. I should have left them to it; after all it could be a perfectly innocent meeting, just someone who was working at the theatre — the set designer, stage manager — and in any case it had nothing to do with me.

The woman chose a table next to one of the pillars and I watched her, what I could see of her, through the artificial ivy. In spite of the general clatter of trays and cutlery, and the droning beat of the musak, when Bryan returned it was just possible to listen in on their conversation.

'I've written down the address.' The woman reached into her bag then pulled out a small notebook which she placed open on the

table, turning it so Bryan could read it the right way up. 'She had lunch in South Kensington — an Italian place, expensive.'

'On her own or with someone?'

'A woman of about the same age but not so smartly dressed. Jeans, very short hair, a green denim jacket.'

'Don't recognize the description. Anything else?'

'Later she visited the same place I told you about before. She was there about an hour and a half.'

Bryan sighed. 'Oh, God. It's whether there's any connection with the weekly visits and the other thing.'

'You think there could be?'

'I don't know, Megan. All I do know is she's hiding something. If I ask her even a few harmless questions she either clams up completely or works herself up into such a state she has to take one of her wretched pills.'

'You were at home that evening.'

'Looking after the baby.'

'Where was the nanny?'

'She'd been away for a couple of days. She was on her way back.'

'And Helen said she was seeing a friend.'

'Some woman she met at an exhibition.'

He glanced in my direction, then turned back to the girl called Megan.

'You know this woman?'

There was no reply. Perhaps he shook his head. Slowly, cautiously, I took a step backwards. Then I turned my head sharply so if Bryan looked in my direction it would be impossible for him to be certain who I was. A moment later I was in a gift shop, buying garish cards

with pictures of people with thermometers in their mouths and spots all over the visible parts of their bodies, nothing like the symptoms of mumps but Jack and Rosie would love them just the same.

*

‘Thought you’d probably be out,’ said Sandy. ‘I was just passing, on my way back from the cottage, decided to call in on the off chance, hope you don’t mind.’

‘No, of course not.’ I didn’t bother to point out that there was no route from Clevedon to Bristol that took in Cliftonwood.

He looked exhausted. There were dark shadows under his eyes and the eyes themselves looked yellowish and slightly bloodshot.

‘You’re not just about to go out, are you?’ he said. ‘If you are do say. I should’ve phoned but it wasn’t something I’d planned. I suppose, because of you seeing Geraldine, I felt I had no right.’

‘Sit down, Sandy, I’m going out at seven thirty. That gives us — ’

‘Oh, it won’t take that long.’

I was spending the evening with Chris. She wanted to have a serious talk — about men. In her opinion it was time I settled down, either with *my policeman* (who had turned out to be still involved with his ex-wife), or with *my academic* (who appeared to want a platonic relationship, someone to accompany him to the cinema but make no emotional demands: someone to tide him over until he came to terms with the death of his wife).

‘I wanted a chance to speak to you on your own,’ said Sandy, settling himself down in an armchair and waving aside the offer of a drink or a cup of coffee, ‘just to let you know how much I appreciate the way you’re helping Geraldine.’

‘I’m not sure I am.’

‘Of course you are.’ He looked genuinely surprised. ‘Her whole manner, way of talking ... I bought some special food for her birthday, cooked it all myself, not that it needed much culinary expertise, just bunged it in the microwave. Anyway for once she ate the lot, seemed to enjoy it.’

‘I’m glad. But she’s shown no signs of wanting to leave the flat.’

‘Oh, surely it’s not that simple. I mean, one person could manage a few yards down the road but still be feeling pretty terrible. Whereas another might take time to get up courage to go out but basically be a whole lot better.’

‘And you think that’s how Geraldine feels?’

He nodded enthusiastically, then stood up and started walking backwards and forwards as though preparing himself to let me in on the real reason for his visit. Another discussion about training to be a Jungian analyst?

‘What d’you think about the break-in?’ he said. ‘I got in touch with the police and the young man’s still being questioned. Seems a bit over the top to me but I suppose they know what they’re doing.’

So he hadn’t been told about the incriminating hammer. ‘Yes, I expect so,’ I said. ‘Sit down, Sandy, you’re making me dizzy.’

‘Sorry.’ He perched on the arm of a chair. ‘Rona Halliwell, you get on pretty well with her, don’t you? What about Bryan and Helen? Of course Bryan’s working flat out, the play opens the week after next, and that leaves poor Helen on her own a fair bit of the time.’

I interrupted him before he started on another member of the household. ‘Sandy, is there something worrying you, something you wanted to ask me — about Geraldine?’

'Oh, nothing like that. Certainly not about you and Geraldine. She doesn't tell me much but that's as it should be, she trusts you, I understand completely.'

'Perhaps it makes you feel left out.'

'Not in the least. Actually there is one thing.' He stood up again and walked to the window. 'It's about Helen.'

'Helen,' I repeated.

'This is rather embarrassing. I don't know how to ... The thing is, sometimes I give her a lift in the car, drop her off at some beauty spot, then pick her up an hour or two later. She wants to develop a career as a photographer. I expect she's mentioned — '

'It must be rather inconvenient for you.'

'Not really, I can usually fit it in with something else, a visit to the DIY shop, timber yard.'

'Does Geraldine know?'

'Geraldine? Probably not. I haven't bothered to mention it, didn't seem much point.'

'She told me how you took Lynsey to Reading station.'

He hesitated, frowning as if he was trying to remember. 'Oh, that was weeks ago. Jabbered on nonstop all the way there and back, left me with a throbbing head and a promise to myself never to repeat the exercise.'

'Someone else might have told Geraldine about you and Helen.'

'Me and Helen? You make it sound like ... Oh, you mean Lynsey. Yes, I thought of that. Means no harm but does like to turn life into a soap opera if she's given half a chance. No, I usually pick up Helen at the end of the road, well out of sight of the house. Saves a lot of fuss and bother. As a matter of fact it breaks up the day for me.'

Working on the cottage from morning to night — well, I'm sure I don't have to explain.' He drew in breath, patting himself on the chest as if he had a touch of asthma. 'Anyway, to cut a long story short, I suppose I've encouraged Helen — to talk, I mean. She's a complicated person, insecure, low self-esteem.'

'So everyone keeps telling me.'

'Got a lot of problems, things going back to childhood. She's an only child, like Thomas, wanted for nothing as far as I can tell but her parents believed in a boarding-school education. She was sent away when she was twelve, seems to have taken it as some kind of rejection.'

'So you've been acting as her therapist.'

He slumped in a chair with his legs spread wide. 'Stupid, isn't it? Bitten off more than I can chew. Tried to run before I could walk.'

'I don't suppose you've done much harm.'

'Thanks, Anna. The trouble is we've reached a stage where —'

'Have you any idea why she gave up driving?'

He looked up surprised. 'Oh, that.' Hoisting himself into an upright position, he crossed one leg over the other, then uncrossed it again. 'Just some silly incident. Took a corner too fast, skidded on a wet road.' He swallowed, putting his hand up to his throat. 'She's not a happy person.'

'And she's started to become too dependent on you, too demanding. If she has all these problems I'm surprised they didn't come out when she applied to adopt.'

'Social workers can only know what people choose to tell them. Oh, you think they should've read between the lines. Anyway, it's not the baby that's the problem.'

'Sandy?'

'Mm.'

'Are you in love with her?'

I expected him to jump up, expressing outrage at the very suggestion. Instead he smiled and for the first time during his visit looked almost relaxed. 'Is that what you're thinking? Well, I suppose I can't blame you. No, there's nothing like that. She's a beautiful creature but far too repressed. I like people who can express their feelings. No, I just wanted to help. I suppose helping people's become a kind of obsession, almost like falling in love, but far, far more important.' He looked up, running his fingers through the tufts of hair above his ears, willing me to give him my seal of approval.

'There's nothing wrong in trying to help but you can't run other people's lives for them.'

'I know. Just help them to help themselves.' He stood up and started moving towards the door. 'Thanks, Anna, that's been really useful. I'd better go or Geraldine will be wondering what's happened to me. By the way, Inspector Fry, he's a friend of yours, isn't he?'

'I know him. Yes.'

'I just wondered if they were making any progress. The murder. The reason I'm asking, if they got the bastard it might help Geraldine to feel more secure, what d'you think?'

'The best hope of a conviction seems to rest on a certain amount of forensic evidence.'

'Really? They've found something?'

'I don't know many details,' I said, 'but if I find out anything that might make Geraldine feel better ... Look, about this business with Helen, I should ease up a bit, for your own protection. Perhaps you

could suggest she waits till they're back in London then looks for some professional help.'

'Good idea. Thanks. So stupid. I've been worrying for weeks. Felt guilty I suppose. Felt I'd brought it on myself, falling into the usual trap. Wanting to take on someone else's problems, make myself feel useful, needed.'

'You're being a bit hard on yourself.'

'Am I?' He smiled and some of the tension left his face. 'I've been reading this book. Jung's lectures, back in the thirties.'

'Long time ago.'

'Yes. Amazing.' He was thinking about the book, not the fact that the lectures had taken place sixty years ago. 'Someone asked Jung a question — about the interpretation of dreams. His answer, it surprised me, but when I thought about it of course he was perfectly right.'

He moved towards me, hesitated for a moment, then kissed me on the cheek.

'Thanks, Anna, I knew you'd understand.'

*

Just as I was falling asleep something jerked me awake again. Nothing I had heard just something that had been going round in my brain all day but not at a conscious level. Rona and her sister Biddy. I thought of all the conflicting feelings Rona must have had when Biddy died. Relief that the exhausting role as a carer had come to an end, guilt because of the feeling of relief, and a terrible sense of loss — of Biddy herself, but not just that, loss of a whole way of life. Was that why she had been so keen to take on the care of the newly adopted baby? I wondered how long Biddy would have lived if it

hadn't been for the accident. She could have outlived Rona and had to be found a place in a residential home or some kind of sheltered accommodation. Then I thought about Rona's flat. It was in Sutton, the right side of London for a day trip to the south coast. On to the M25, then the road that leads to Gatwick and on to the Sussex Downs. I remembered how Howard Fry had said Walter Bury helped to organize outings for the handicapped. Walter Bury, who had once lived in Kent, and still had a sister in Canterbury. Walter Bury, who for no apparent reason, had met with a sudden, violent death less than a mile from the house where Rona was staying.

Chapter Fourteen

Thomas was away for the weekend. Child musicians from schools throughout the south-west would be playing together in an improvised orchestra. The venue was Plymouth.

The previous day I had witnessed Geraldine and Sandy saying a fond farewell. The poor boy had looked less than enthusiastic but Sandy had assured me he would love it when he got there. I found this hard to believe. Bending to pick a thread from the sleeve of his bottle-green blazer Geraldine had explained how the mother of one of Thomas's friends would be calling by any minute to pick him up and take the two boys to the assembly point. Her voice had sounded bright, unnatural, like someone trying to play the role of a good mother but with her mind on something entirely different. Sandy had given Thomas a hug, then turned away with the anguished look people usually reserve for times when a loved one will be absent for several months. If all three of them felt so bad about the long weekend why had they arranged for Thomas to go?

Presumably it was a necessary part of his development as a musician ...

Today was Friday — my last session with Geraldine. My last chance to find a way to release her from her self-imposed prison. Overnight the weather had turned cooler and she was wearing the sweater Sandy had given her for her birthday. Just as I had thought, the pastel colours suited her, she looked softer, gentler.

'Thomas phoned yesterday evening,' she said. 'He was sick on the coach but I think he's going to be all right.'

'That's good.'

‘He won’t be back till Monday evening.’

‘Oh well, I expect the time will go quite quickly.’

‘Yes.’ She traced the outline of one of the birds on the front of her sweater. ‘Helen and Bryan are away too. Somewhere in Cornwall, near St Austell. Bryan wanted a complete break before the final rehearsals.’

‘I thought the house seemed quiet.’

‘Oh, Rona’s still here — and the baby. They were taking Chloe with them but she developed a cold. Just a snuffle but even at the best of times babies that age never like sleeping away from home.’ She sat on the arm of the sofa. ‘This is our last meeting, isn’t it? I feel I’ve let you down badly. You’ve helped me so much but I still haven’t been able to leave the flat.’

‘We must talk about what’s going to happen next.’

She leaned forward, clasping her knees. ‘Oh, I don’t think there’s any need for that. I’m feeling a little more confident each day. Who knows, this time next week I might try walking round the garden.’

‘Why not try it now?’

She sighed. ‘You’ll think I’m being awfully cowardly but I really don’t feel up to it, not today.’ Then she smiled, the same false little smile I remembered from our first meeting. ‘You don’t believe in agoraphobia, do you? You think I ought to pull myself together.’

‘I believe it’s a response to stress,’ I said.

‘No, go on, tell me what you really think.’ She seemed amused, as though she had caught me on the hop. ‘I do think it’s important we’re completely honest with each other. I know you’re a professional but I’ve come to see you as a friend. Is that wrong?’

‘There’s a story,’ I said, ‘about an agoraphobic man who’d been confined to his house for several years.’

‘A man?’ She seemed astonished.

‘It could have been a woman but in this particular case ... Anyway, he was so fed up with being stuck at home that he decided to drive to a cliff top, convinced that long before he reached his destination his anxiety would give him a heart attack and put him out of his misery.’

I looked up, wondering how she was taking it, afraid I had misjudged her. But her eyes were shining and her mouth was slightly open, willing me to go on.

‘Well, he reached the cliff and having got that far he realized that for the first time in years he felt fine. No more anxiety, no more agoraphobia.’

She laughed. ‘So the moral of the story — you think something awful will happen but it doesn’t. Is it a real case or did you read it in one of your psychology books?’

‘It doesn’t really matter, does it?’

‘Oh, I think so. You’re telling me I could go out if I had a mind to, I’m just being thoroughly obstinate.’

‘No, it doesn’t mean that. It just means the solution to a problem can end up *becoming* the problem.’

‘And what’s my *real* problem?’

‘That’s what we’ve been trying to find out.’

She clasped her hands together and kept her eyes on the carpet. ‘The day of the murder,’ she said slowly. ‘No, the day after — whenever it was they found the ... ‘

‘Go on.’

'When I was a little girl. Oh, about eight or nine I suppose. A neighbour of ours killed his wife.'

'How awful.' I started to say what a shock it must have been but she held up her hand.

'If they'd told me it wouldn't have been so bad. I suppose they wanted to protect me but at that age you pick up stray remarks, take in far more than anyone realizes.'

'No one told you what had happened?'

'Not at first. She was having an affair, you see. The wife. A girl at school told me she'd been hacked to pieces with an axe. But it wasn't true. She'd been strangled. I only found that out later, years later.'

'Half-truths are always more frightening.'

'Is that what you think?'

'Yes, don't you?'

She laughed but this time it was a harsh unpleasant sound, something on the edge of hysteria and extreme anger. Standing up she moved swiftly towards the door. 'Don't go away. If I make some coffee you could tell me some more of your theories. No, I'd love to hear them, I really would.'

*

The door to the ground-floor flat was slightly ajar. I stepped inside and called Rona's name but there was no reply. She must have gone out for a walk, but if the baby had a cold wouldn't it be kept indoors? Even if the current theory was that fresh air blew away the germs wouldn't Rona have locked up before she left?

When I put my head round the kitchen door I noticed that several cupboard doors had been left open and the table was littered with

stuff: a bowl with a picture of Jemima Puddleduck and the remains of something mushy that had hardened and turned brown, a box of baby wipes, a screwed-up bib, a blue plastic spoon, several sheets of kitchen roll that had soaked up the juice from an upturned cup. I called Rona's name again, more loudly this time, then went down the passage to the nursery.

The cot sheet was crumpled and a small white teddy bear lay on it face down at one end. A plastic pail in the corner had its lid lying beside it on the floor and a disposable nappy hanging over the side. The room had a sickly sweet smell, a mixture of talcum powder, baby lotion, and urine. Opening the window wide I listened for sounds in the garden — Rona returning, the baby babbling away — but everything was deathly quiet, the whole flat had a deserted feel as though someone had left in a hurry. At the last moment the Sealeys had decided the baby was well enough to travel. There had been no time to clear up, they had told Rona to leave everything and strap Chloe into her car seat. It was a plausible explanation but not very likely. Since they were travelling by car it would be impossible to estimate the precise time of arrival in Cornwall. There would have been no need to rush off leaving everything in such a mess.

Any moment now I expected Rona to stomp into the flat and demand to know what I thought I was doing prowling round the place. In the meantime I decided to inspect each room in turn, partly out of curiosity, although I justified it by deciding I would have to report back to Geraldine, let her know I had made a thorough check.

The living-room was fairly tidy. Bryan's leather jacket had been flung across the back of a chair and a copy of the *Times Literary Supplement* lay on the floor, together with an inflatable toy in the

shape of a large grey rabbit and half a dozen cloth bricks. On a low table someone had made an interlocking structure out of red plastic stars. When I lifted it up it disintegrated in my hand, and as I bent to collect up the pieces I noticed Lynsey's purple and yellow knapsack lying by the fireplace. It looked empty, but when I picked it up two screwed-up tissues fell out and a small notebook with most of the pages missing.

The first page had a picture of a cat, something Lynsey could have drawn to amuse the baby. Its bushy tail was wrapped round its black and white body and the word MARTIN had been written above its head. The next page was covered in scribbles as though someone had held the baby's hand and pretended to make her draw. On the third was what looked like an address. Three scrawled figures that might have been 437, and the name of a road. LISTOW? ILSDON? I gave up trying to decipher the letters. There was no reason why the address should be anything important, significant. Lynsey had been playing with the baby between doing her cleaning chores, and forgotten to collect her knapsack when she left for home.

In Bryan and Helen's room the king-size bed was neatly covered in a blue and white quilt, made out of the same material as the curtains. There were no clothes lying about, only the door of a fitted cupboard left slightly ajar with part of a black coat sticking out. I slid it back and began counting the dozens of pairs of shoes Lynsey had described so vividly. As usual she had exaggerated, but not that much.

In the bathroom the cold tap had been left running and a bar of soap, left in the basin, had started to turn to sludge. A yellow plastic duck and a baby's sponge lay on the floor and the carpet felt damp underfoot. I turned off the tap, picked up the sponge, and sat down

on the edge of the bath, convinced now that someone had either left in a great hurry or in a fairly distraught state of mind. On previous visits to the flat I had been impressed by how clean and tidy it had been. Most people with babies seemed to live in a fairly chaotic mess. But perhaps I was thinking of Chris. With a nanny *and* a cleaner it ought to be possible to keep the place in good order.

As I stepped inside Rona's room I half expected to find her asleep in bed with the baby tucked in beside her. Wasn't there a school of thought that said it was good for babies to sleep with their parents? They picked up the small sounds and movements and it made them feel safe. Naturally, another child expert believed exactly the opposite. The room was empty. On a small cabinet by the bed stood a large old-fashioned alarm clock that had stopped at ten past three, a leather-bound Bible, and a photograph of a woman, who looked as if she was in her early twenties, although when I lifted the photo I could see that she was actually a good deal older. The round, innocent face had deceived me, the straight mousey-coloured hair, held in place by a brown tortoiseshell slide. It was Rona's dead sister, Biddy, the snapshot enlarged so the whole picture looked slightly out of focus.

A sound from the garden made me jump but when I looked out it was only the window cleaner. He nodded, then began extending his ladder, ready to start on the windows of the top-floor flat. I would have to tell Geraldine about the Sealeys' flat being left unlocked and find out what she wanted me to do about it. Replacing the photo I looked briefly round the rest of the room then left, putting the front door on the latch, and walked out of the gloom into the bright cool sunlight.

The window cleaner was whistling his own version of a popular hymn. From the top of the ladder he looked down and winked.

‘Nice day. Think it’ll last?’

‘I hope so.’ I walked round to the back of the house, put my key in the lock and called out to Geraldine to let her know who it was.

She leaned over the stair rail, out of breath, agitated. ‘Yes?’

‘The ground-floor flat,’ I said. ‘The door’s been left unlocked but there’s no one about.’

‘Just a moment.’ I heard footsteps on the landing, a cupboard door banged shut, then Geraldine reappeared at the top of the stairs.

‘Rona’s not there?’

‘No, nobody. She could have gone for a walk I suppose but it’s not like her to forget to lock up.’

‘Lynsey didn’t turn up this morning,’ she said. ‘She was supposed to come at ten to collect my list. She’s never let me down before, it’s not like her at all. I wanted to get in touch with Sandy, see if she’d mentioned anything to him.’

‘Wouldn’t he have told you before he left?’

‘He must have forgotten. Now, I’m not sure what ... You see there’s no phone at the cottage.’

The defiant mood had disappeared. She looked pale and shaky. I guided her into the living-room where she sat down staring straight ahead like a child waiting to be told what to do.

‘I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation,’ I said. ‘I’ll stay here for a bit, shall I, see if Rona returns?’

‘Would you? D’you mind awfully? Lynsey must be unwell, sleeping off a hang-over or something. She lives in Southville, has a room in a house with four others.’

‘She’s told you about them?’

‘Oh, hardly anything. Would you like something to eat? Normally I only have a sandwich but — ’

‘No, don’t worry. Look, I’ll check downstairs again in fifteen minutes, then have a look round about, see if Rona’s taken Chloe on the Downs. Perhaps I should lock the ground floor first. What d’you think?’

‘Yes, all right, whatever you think best.’ She picked up a telephone book and started turning the pages very fast, licking her finger when two sheets of paper stuck together. ‘If they’d left an address, where they’re staying in Cornwall — but why would they, it was only for two nights?’

Lynsey had disappeared. So had Rona and the baby. I had told Geraldine there were sure to be simple explanations. Now I was not so sure. While she busied herself in the kitchen, preparing the sandwiches I didn’t want, I started making plans. Geraldine had mislaid Lynsey’s address in Southville. She couldn’t even remember the name of the street although she was sure Sandy would know. I could drive out to the cottage but was it really necessary? The Sealeys had changed their minds about the baby at the last minute and Rona had gone with them to Cornwall, leaving the flat in a mess because Bryan was impatient to leave. As for Lynsey, she had probably muddled up which day she was supposed to be doing the shopping. But my feeling of unease was increasing by the minute.

I put my head round the kitchen door. ‘Deb Cavendish,’ I said. ‘I’m going to ask her for Lynsey’s address.’

‘Right you are.’ Geraldine was chopping up slices of cucumber. She didn’t turn round but the agitation in her voice seemed to have

disappeared now she knew I was going to take charge.

'You'll be all right, will you? I'm not sure when I'll be back but I'll give you a ring.'

'Oh, there's no need, Anna, I'm fine, just a little tired. I may take one of my tablets and have a short sleep.'

'Yes. Good idea.'

'Deb Cavendish,' she murmured. 'I've never met her, nor has Sandy, but I got the impression she and Lynsey had been quite good friends before that silly young man came along. Two's company, three's a crowd, isn't that what they say?'

Chapter Fifteen

Deb was having her lunch-break. No one knew for certain where she was but the woman with the long dark plait thought she remembered her mentioning something about buying a book. She was friendlier than on my previous visit. Perhaps Deb had spoken to her, or maybe, now she had accepted the fact that I wouldn't be having a facial, she could relax and let slip her professional mask.

On the way to Broadmead I had planned what I was going to say to Deb. I would tell her Lynsey had failed to turn up for work, then mention that Rona and the baby were also missing. If she looked uncomprehending, wondered what I expected her to do about it, I would apologize for wasting her time, ask for Lynsey's address, and drive to Southville.

My stomach was aching from lack of food, a missed breakfast followed by a refusal to eat one of Geraldine's paste and cucumber sandwiches. There was no sign of Deb in the bookshop in the Galleries so I tried the one in The Haymarket that had a sale and was so crowded it was almost impossible to get inside. Fighting my way along the shelves of paperbacks I thought I saw the back of Deb's head but it turned out to be a woman with a baby in a sling round her neck, a tiny thing with bleary eyes and half-open mouth, far smaller than Chloe. By the time I started up the stairs I had pretty well given up hope and was thinking of returning to the store. Then I saw her.

She was standing by what looked like the sociology section but turned out to contain the kind of popular legal books that tell you how to write your own will, convey your property, or obtain legal aid.

Moving as close as the throng of people would allow I spoke her name and watched as she froze, wondering if someone was talking to her or there was another person with the same name standing nearby. Then she turned, recognized me, and dropped the book she was consulting, scrambling to pick it up and return it to the shelf.

‘Oh — it’s you.’ She sighed. ‘Now what’s happened?’

‘I’m not sure. Nothing probably. But it could be important.’

‘If you say so.’ She seemed reluctant to hear any more. She was dressed in a black suit with a white T-shirt under the jacket and black patent-leather shoes that added a couple of inches to her height. The fact that she was slightly overweight made her look soft, sexy. She had that air some men seem to find irresistible: she had seen it all before but survived in spite of herself. I wondered what Dean Koenig was like. Much younger than Deb, by the sound of him, but attracted to her, perhaps, for that very reason.

‘Something about Lynsey, is it,’ she said dully, ‘or Dean?’ Her expression brightened. ‘Have they decided to release him on bail?’

‘No, I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s happening to Dean, have you rung the police station?’

She looked at me without smiling and started pushing her way towards the stairs.

‘Listen.’ I ran after her, afraid of losing sight of her in the crush. ‘How long have you got? Time for a quick coffee? Please.’

She glanced at her watch. ‘I suppose so, if we hurry, but I haven’t seen her you know, not for ages, certainly not since you came to the store.’

We found a pub — Deb said all the fast-food places would be too slow — ordered two coffees and sat squashed in at a table that was

wedged far too close to the bar. The place was full of smoke and I could feel myself starting to wheeze: a psychological reaction, no doubt, the result of giving myself aversive therapy in an effort to kick the habit once and for all.

‘The thing is,’ I said, ‘Lynsey didn’t turn up to do Mrs Haran’s shopping this morning and since she didn’t even phone or leave a message I’m a bit worried.’

‘Is that all?’ She raised her head and started reading through the menu that was scrawled on a chipped blackboard screwed to the wall above my head.

‘There’s something else,’ I said. ‘The ground-floor flat where Bryan and Helen Sealey live was left unlocked but — ’

‘That was Lynsey’s fault?’

‘No, of course not, but the Sealeys are away for two nights. They were going to take the baby but she had a cold. Now there’s no sign of her or her nanny and as I say Lynsey didn’t turn up for work.’ Deb’s hand went up to her mouth. ‘Yes?’ I waited, as patiently as I could. ‘Look, if there’s something you haven’t told me ... ’

She picked up her cup, slopping coffee in the saucer. ‘The nanny — that’s an old woman called Rona, isn’t it?’

‘Rona Halliwell. Has Lynsey said something about her?’

‘They don’t get on, didn’t last time I heard. Lynsey took off the baby’s cardigan or something and Mrs Halliwell gave her a mouthful.’

‘Go on.’

She chewed the corner of her nail, glancing at my face, then looking away. ‘I suppose I’ll have to tell you.’

‘What?’

'I don't know though.' She paused, screwing up her eyes, trying to decide. 'The baby.'

'Yes. *What* about her?'

'Lynsey thinks it's hers.'

'She what ... I don't understand. Lynsey thinks Chloe's her baby? How could she? I didn't even know she'd had a —'

'Six months ago, more. It was December, when she was still in London. A little girl. Seven and a half pounds. She had this friend, they were going to live together, find a flat — then he did a runner.'

'Ray, was it?'

'Oh, she's told you.' Deb looked a little disappointed. 'I thought you said —'

'No, nothing about a baby, only that she had a friend called Ray.'

'Some friend. Of course by the time he went it was too late for a termination. I thought she'd keep the baby but she said that wouldn't be fair on it, she wanted it to have a decent life. She gave her up for adoption when she was only a few days old.'

I felt sick. 'But why's Lynsey so certain Chloe's her baby?'

'The Sealeys come from Wimbledon. Me and Lynsey lived in Raynes Park, that's quite near, the same borough.'

'Yes, but even so, there must be masses of babies.'

'No, you're wrong there, there's hardly any available for adoption, especially newborn ones.'

I was thinking fast. Was Lynsey right about the baby or had she just convinced herself it was hers because she couldn't come to terms with what had happened? I tried to imagine what it would be like giving up your own child. Chris had told me how her feelings for her new-born babies had been frighteningly strong, how she would

have killed, without hesitation, if anyone had tried to take them away or do them any harm. Was it the same if you had decided beforehand to give the baby up for adoption? If it was your first how could you possibly know what you were going to feel?

Deb had finished her coffee and was looking at her watch. 'Are you sure she's taken it?' she said.

'No — no, I'm not sure at all.'

'You see if she hasn't you must never say a word. I shouldn't have told you, swore I'd never tell a soul.'

'Does Dean know?'

'Dean? Yes, of course he does. I wouldn't keep a thing like that secret from him. Besides, why d'you want to know, what difference does it make?'

'No reason.' I wanted to promise I would never mention it to the Sealeys or anyone else. But how could I? Even if the baby was with Rona in Cornwall things would never be the same again.

'What happened?' I said. 'If you tell me everything it may help. She heard about the Sealeys' baby, decided it was hers, and managed to get a job helping Geraldine Haran so she could — '

'Oh, no, nothing like that. It was only after she started working for Mrs Haran she became convinced the Sealeys had adopted her baby.'

I looked at her doubtfully but she stared me out. 'There was nothing about Bryan Sealey in the papers, not like when someone famous adopts a kid. Jessica. That's what Lynsey called her. She gave her the name before she was born, even though she knew she couldn't keep her. If it'd been a boy he'd have been Sebastian.'

If I had a boy I'd call him Sebastian and if anyone called him Seb I'd kill them.

'And Chloe's got the same colouring?' I asked. 'Did Lynsey notice some special mark on her skin, something that made her feel certain?'

'No, nothing like that. She said she just knew, it was a feeling, something she couldn't explain.'

'Has she told anyone else?'

Deb shrugged. 'I doubt it, although reading between the lines I'd say she had a bit of thing about that Mr Haran.'

'Sandy? What did she say?'

'Oh, nothing you can put your finger on. Just that he'd been very kind. He gave her a lift to London so she could go and see the social worker.'

'He knew where she was going?'

Deb shrugged. 'Anyway it wasn't any good. I warned her they never tell you who got the baby. They couldn't, could they, although I've heard in the States the real mother meets the adoptive one. Bloody crazy if you ask me, bound to lead to trouble.' She pushed her cup aside, preparing to leave. 'Lynsey hates that Helen Sealey, said she knew something about her and if anyone found out they'd take the baby into care.'

'What? She didn't say what it was?'

'Oh, I expect she made it up. You know Lynsey. Mind you, if it was my kid I might feel the same way.' She stood up, smoothing her skirt. 'I'll have to go.'

'Yes, of course. Look, if she gets in touch ... I'll give you my phone number.'

'I never thought she'd do it.' She took the slip of paper then started walking towards the exit. 'Not really.'

'I don't suppose she has,' I said. 'The baby's probably gone to Cornwall with her parents and Lynsey's in bed sleeping off a hang-over.'

Deb stared at me for a moment, adjusting her shoulder-bag before she crossed the road. 'Oh no, it can't be anything like that. Lynsey's got a thing about alcohol. Something to do with her dad. She never touches a drop.'

*

I could have gone round to the office and talked to Martin or Nick but I was supposed to be on holiday. They would sigh and groan, tell me I was my own worst enemy. I would never hear the end of it.

Instead I drove up to the university, spent five frustrating minutes searching for a parking space, then half walked, half ran, willing Owen to be in his room, needing to talk to someone, anyone, before I decided on my next move.

The room was empty. I returned down the dingy corridor, looking for an open door but the place seemed deserted. In the secretary's office a girl was seated at a word-processor, eating a doughnut. When I pushed open the glass door she looked up briefly then took another bite.

'Owen Hughes,' I said, 'd'you know where he's gone?'

She licked each finger in turn. 'They're having a meeting.'

'It's rather important, when are they likely to finish?'

'Any time now, you've an appointment have you?'

'No.' I began to explain, then stopped when a door squeaked open and I heard a group of people coming closer.

Owen was conversing with a large camelfaced woman — something about cash and how the Americans didn't have to grub around for research grants. He looked up and rubbed his eyes as if he thought he might be seeing things.

'Anna?'

'Are you busy?'

'Not really. I have to see a student in about ten minutes but ... '

I followed him into his room. There were piles of books on every chair and a large brown-paper packet that was covered in dust but still hadn't been unwrapped.

'Look, it's about the Sealeys,' I said, 'they're away in Cornwall and they haven't left an address or phone number.'

'Very sensible.' He opened a drawer and started searching through a muddle of old envelopes, notebooks, ballpoint pens.

'The baby was staying behind with her nanny but there's no one in the flat and it's been left unlocked.'

'That's suspicious, is it?'

'Not on its own but Lynsey, the girl I told you about — she hasn't turned up for work and — '

'Slow down.' He sat on the edge of his desk, tipping some books off a metal chair with a torn canvas seat and pushing it in my direction.

'Lynsey had a baby, back before last Christmas,' I said. 'I've just seen Deb, the friend of hers who works in John Lewis. Apparently Lynsey had the baby adopted. Now she's convinced the Sealeys' baby's hers.'

'So she's taken it back. Makes sense.'

'The thing is ... No, forget it.' I turned towards the door.

'Hang on.' He caught hold of my arm. 'Right, I'm giving you my undivided attention.'

'I have to decide whether to go to the police. If Lynsey's completely innocent I shall feel I've made trouble for her. On the other hand —'

'When did you discover the Sealeys' flat had been left unlocked?'

I sat down. 'This morning when I went to see Geraldine. I'd get in touch with Sandy but there's no phone at the cottage and ... Deb said Lynsey's got a thing about Sandy.'

Owen smiled. 'A thing? So Sandy Haran, the property dealer turned psychologist, has been having it off with the cleaning lady while you treated his wife for agoraphobia. I should leave well alone, let someone else sort out the mess. Hey?' He snapped his fingers. 'I said I should leave well alone.'

I was thinking fast. Had I misjudged Sandy completely? He could have met Lynsey months ago. Then, when Geraldine reacted badly to the murder, he had seen a way to give Lynsey a job while at the same time providing Geraldine with someone to do the shopping. But if there was something going on between them wouldn't it have been better to keep Lynsey as far away from the flat as possible? *Doing up a cottage* was the ideal cover for an illicit affair.

'Listen,' I said, ignoring the irritating expression on Owen's face, 'if Sandy knew Lynsey before he offered her the job ...'

'You mean he wanted his two women to meet, become friends. Crazy as it sounds, I believe it's a fairly common phenomenon, something to do with wanting the mother figure and the lover as part of one big happy family.'

I stared at him, unwilling to admit that he could have displayed some genuine psychological insight.

He grinned. 'Your inspector friend — what was his name? Howard something. I know — Howard Fry. I made this association. A fried egg sitting on top of a policeman's helmet. Now I can't get the image out of my brain.'

He stood up, with his back to the window. It was a technique he had perfected. He could see me clearly but I could only see him as a dark shape. It had been that way the first time we met.

'Anyway,' I said, annoyed at the patronizing way he always referred to Howard as *my inspector friend*, 'there may be a perfectly simple explanation — why the flat was left unlocked. Rona may have taken the baby to visit a friend living nearby and just forgotten to pull the door shut when she left.'

'Yes, the simplest explanation's usually the best.' His voice had an edge to it. He wanted me to leave, he had far more important matters to attend to. Any minute now his student would be knocking on the door and the two of them would spend a pleasant hour studying the latest print-out from the computer. 'You tell your inspector all about it,' he said, pretending to sound more relaxed than he felt, 'and if it turns out you've overreacted — well, there's no harm done. Leave it to the cops, that's what I always say, they'll know what to do.'

I had my back turned and my hand on the door handle. 'Oh, they'll know what to do all right and a perfectly innocent girl will be dragged in and grilled for several hours — all thanks to me.'

*

The road where Lynsey lived was near the old tobacco factory. A large number of houses had been demolished and blocks of council flats built in their place but Lynsey's bed-sit was in a three-storey

terraced house in a small cul-de-sac that had escaped the developers. The ground-floor window had a poster, advertising a local theatre group I had heard of but never seen. Their current production was called *After the Revolution*. I made a note to tell Janos about it. He enjoyed an evening out and it sounded just his kind of thing.

There were three door bells but only one of them seemed to work. I banged on the front door but there was no reply. Not even a face at the window or a twitching curtain. A few doors back I had noticed an alleyway full of bags of rubbish. If it led round to the back of the terrace I might be able to approach the house from the rear, but when I investigated I found the alley had been blocked off by a pile of broken concrete slabs. Later in the day surely some of the tenants would be at home. In the meantime there was not much else I could do.

On my way back to Cliftonwood I had second thoughts and decided to contact the police, but by the time I was halfway up Whiteladies Road I had changed my mind again. Finally I fixed on a compromise. I would wait until five thirty and phone Sandy, who should be home by then. If he knew nothing — about Lynsey or Rona — then I would get in touch with Howard Fry.

I thought about Lynsey's obsession with the murder in Leigh Woods and her insistence that she had some special information. Her attitude towards Rona and Helen, never mind virtually all the men in the world, was so hostile, so absolute, but now that I knew about the baby it was starting to make sense. Supposing she had harmed Rona in some way, justifying it in her mind, using the distorted logic of a person under severe stress. She could never

hope to reclaim her baby but with Rona gone she might be able to take over as Chloe's nanny. Or was she planning to discredit Helen in some way, to convince the Social Services she should never have been allowed to adopt, to frame her for a crime she hadn't committed? Bryan would still be the baby's legal father but Lynsey might have convinced herself that with Helen out of the way ...

Just after five thirty I dialled Sandy's number, certain that the two of us together would be able to work something out.

Geraldine answered, her voice slurred and indistinct. I imagined her lying on the bed with her arm stretched out to reach the phone.

'It's me — Anna. Is Sandy back?'

'Oh, it's you.' She cleared her throat and attempted to talk normally. 'He's out in the garden. I could fetch him if you like but neither of us has heard anything — about Lynsey or Rona.'

'What does Sandy think?'

'Oh, he's not worried. He had an idea Lynsey might've mentioned an appointment.'

'What kind of appointment?'

'I've no idea.' Her tone of voice implied that I was making too much fuss. She wanted to ring off, she wanted to go back to sleep.

'All right. Thanks. Don't worry.'

The line went dead. Geraldine wasn't worried, couldn't understand why I was making such a fuss.

Still I put off calling the police. Sandy would come in from the garden and when Geraldine told him about my call he would realize something could have gone seriously wrong and phone back. I would explain how Lynsey thought Chloe was her baby and we would make up our minds what to do next.

The call from Deb came through while I was watching the six o'clock news. Someone from the City was explaining why the hundred-share index was down three points. The high, supercilious voice continued as I listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

'Is that you? She's here. Turned up half an hour ago.'

'Lynsey — she's there at your house?'

'And the baby.'

I breathed out deeply. 'Is she there in the room with you?'

'Upstairs, changing its nappy.'

'I'll be round in fifteen minutes.'

Chapter Sixteen

The living-room was small but smartly furnished, with a pale carpet, three brand-new armchairs, and a pine dining table with a bench on either side. At the far end, near the patio windows, hundreds of records and CDs had been piled up on wide bamboo shelves. A large music centre had been dismantled into several sections as though someone was in the process of repairing it.

Deb gestured towards one of the chairs. 'Thanks for coming. I couldn't think what else to do.' She hitched up her black leather trousers, then picked at the fluff on her mohair sweater. One of her eyes was made up with two shades of pinkish shadow, the other was still waiting to be attended to. She had not expected me to arrive so quickly, although I doubted if her smart appearance had anything to do with my visit. She had arranged to go out for the evening, then Lynsey had turned up on the doorstep and ruined her plans. Now she was hoping I would take over and let her off the hook.

'Lynsey's upstairs, is she?' I said.

She nodded. 'Giving the baby its bottle.'

'She's all right — the baby?'

'Seems to be. Hasn't cried much. I thought they yelled their heads off most of the time.'

So she knew even less about babies than I did. 'And Lynsey, how's she been? Perhaps you'd better tell her I'm here.'

'Oh, she knows that. She'll come down when she wants to.'

'Has she said anything?'

'Not much. Just that the baby needed looking after.'

On the mantelpiece a huge framed photograph of two people on the beach seemed to dominate the room. Deb, in bikini bottoms and a T-shirt that stopped a few inches below her armpits, had an arm wrapped round the waist of a tall dark-haired man of about twenty, dressed in a pair of orange and grey shorts. His hair was pulled back into a long, glossy ponytail and his head was turned slightly to one side, displaying a row of gold studs in his ear.

‘Those were the days,’ said Deb, following my eyes.

‘That’s Dean?’

‘Who else?’

‘Taken recently?’

‘Couple of months ago. Day out at Barry Island.’

‘It must be hard for you, not knowing what’s going to happen.’

She ran her tongue across her lips. ‘I’ll fetch Lynsey, shall I? Never tell you a thing, the Old Bill, gives them an extra feeling of power.’

While she was out of the room I studied the photo more closely. Dean’s eyes were exceptionally large, with thick dark lashes. His high cheekbones made him look sensitive but no doubt it was an illusion. How could you tell anything just from the way someone looked? All the same it was hard to imagine him threatening an old lady with a hammer, and even harder to believe he was responsible for Walter Bury’s death. Surely by now Deb must have been told about the weapon. If she believed Dean was a murderer she was taking it very calmly, but perhaps the police had told her he was only being kept in custody as a precaution while they made further checks.

Upstairs Lynsey gave a sudden shout. ‘She thinks what? Why didn’t you tell her? Fucking hell, I’d never have let you phone.’

A moment later she appeared with the baby balanced on one hip, and an expression of utter outrage. 'You think I stole her. Yes, you do. It's not true, it's crap! Rona said she'd be back in half an hour but she never turned up. What was I supposed to do?'

'Why didn't you tell Sandy or Geraldine?'

'What good would that do? Besides if Helen wanted Chloe she'd have taken her with them.' She was shouting but when she saw the baby's mouth turn down she lowered her voice almost to a whisper and tears began to slide down her face. 'Nobody wants her, poor little sod.'

Deb flopped into a chair and took a packet of cigarettes and a lighter from under the cushion. Lynsey glared at her. 'I told you she wouldn't believe me.'

'I believe you,' I said. 'Sit down and tell me exactly what happened.'

'Why should I? Why d'you want to know?'

Deb leaned back, blowing smoke into the air but making sure it missed the baby's face. 'Oh, come on, Lynse, that's not fair. Anna was worried when you went missing. I was worried, anything could've happened.'

'What? Like the both of us jumping off the Suspension Bridge.' She balanced the baby against the corner of the chair, wiped its face with a tissue, then covered her own face with her hands.

'Listen,' I said, 'd'you really think Chloe's your baby?'

She shrugged.

'But she's the same age, has the same colouring?'

'Rona never came back,' she said. 'I thought she was going to the dry cleaner's — with Helen's coat.'

'That's what she told you?'

She lifted her head and rubbed her eyes. I was thinking about all the things she had said about Rona. How she'd called her an evil old bat, not fit to be looking after a little baby. How she'd said if the Sealeys had to have a nanny at least they could find someone young enough to do it properly. How she'd told me — *only joking, of course* — it was a pity the Leigh Woods killer hadn't smashed Rona over the head instead of some poor harmless bloke.

'Come on,' I said quietly. 'Just tell us everything, from when you first arrived at the flat this morning.'

Her head jerked up. 'Wasn't this morning. Who said it was this morning? Yesterday, in the afternoon, I was cleaning the bathroom and she came and asked if I wanted some tea. Then, like, when we were in the kitchen she said she had to pop out, to the post or something.'

'I thought you said the dry cleaner's.'

'*And* the post. She had this bag of stuff. I told you.' She thought about it, trying to get the details straight — or trying to concoct a convincing story. 'She was always writing letters. Not letters, cards, only she'd put them in envelopes. Sometimes Thomas took them to the box only he opened one of them, like he thought there was something funny.' She paused, looking at me and Deb in turn. 'There wasn't though. Just a picture of two polar bears.'

'What was written on the back? Did Thomas read it?'

'How would I know? Nothing interesting. Anyway, you're not listening about what happened yesterday. She was gone for ages and ages and the baby started whingeing, like she was getting hungry, so I carried her round for a bit, then I made her a bottle only like she wouldn't take it at first.' Deb had heard it all before. She

disappeared into the kitchen and I could hear her filling a kettle, putting mugs on a tray. Before she returned she would have made up the other eye.

‘Anyway,’ said Lynsey, ‘she never come back so like I stayed the night. The baby was ever so good. Settled in her cot straight off.’

‘She took the bottle, then?’

‘Course she did, and some of that baby rice stuff. In the morning — they wake early, babies — in the morning I gave her a bath, then like I put her things in a carrier bag, nappies and that, strapped her into the buggy and left.’

‘What were you intending to do?’

‘What was I intending to do?’ She mimicked my voice the same way she had done the first time we met. ‘Search me, only I reckoned if nobody wanted her I might as well keep her, just for the time being, only like I didn’t want to go back to the house.’

‘So you walked round for a bit, then came to Deb’s.’

She smiled. ‘When I thought she’d be home. Seeing as Dean wasn’t going to be here.’

‘You came on the bus?’

‘What d’you take me for? It’s only three or four miles.’

‘Just one more question. Does anyone else know? About how you think Chloe could be your baby?’

She studied my expression, wondering whose side I was on. ‘Sandy knows,’ she said, ‘but he won’t have said anything. Like it was confidential, I was one of his patients.’

‘That’s what he told you?’

She nodded, turning away to hide a smile. So Sandy had been acting as Lynsey’s therapist, as well as Helen’s. I wondered what

else he had been to her.

Lynsey's expression had changed. She looked miserable, defeated. 'The day I decided to have her adopted,' she said.

'Tell me about it.'

'Why?' But she wanted to talk. 'I was walking along the Kingston Road thinking about all the people who'd died. Not people I knew, not my mother, just people. And animals, tortured and neglected and that. I'd just left the health centre, turned up on the wrong day thinking it was the ante-natals but it was the baby clinic, little things wrapped in blankets, waiting to be weighed.' She looked up to make sure I was listening. 'When it was someone's turn they called the baby's name, I expect it was easier than working out if the mother was a Miss or a Mrs.'

'Go on.'

'I knew I'd never make a go of it, not day after day, and the evenings too. I'd be no good at it. Useless. When I told the midwife she pretended not to be shocked, tried to look all calm, just like you do, said she'd put the social worker in touch, said there was no need to make a decision in a hurry.'

'It must have been hard.'

'The day she was born, it was a Sunday. There was church bells ringing, I hate church bells, they ought to be banned. She looked a bit like Ray, but then Ray had one of those baby faces — small nose, smooth skin. You listening?'

'Yes.'

'Later I came and stayed with Deb. She'd been living with a bloke called Chas but by the time I got there he'd moved out and it was Dean. Not that I blamed her. Chas sounded dead boring. Anyway,

like it's not right criticizing people, not unless you know all the details.'

In the kitchen I could hear Deb tearing open a packet of biscuits.

'I was waiting at Paddington,' said Lynsey, 'and it dawned on me Deb might think I was bringing the baby. Just a couple of pounds I had. Sunlight coming through the glass roof, a kiosk that sold ties and tights. Seems a lifetime ago, or just like yesterday.'

'That time Sandy gave you a lift?' I said. 'Did you see the social worker?' I was thinking about the notebook in the yellow knapsack. The address which I now realized must have been in the Kingston Road in South London.

'Waste of time.' She turned away, smoothing the baby's hair, fiddling with its sweater.

Deb returned with the coffee. She looked tired, irritable. All the trouble with Dean and now this. Did she blame Lynsey for telling Dean where the Sealeys were staying? It seemed unlikely this was Dean's first taste of crime, although for a hardened criminal he had made a pretty good balls-up of it, allowing himself to be trapped in a room by a woman at least three times his age.

'I'll have to get in touch with the Sealeys,' I said. 'They're still in Cornwall.'

Lynsey jumped up, frightening the baby who was just dropping off to sleep. 'Why? What for?'

'Because they have a right to know what's happened, because they may know something about Rona. We'll go back to the house, then I'll contact the police and ask if they can find out where they're staying.'

'No! They'll think I stole her, they'll arrest me, nobody'll believe anything I say.' Already she was halfway to the front door and a moment later she was out in the street, running in the direction of the main road. I ran after her, calling her name, but even before I reached the corner I knew there was no chance of catching up. There were too many routes she could take, too many alleyways and paths.

Deb stood in the doorway, holding Chloe in her arms as though she was newborn, rocking her backwards and forwards.

'Don't worry,' I said, 'I'll take her back to the Sealeys' flat and stay there till they return.'

'What about Lynsey?'

'She'll turn up sooner or later.'

'You'll tell the police, then?'

'Yes, I'll have to. Apart from anything else we still don't know what's happened to Rona Halliwell.'

'You mean ... Lynsey would never ...'

I ran upstairs and pushed all the baby stuff I could see into two crumpled supermarket bags. When I came down Deb had propped Chloe on a chair and was attempting to fold the buggy.

'What are you going to do with her?' She lit another cigarette. 'She can't go in the back of the car, it's dangerous, against the law.' She looked at her watch and I knew she was hoping to get shot of me and the baby as soon as possible. 'I'll go next door, borrow their seat thing,' she said. 'You can bring it back in the morning, they won't mind, not when I explain.'

Explain what? That a friend had turned up with a baby she had given for adoption seven months ago, then run off leaving the baby

behind? Chloe was starting to cry, not the usual sound that meant she was tired or hungry, but small unhappy sobs that jerked the whole of her body. I picked her up and she stared at my face with solemn tear-filled eyes.

‘It’s all right,’ I said, trying to make her smile, trying to reassure. But she was too tired, too bewildered.

Glancing round to make sure nothing vital had been left behind I collected the buggy and the plastic bags and went out into the street.

*

Arriving back at the house the first thing I noticed was that all the lights were off in the top flat. Unwilling to let myself in so late in the evening I pressed the intercom, expecting Sandy to answer, and was surprised to hear Geraldine’s voice.

‘Yes?’

‘It’s me, Anna.’

‘Anna,’ she repeated. She didn’t sound particularly surprised, nor did she release the lock.

‘Is Sandy there?’ I said. ‘I need to get into the Sealeys’ flat. The police are trying to contact them, it’s a long story but the baby’s quite safe. I’ve left her in the car so I’d better be quick.’

There was a slight pause then the lock clicked. I pushed open the door and started up the stairs, meeting Geraldine, who was on her way down, clutching the banister rail with one hand and holding up her nightdress with the other.

‘Sandy had a migraine,’ she said, ‘he’s asleep at last so I don’t want to disturb him.’

‘No, of course not, I just wondered if you had a spare key.’

She yawned, reaching up to move the green lead parrot and take a small wooden box off the shelf on the landing, tipping the contents into her hand and holding out five or six keys.

'I should take them all,' she said. 'So the baby's all right, well, that's a relief.' She didn't ask what I was doing there, or what had happened to Rona and Lynsey.

*

DS Whittle sat opposite me with his elbows resting on the Sealeys' kitchen table. 'If you'd gone on holiday, Anna, you'd have spared yourself all this.'

'She doesn't like holidays,' said Howard, 'she's like me, thinks they're not worth the effort.'

It was just after ten. The baby, exhausted after being wheeled round Bristol for most of the day, had fallen asleep in the car and allowed herself to be lifted out of the seat and transferred to her cot, almost without opening her eyes. Later no doubt she would wake up, starving hungry, but by then I would have had a chance to work out how to prepare a bottle. Did seven-month old babies eat solid food at bedtime? I could ask Howard but he would be unlikely to remember that far back.

He was leaning against the fridge-freezer, fiddling with a row of magnets, each in the shape of an exotic tropical fruit. 'You should have contacted us sooner,' he said, 'before you went round to Deborah Cavendish's house. Taking a baby is a serious offence.'

'She didn't take the baby. She was left with her, had no choice.'

'She could have contacted Social Services.'

'Oh, come on, she thinks it's *her* baby. Anyway you're not interested in the baby, just the fact that Lynsey knew Dean Koenig.'

‘I’m not jumping to any conclusions.’

‘No, just putting two and two together and finishing up with about fifteen.’

He smiled. ‘Sounds more like your style, Anna. Evidence — that’s all I’m interested in.’

‘What evidence? As far as I can tell you’re no further on than you were a month ago. Just a hammer that might or might not be the murder weapon. If you want my opinion you’ve been wasting your time. How many people in the area have you interviewed? How many properties have you searched?’

Howard pulled out a chair and sat down. ‘Look, if you have something to tell us just get on with it. D’you know how many people live within a couple of miles of the scene of the crime? Even if we had enough men what would be the point of talking to people who were nowhere near Leigh Woods on that particular evening? In any case the killer’s just as likely to be someone from the other end of the city — or anywhere else for that matter.’

He hadn’t finished, just run out of breath, but Graham Whittle jumped in fast to explain how one of the electricians at the theatre had heard Bryan mention he would be staying with a television director who had a cottage near the Cornish coast. The electrician couldn’t remember the director’s name but he thought he’d worked on a series about bent coppers. Graham had spent over an hour tracing the name and address. Now the St Austell police were on their way to tell the Sealeys what had happened.

‘Colin Elliot,’ I said, ‘did you know he’d been knocked down by a hit-and-run driver?’

‘What about it?’ said Howard suspiciously. ‘He wasn’t badly hurt, just a few cuts and bruises. Who told you?’

‘Oh, just a neighbour.’

‘I thought you’d never heard of Elliot.’

‘I hadn’t,’ I said, realizing too late that I had given myself away. ‘You said he lived in Clifton Vale so I just asked a couple of people if they knew him.’

He nodded. ‘Any particular reason why? Something you’ve been keeping to yourself? Something you ought to have told us?’

The baby was starting to cry. I stood up. ‘So you’re not seeing Colin Elliot’s accident as connected in any way with — ’

‘He was drunk, wandering all over the road. If anyone had wanted to dispose of him nothing could’ve been easier. In fact the driver was a retired teacher in her seventies, not exactly hired-killer material.’ He put his hands over his ears. ‘I should pick up the baby or it’ll work itself into a frenzy. Once they get going there’s no stopping them.’

He was smiling. So was Graham Whittle.

‘You two are both experts in child care, are you?’ I said. ‘Well perhaps you’d like to give me a hand.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you can manage beautifully,’ said Howard, ‘but I suppose we ought to have a look at her, make sure she’s all in one piece.’

Chapter Seventeen

The Sealeys returned just before one in the morning. I was watching an old Joan Crawford film about a woman who kept receiving silent phone calls and threatening tapes. The man who she thought had come to her rescue was just about to run her down with his car when I heard Bryan's jeep pull up outside the window.

'Anna, what can I say?' He strode into the flat, dropping two suitcases in the hall, then continued on into the kitchen where he opened a cupboard containing a large collection of wine glasses and whisky tumblers. 'I don't know about you but I need something strong.'

'Chloe's asleep,' I said. 'I gave her a bottle.'

'Bless you.' I had expected him to dash down the passage to the nursery to check she was all right — but it seemed the last thing on his mind. 'Cornwall's so much further away than you think. The roads were fairly clear, thank God, but by the time we reached Taunton I could hardly keep my eyes open.'

'Where's Helen?'

He jerked his head towards the door. 'She dropped off to sleep. She'll be here in a moment, when she gets her bearings.' He went to the living-room and returned with a bottle. 'I don't know what on earth's happened to Rona but I suppose it's her way of telling us looking after the baby was getting too much. God knows, I've asked her often enough.'

'I'm sure she wouldn't just go off like that,' I said.

'Well, where is she, then?' It didn't seem to occur to him that she might have come to some harm.

Helen stood in the doorway with an expression on her face that implied she had resented being woken up.

‘The baby’s fine,’ said Bryan. ‘You two sit yourselves down and I’ll make us some drinks.’

‘No thanks,’ I said, ‘I have to drive home.’

‘No you don’t, not at this late hour. Sleep in Rona’s room. By the time you’ve told us all your adventures ... ’

Adventures? It seemed to amuse him defining the day’s events as a welcome diversion from my usual humdrum life. But when he turned to face me I could see that was a million miles from how he really felt.

Helen stared at me, almost as though she had forgotten who I was. Then she murmured something that could have been ‘thanks’ and said she was going to bed.

‘Right, then,’ said Bryan, pouring two glasses of brandy and placing one on the table in front of me. ‘Tell me the whole sorry story.’

I recounted it as best I could, starting with how I had come to see Geraldine and found the flat unlocked, and finishing up with a description of Deb and I trying to work out how to do up the impossibly complicated fastening on the borrowed car seat.

‘And you say Lynsey just ran off?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why would she do that?’

‘I’m not sure.’ I had stopped short of telling him how Lynsey thought Chloe was the baby she had given birth to seven months ago. ‘I think she just felt a bit upset. I’ll explain another time — or she will.’

He looked at me curiously, then decided not to put any pressure. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you. Sorry to change the subject, but since

you're here ... Anxiety, fear, can it turn into depression?'

He sounded keyed up, light headed, the way people sometimes do after a long drive through the night.

'It depends,' I said.

'I wondered if something — maybe an event that took place months ago, years ... Could you push it out of your head but — '

'It's more likely that anxiety would result from the effort involved in trying to fight off the underlying depression.'

'Yes, I see. So the two states can go together, they're not two separate illnesses.'

'They're not precise diagnoses,' I said, 'not like physical disease.'

'No, of course not.' He stood up, then sat on the edge of the table. 'And if there was something preying on your mind, something you couldn't talk about to anyone, that could have all kind of effects. Psychosomatic symptoms, nightmares, rapid mood changes and so forth?'

I was fed up with all the hypothetical questions. 'Who are you talking about? Lynsey? Rona? Yourself?'

'Oh, heavens above, not me, I'm boringly easy-going.'

Helen was coming down the passage. She was moaning, as though she had a very bad headache or stomach pains.

'Me!' She shouted so loudly I felt certain the baby would wake. 'He's talking about me. He thinks I'm a freak. I haven't *bonded*. Isn't that what they call it? Go on, you might as well tell her. I couldn't give birth to my own and I can't make a go of taking on somebody else's.'

Bryan's hand was shaking. He placed his glass on the table, then fetched the bottle and topped it up. 'I thought you were going to bed.'

'Hoped I was, you mean, then you and the psychologist could sit here discussing me behind my back. How I'm no good with Chloe — that's what you said. Yes, you did! How I'm not the maternal kind and never will be. How Chloe hates me. Yes, she does, I've seen it in her eyes.'

'Oh, don't talk such rubbish.' Bryan had her by the shoulders. When she struggled to get free he tightened his grip.

'I'd better go,' I said.

'No!' Bryan said, letting go of Helen and banging his fist on the table. 'She never tells me a bloody thing. Expects me to guess what's going on in her crazy head as if I was some kind of mind reader. Please stay, just for a bit, with you here we might actually find out what it's all about.'

I looked at Helen but she had her back turned. 'Would you rather I left, Helen?'

Her shoulders moved a little. 'Suit yourself. You're supposed to sort out people's problems, aren't you? Isn't that what they pay you for?' She twisted round to face Bryan. 'I tell you what, we could enrol for some family therapy — you, me, and the sprog.' She held up her hand as though she expected him to slap her across the face. 'Go on, then, tell her everything. How you never touch me, how you're having it off with that tart who can't even act. Sandy knows how you've made me feel. Sandy understands.'

Suddenly she went limp. Bryan caught her and placed her on a chair where she sat with her head on the table and her hands over her ears.

'It's late,' I said, glancing at the drink I had left virtually untouched. 'Thanks for the offer of a bed but I think I'd prefer to go home.' I felt

in my pocket for my car keys.

‘Don’t go.’ Helen stretched out an arm. ‘If you go Bryan will make me take one of my knock-out pills, then tomorrow he’ll say it’s best to forget all about it.’

I hesitated. ‘Well, the night’s pretty much of a write-off ... ’

‘And tomorrow’s Sunday,’ she said, ‘so we can all have a lie in.’

She seemed to have forgotten the baby and the fact that it wouldn’t be Rona who had to get up early and prepare a bottle. We sat in silence for a couple of minutes, then Helen asked Bryan to make her a drink.

‘He only married me as a fashion accessory,’ she said. ‘Now I’m fat and past it he’s trading me in for a newer model.’ She laughed. ‘A newer model, get it?’

Bryan sighed. ‘What nonsense you talk. If anything you’re the one who’ll do a bunk — with some unendingly patient guy like that nice Sandy Haran.’

They wouldn’t look at one another. I thought about the woman on the escalator at the shopping centre and the discussion I had overheard in my hiding place behind the ivy-covered pillar.

‘We don’t communicate very well, do we?’ said Bryan, standing up, then sitting down again. ‘Isn’t that what they call it — a “failure to connect”?’

‘Perhaps you’re not very good at listening to each other.’

‘Fair enough. All right, you can start.’ He moved his head in the direction of Helen. ‘Go on, say what’s on your mind and I promise I won’t interrupt, not till the bitter end.’

Helen sighed heavily, made a couple of false starts, opening and closing her mouth, then began. ‘I don’t know what I’m supposed to

do. I feel completely useless. Is that the kind of thing you want to hear? There's no modelling work and — '

Bryan's head jerked up. 'You said you didn't want to — Sorry, carry on.'

'I don't know what to do with Chloe. There's so much you're supposed to know and if you make a mistake the baby can't even tell you what you've done wrong.' She looked at Bryan and me in turn, waiting for us to point out that she hadn't made much effort to learn, that Rona had taken over from the start while Helen spent her time touring the countryside looking for suitable scenes to photograph. Neither of us said a word.

'When we got her she looked so tiny.' She paused, to give her next statement greater effect. 'And anyway you never really wanted a baby.'

'Not true,' whispered Bryan. 'No, carry on.'

'You only agreed to adopt so that when you left me at least I wouldn't be completely on my own. Yes, you did, I could tell.'

Bryan was pulling faces. 'You'd better answer that,' I said.

'Now?'

'Yes, now.'

'Since we've been together ... ' He was talking to me, not Helen. 'Since we've been married I've tried everything I can think of to make her feel more secure. Rona says her mother was the same, over-anxious, wracked with self-doubt. D'you s'pose it's genetic, something to do with the nervous system? Her mother was good looking too. Maybe beautiful women become too dependent on their looks, assume that's the only reason people are paying them attention. I thought when we got Chloe it would be better, convince

Helen how I felt, how I wanted the relationship to last, but it seems to have had the opposite effect.'

'You talk about me as though I'm a spoilt child,' said Helen sulkily. 'You always have.'

Bryan ignored this comment. 'And all this business about not wanting to drive so you're either stuck at home or have to find someone who'll act as your chauffeur. Why? What happened? If something happened why didn't you tell me? We could have discussed it, sorted it all out.'

Helen looked genuinely mystified. 'Told you about what?'

'Well, I assume you had some kind of accident.'

'When?'

'I don't know. Around the time you started refusing to drive. Lost your nerve, worried in case the police caught up — '

'The police? You think I killed someone. Yes, you do. You think I'm so cold blooded I could knock someone down and just drive on — like what happened to that Walter Bury's wife.'

Bryan froze. 'How did you know about that?'

'I read about it — or Sandy told me. You think I — '

'No I don't!' It was Bryan's turn to start shouting. 'I don't think anything. If you never talk to me what am I supposed to believe? If I've no idea what's going on my mind starts inventing things. It's obvious, isn't it, Anna? Isn't it!'

Helen pretended she was going to sneeze. It was a way of covering her eyes and mouth. 'There wasn't any accident,' she said. 'I'd have told you.'

'Would you?'

‘I thought if I gave up driving you’d have to spend more time with me.’

‘What? I can’t believe it. You felt so neglected ... And spending all that time with Sandy Haran — I suppose you thought that would make me madly jealous.’

She was pouting, like a naughty child who’s had enough, wants to be forgiven. He pulled her hand away from her face. ‘You were wasting your time, it never even crossed my mind. After all, he’s not exactly your type — a balding middle-aged man, dressed in baggy-arsed jeans. Why didn’t you tell me how you felt?’ He swung round to face me. ‘Why didn’t she tell me?’

‘It’s not always that easy.’

‘No.’ His voice had softened. He put out his hand to touch Helen’s face but she jerked her body away. ‘Oh, don’t be so silly. Anyway, what about all that fuss when you thought you’d put on weight? All of two pounds, I’d say. All that endless inspection in the mirror. New scales, accurate to a tenth of an ounce. Have you noticed, Anna, how she likes to stay poker-faced? That’s in case any movement produces lines at the corner of her eyes.’

‘I knew you despised me,’ she said, but her hand was steady when she lifted her glass and she couldn’t prevent a smile.

‘Come here.’ Bryan dragged her towards him and held her against his chest. ‘When I first met you I thought I was so incredibly lucky.’

‘Because I was on the cover of some stupid magazines.’

‘Yes, in a way that’s perfectly true. But not just that, other things.’

She put on a baby voice. ‘What other things?’

I wanted to go, leave them to it, but I decided to stay where I was — just a few minutes longer.

'We're friends,' he said, 'that's what really matters. You, me, and Chloe. Friends, companions, we like spending time together.'

'But not making love.'

'That's because of your pills, you're always tired out.'

'So are you.'

'Fair enough, but once the play opens we can go back to London.'

I stood up and they pulled apart, embarrassed, as though they had forgotten I was still there.

'Thanks, Anna.' Bryan stretched out his hand. 'Thanks for everything, I don't know what we'd have done without you.'

They thought all their problems had been resolved and they would live happily ever after. Perhaps they would.

'Just one last thing,' I said, 'have either of you any idea where Rona could have gone?'

'Haven't a clue; have you, Helen?'

Helen looked at the ground. 'I expect she's escaped to her flat in Sutton.'

'Why? Did she say something?' I asked. 'Shouldn't somebody give her a ring?'

'She's not on the phone.'

'In the morning I'll try and contact a neighbour,' said Bryan. 'Rona would never have left Chloe if she hadn't thought Lynsey could manage perfectly well.' Neither of them seemed particularly concerned about Rona's well being — nor with Lynsey's come to that. I felt angry, upset, but short of asking the police to look for Rona there was nothing much I could do.

'I'll ring you tomorrow lunchtime,' I said. 'Perhaps you'll have heard something by then.'

Helen looked surprised. 'Yes, all right.'

'Yes, you do that.' Bryan followed me out on to the drive. 'Hey, listen, that woman you saw me with at the shopping centre.' So he had seen me after all. 'No doubt you thought the worst, although, God knows, if you can't have a cup of coffee with someone of the opposite sex without ...'

'I didn't think anything,' I lied.

'Yes, you did. Anyway, it was a business meeting.'

'You don't have to explain.'

'Oh, come on, I want to. You'll think I'm insane but she was someone I hired. A private detective.'

'To check up on Helen and Sandy.'

'Don't be crazy. I thought Helen was in some kind of trouble. She goes up to London every Tuesday, usually comes back in an odd kind of mood, won't talk, seems withdrawn.'

'What did you think was going on?'

'I had no idea. I was worried.'

'And?' Surely after what I had just witnessed I deserved some kind of explanation?

'She's been attending some kind of clinic — for women. Somewhere in north London. D'you know anything about it?'

'It depends. Does she have an eating disorder?'

'How d'you mean? Oh, she's not anorexic, she eats pretty well.'

'But she's obsessed with her weight. You said so yourself. People like Helen, people who've had to stay thin — athletes, models, actresses — they're particularly susceptible.'

'God, you don't mean ... Bingeing and ...' He pulled a face. 'Don't tell her, will you — about the private eye?'

‘Of course not, but why don’t you let her know you’re worried about her, try to give her the confidence to tell you about it herself?’

‘If she found out I’d had her followed ... ‘

‘Just be patient, sympathetic.’

‘I always am.’ He grinned. ‘Oh, you mean I don’t have the right bedside manner. Incidentally’ — he rested a hand on my shoulder — ‘I’m afraid you may’ve got the wrong impression. She’s not nearly as selfish as she seems, it’s just that she’s known Rona all her life, thinks of her like a mother, too tough and independent to come to any harm.’

‘I hope she’s right,’ I said, climbing into my car and winding down the window. ‘I just hope she’s right.’

Bryan stood in the driveway, watching as I reversed into the space between the lawn and the monkey puzzle tree. Just before I turned into the road I raised an arm and glanced in the driving mirror, but he had gone back into the house.

Chapter Eighteen

For a moment I thought I had imagined it, hallucinated. She was sitting inside the vegetarian cafe in Waterloo Street in Clifton with her arms resting on one of the long wooden tables. When I moved closer I could see a bowl of soup and a bread roll, both untouched.

‘Rona?’

Her hand slid across the table, knocking the bowl and splashing the saffron-coloured liquid over her paper napkin.

‘Where’ve you been? Are you all right?’

She inclined her head a little, mopping up the soup that was in danger of dripping on to her lap.

‘We were worried about you.’ I turned to the counter and ordered a cup of coffee. While it was being poured I could hear Rona murmuring to herself — something about the baby. ‘It’s all right,’ I said, ‘Chloe’s fine. Lynsey took her to her friend’s house but she’s back home now, everything’s all right.’

A shudder ran through her body. ‘I didn’t know what else ... I didn’t know ...’ She was totally exhausted, incapable even of drinking the soup.

‘You don’t have to say anything now. If you like we could go to my flat.’

‘No, I have to tell someone. I’ve been so stupid, such a coward.’

Her eyes were fixed on a knot in the table. She was searching for the right words, trying to steel herself to begin.

‘Did something happen?’ I said. ‘You had a phone call? Perhaps you just felt it was all too much.’

She moved her head slowly, wearily. 'Biddy,' she said, 'I went to see Biddy.'

'Biddy? But I thought ...'

She was hunched over the table. Suddenly she straightened up and the beaten look changed to something closer to the old familiar expression. *Anger It's anger that gives you strength ...*

'Helen never kept in touch, you know, not after her parents died. Oh, a card at Christmas with a scribble on the back that was virtually impossible to decipher. I went to the wedding of course — her and Bryan — but since then ...' She picked up her spoon. 'D'you mind if I eat this, I came back on the train and I certainly wasn't going to pay their restaurant car prices.'

'Would you like something else? A salad, something on toast?'

She shook her head. 'After the baby — well, before they actually got her — Helen phoned me at the flat. She wanted my advice, that's what she said, how to find a nanny, how you went about it. She was so excited about the adoption she never even asked after Biddy. Not a word.' Breaking off a piece of bread roll she dipped it in the soup. 'I said I'd find out everything she needed to know and ring her back.'

'This was after the baby had been born, was it?'

'Yes, I think so. Yes, it must have been because she knew it was a girl.'

The man behind the counter had come round to ask if we needed anything else. He wasn't trying to get rid of us — the lunchtime rush had ended — but I ordered two more coffees, then turned back to Rona.

'Go on.'

'Where was I?'

'You were going to ring Helen back, to tell her how to find a nanny.'

She sighed. 'Biddy was away at the time. Every so often Social Services would arrange a fortnight in a residential home.'

'To give you a rest.'

'I suppose I'd been looking forward to some time on my own, but when it came I felt too tired to enjoy it very much. You get into a routine, you see, when it's broken ...'

'Yes, I know. How did you feel about Helen and the baby? Was the real reason she'd phoned because she hoped you'd come and take over?'

'She was sounding me out. Helen can't bear anyone to say no to her. She's always been the same, ever since she was tiny.'

I nodded, only to encourage her to continue, but she took it as a criticism of Helen.

'Oh, I'm not blaming Helen, it was my decision.'

The coffee arrived. Rona pushed the remains of the soup to one side but hung on to the bread roll, picking off small crumbs and chewing them as though it was a great effort.

'After Helen phoned I was frantic. It was raining but I went for a walk in the park. There's one quite near my flat, nothing special but I like the ducks, the noise they make, their beautiful oily feathers. There's a white one, part farmyard, part mallard, I suppose they must have interbred.' She broke off suddenly aware that she had shifted away from the point. 'I suppose I'd known from the start what I was going to do.'

'You mean as soon as Helen told you about the adoption?'

'I went back home and rang her. I told her Biddy had died, six months before, and if she wanted I would be free in a few weeks'

time. Oh, you must think I'm so callous.'

'I don't.'

'Well, you ought to.' She glared at me, then relented and took hold of my hand. 'Biddy seemed happy at the home. Just as happy as when she was with me. Sometimes I'd wonder what it was all for. She's like a child, a small child, as long as she has everything she needs ... Of course I knew Social Services wouldn't pay but Father had left a little money, enough for at least four or five years. After that ... well I could cross that bridge when I came to it.'

'Did you tell Helen that Biddy had died in an accident?'

She nodded miserably. 'The same as I told you.'

'What did she say?'

'Helen? Oh, I forget. I expect she said it was terribly sad but really a blessing. No, that's not fair, I'm sure she tried to say the right things.' She paused, taking hold of her blue glass beads and twisting them until they tightened on her neck. 'Just before we all came to Bristol the matron of the home said Biddy was asking for me. I'd visited her of course and she'd seemed quite content but one of the other residents had pulled her hair and ... Oh, I suppose I'd known all along it wasn't going to work.'

'It must have been dreadful for you.'

'I'd brought it on myself. About six weeks ago I took a few days off — to go and visit. But I never did. Just went back to Sutton and sat there. Then I returned to Bristol. It was while I was away they found the body.'

'Walter Bury?'

'I met him once you know. In the woods. I'm sure it was him. They had his picture in the paper and it looked like the same man although

I suppose it might have been someone else.'

'What was he doing?'

'That's why I remember him. He was bending down studying some plants and I asked him what they were called and he said they were spiked speedwell, quite rare, only found in the Avon Gorge and a few other places.'

Outside in the street someone had started unloading boxes out of the back of a van. A woman with a pram was complaining it was impossible to get past and the van driver was explaining he'd only be a couple of minutes.

'Did you tell the police?' I said.

'No, why should I? It was several weeks before it happened, before the poor man died. Who can have done it, d'you s'pose? Lynsey kept saying it was because of his wife.'

'His wife?'

'Oh, Lynsey'd met someone, a friend of a friend, someone who'd known Walter Bury, someone who'd told her how his wife was killed in a road accident.'

'Did she say who this friend was? Colin Elliot, was it?'

Rona's eyes had filled with tears but whether they were for Bidy or Walter Bury or just from total exhaustion I had no idea.

I pushed her cup of coffee closer, encouraging her to drink. 'How was Bidy when you saw her this time?'

'Oh, Bidy-like.'

'Pleased to see you?'

'She asked when we were going home.' She smiled for the first time, picking up her mug of coffee and holding it in both hands.

'D'you know why I'm sitting here, Anna? It's because I'm so feeble, no backbone, can't face Bryan and Helen.'

'They'll understand,' I said. 'If you like I'll walk back to the house with you.'

'No, that's very kind, but I have to do it on my own.'

'All right then, I'll go as far as the Suspension Bridge and on the way I'll tell you about Lynsey, only you must promise to keep it to yourself.'

She nodded. 'Poor Lynsey, I knew I could trust her. We got off to a bad start, then we were both too proud to make it up. So stupid, all so stupid.'

*

Geraldine was waiting for me at the top of the stairs.

'Anna, how are you?' She made it sound as though I was a long-lost friend, not someone she had seen almost every day for the last two weeks.

'I'm fine.' I stepped forward, putting out an arm to catch her as she stumbled, knocking her elbow on the wall. 'I came to tell you about Rona.'

'Rona,' she said vaguely.

'She's back. I found her sitting in a cafe in Clifton Village. She went to visit her sister.'

'Her sister? Oh, that's nice.'

'Did she tell you about Biddy? Look, I think it'll be easier if I explain to you and Sandy, then she won't have to tell you herself. I think that's what she'd prefer.'

We were still standing in the hallway. Geraldine had her back to the living-room door. On the stairs leading up to Thomas's bedroom

someone had propped up the penguin with the chewed beak. To greet him when he returned home?

'I'm worried about Sandy,' said Geraldine.

'Oh, I'm sorry, he's still ill in bed, is he, shouldn't you call the doctor?'

She stared at me as though I was talking gibberish. 'The doctor?'

'You said he had an attack of migraine.'

'Did I? I had a friend who suffered from migraine. She couldn't eat chocolate or cheese, and some other foods — I forget. You see he didn't come back last night, only I'm sure there's some very simple explanation.'

'Sandy didn't come home?'

'I expect he told me where he was going and it slipped my mind. Sometimes he calls in on a friend in Portishead and decides to stay over. They have a few drinks, you know how it is. It's someone he was in business with years ago. Dennis, he's called Dennis. I had a friend once, Denise Hulme, she had an affair with her boss and got herself into a terrible tangle. It's no good, it's never any good.'

'Have you phoned this Dennis?'

'What? Oh, yes, but Sandy's not there. He hasn't seen him for months. I felt a bit of a fool checking up.' She ran her eyes down my body, starting with my hair and ending with my feet. 'You've never been married, have you?'

'No.'

'I know hardly anything about you, apart from what Sandy's told me, and you're not supposed to ask, are you, not if you're having treatment.'

'What did you want to know?' It seemed an odd time to start answering questions about my life, but Geraldine was acting so oddly I decided it was better to follow her lead.

'Oh, nothing in particular,' she said. 'I suppose I was wondering if you lived with someone.'

'Not at the moment.'

'But you have done, you know what it's like?'

'Yes, I know what it's like.'

'So you've been fond of someone, in love.'

'They're not quite the same thing.'

'No.' She thought about this, running her fingers backwards and forwards across her chin. 'I've never been a very sexual person, I suppose I'm more interested in the meeting of minds.' Her body started to sway and she reached out to steady herself, pressing the palm of her hand against one of the shelves of china birds. 'Anna?'

'Yes.'

She opened her mouth as though she was going to tell me something important, then seemed to think better of it. 'I'm just so thankful Thomas isn't here,' she said. 'Poor Thomas, he's such a sensitive little boy, over-sensitive like me, I'm afraid I've been too protective.'

'He's fine,' I said. 'A little shy maybe but he'll grow out of it, people usually do.'

I was talking about Thomas but thinking about Lynsey. After she told Sandy about the baby had he used the knowledge to blackmail her into sleeping with him? Lynsey could be with him even now. But I was speculating again, imagining. Not long ago I had thought he was having an affair with Helen Sealey.

Geraldine was clasping and unclasping her hands.

‘About Sandy,’ I said, ‘perhaps you should call the police.’

She jumped. ‘Oh no, I’d never do that. Sandy hates a fuss, he’d never forgive me. He’ll turn up soon, it’s just that I don’t feel I can tell you very much this morning.’

‘It’s Saturday, I only came up to tell you about Rona.’

‘Oh.’ She closed her eyes.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said, ‘I’ll make a few enquiries, ask if anyone’s seen him. Perhaps he said something to Bryan or Helen. If not I’ll go round to the cottage, he might have worked late and decided to stay there for the night. You’re sure he didn’t say that’s what he intended to do? There’s an old mattress and I think I saw some blankets.’

She hadn’t heard a word.

‘Anna? The young man who broke into the ground-floor flat — d’you know what’s happened to him? Sandy said he was still in custody, pending further enquiries, surely they don’t think he had anything to do with the murder.’

‘What did Sandy tell you?’

‘Oh, I forget exactly, I just thought you might know something. All he did was break a window.’

‘And the lock inside it. He’d have needed some kind of heavy tool to do that.’

The colour had drained from her face. She pushed open the living-room door and collapsed into the nearest chair with her head tipped back and her knuckles pressed against her eyes. Then all of a sudden she sat up straight. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about, Geraldine,’ I said, ‘I’ll see you in about an hour.’

Chapter Nineteen

Just as I had decided there was no one at home a broadly built man, with a shock of untidy yellow hair, yanked open the front door and stood there, wrapped in a blanket, his eyes half closed with sleep.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m looking for Lynsey Wills,’ I said, ignoring the scowl on his face.

‘Why ring our bell, then?’ I expected him to slam the front door in my face. Instead he took a packet of cigarettes from under the blanket and flicked it open. ‘You’re a friend of Lynsey’s?’

‘Yes.’

‘She’s out. Was last time I looked. Her room’s empty, bed hasn’t been slept in. I wanted to borrow some milk.’ He took a cigarette out of the packet, then pushed it back in. ‘Why d’you want her?’

‘You know her quite well, do you?’

He shrugged. ‘She drops in for a chat now and again. Hates men but tolerates me and Greg. Seems to have got involved with some guy who gave her a hard time.’

‘Look, d’you mind if I come inside?’

‘S’pose you’d better. This blanket’s bringing me out in a rash.’ He stepped back, holding open the front door. ‘Told you most of what I know but you could ask Greg if you like. What are you? Not one of them, I hope, not from the Benefit Office?’

‘Do I look like it?’

‘No, you look too worried.’

I followed him into a ground-floor room that stretched from the front of the house to the back, with dividing doors that had been folded

back and held in place by a chest of drawers and a battered armchair. Through a half-open door at the far end I could hear children quarrelling in a neighbouring garden, an exasperated adult voice intervening to sort out the dispute.

The man who had answered the door was pulling on a pair of white jeans. 'What time is?' he asked. 'Christ, if my watch's right ...' He pointed in the direction of a double bed where a black foot stuck out from under a brown and red duvet. 'I'm Hal and that's Greg.'

'Anna,' I said, 'Anna McColl. Look, it's a long story but Lynsey ran off last night and I need to talk to her. I didn't expect her to come back here but I couldn't think where else to start.'

'How d'you mean ran off? I could check her room again if you like. She never locks the door. Greg and I nag her about it — all kinds of people come in and out of the house, you can't be too careful.' He started up the stairs and when I caught up with him he was banging on the door of a room at the back of the house.

'She's not there,' shouted a voice from the next floor up, and an old woman descended the stairs, clutching at the rail to steady herself although the screws that held it in place were coming away from the wall. She was wearing a maroon dressing-gown, held together by a white plastic belt. Her face looked familiar and I guessed she must be the woman in the hat, the one Lynsey and I had passed when we were walking along the Gorge.

'Phyllis,' said Hal, 'she's hard of hearing.' He spoke close to her ear. 'D'you know where she is?'

'Eh?'

'Lynsey, d'you know where she's gone?'

She thought about it, bending down to pull her slipper over the back of her heel. 'Hasn't come back.'

'Since when?' I said. 'When did you see her last? Did she say anything?'

'Eh?'

'I wondered if Lynsey'd said anything, told you where she was going?'

The old woman muttered something I couldn't catch, then opened her mouth wider but put up her hand to cover the lack of teeth. 'She's a good girl. Why d'you want her?'

Hal was watching me closely and I had a feeling he would ask me to leave unless I came up with a convincing explanation.

'Look, the reason I'm here ... Lynsey thinks she's in trouble but — '

'What kind of trouble?'

I hesitated. 'That's just it. It's all a misunderstanding. I wanted to let her know.'

Phyllis muttered something about snoopers and shuffled back up the stairs. Hal gestured towards the ground floor and I went down ahead of him and waited by the pile of junk mail lying on the floor beneath a pay-phone attached to the wall. Above the phone several numbers had been scrawled in green felt pen and someone had drawn a face with squinting eyes and its mouth turned down like a clown.

'Come in if you're coming,' called Hal and I could tell by his tone of voice that he had decided to help. As I entered the room he gave the bedclothes a shake and the man called Greg pulled his foot under the duvet and turned over on his stomach.

‘Do you know if Lynsey has any friends,’ I said, ‘people who call round?’

‘Haven’t seen anyone. She used to live in Whitchurch.’

‘With Deb.’

‘Oh, you know her. Never heard her talk about anyone else. Names, plenty of names, but as far as we could tell they were mostly kids she went to school with, guys she knew in London.’

Greg raised himself up on an elbow and smiled. ‘How you doing?’ Then he flopped back on to the pillow.

‘So you don’t really know anything about her,’ I said, remembering the rented video, wondering if he was holding back. ‘I got the impression you saw quite a lot of her. She told me the three of you watched videos together.’

‘Oh, she talks to us all right but you can never tell fact from fiction. To be honest I don’t listen all that carefully.’

‘Right,’ I said, ‘well, thanks. I’d better go.’

‘No, hang on, what did she tell you about the videos? Makes us laugh, sitting there watching all that blood and guts. Keeps shouting: “Kill the bastard!” — that’s if there’s some rapist bloke or it could be just a harmless bunch of guys fooling around.’ He grinned, holding a teaspoon over a jar of instant. ‘Coffee? It’ll have to be black, I’m afraid.’

‘No thanks. Sorry to get you out of bed. She’ll turn up sooner or later, I’m sure she will. If you see her tell her I called by.’

As I turned to leave Greg propped himself up again, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

‘Sandy,’ he said, ‘she mentioned some guy called Sandy. Is that any help?’

My head was throbbing. I returned to the flat, drank two glasses of water, then realized it wasn't going to do the trick and found a couple of aspirins. I knew where I had to go next. The drive would take less than half an hour, even allowing for traffic congestion near the Suspension Bridge. How long was it since my last visit to the cottage? Only ten days but it felt like much longer. It seemed so unlikely that Sandy would want to spend the night there but supposing he had injured himself, sawing wood or drilling holes in the brickwork? There was no phone and the nearest house was about a quarter of a mile away. He could be stranded, unable to call an ambulance. But there were other, more likely reasons to explain why he had failed to return home. He could have told Geraldine he had a business appointment, some loose end to tie up, a remnant of his property development days. The story was a cover. He was with another woman. I would have to go back to the flat and tell lies on his behalf. It was the last thing I wanted.

When I ran down the outside steps a car was pulling up next to mine.

'Hang on,' I shouted, 'don't box me in, I'm just leaving.'

The driver stopped reversing and wound down his window. It was Owen.

'In a hurry, are you?'

'Yes. Why?' There was no time to go into a long explanation and, besides, the last time — when I had needed his advice ...

'Just wanted a quick word,' he said.

'What about?'

'It doesn't matter. Another time'll do.' He looked uncomfortable, as though he had psyched himself up to tell me something I wouldn't

want to hear. 'The girl with the baby,' he said, 'what happened?'

'Nothing. She's OK. I mean, I hope she is. She thinks she's in trouble with the police.'

'She is, isn't she?'

'No. No, it wasn't her fault. It's complicated. Look, just tell me why you came round.'

'I wanted to explain. I think you may have got the wrong idea.'

'Yes.' I waited, as patiently as I could. Explain what? That he hoped we could stay friends but just at present he didn't feel up to anything more. That he might have seemed unsympathetic when I called in at the Unit but he didn't really want to be involved in my work problems, he just thought we could go out for the evening now and again.

'Don't worry,' he said, winding up the car window until it was only open a crack and I could barely hear what he was saying. 'Now's obviously not the right time. Incidentally, the man they found in Leigh Woods — I met someone in the French Department who taught him at an adult education class.'

'A French class, was it?' I shouted. 'Why didn't you tell me before?'

He started up the engine, looking over his shoulder to check for on-coming traffic. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think it was of any great importance.'

*

The air was very still. As I joined the Clevedon Road a tractor, pulling a trailer that was empty apart from a rough-haired collie, came out from a farm entrance fifty yards ahead. I cursed, knowing I would probably have to follow it at a snail's pace for the mile or so until I reached the turning to the lane. But what was the hurry? What difference did it make how soon I reached the cottage, apart from the wish to satisfy my curiosity? Lynsey could be up in London, or

anywhere. If she really believed Chloe was her baby who could blame her if she wanted a few days on her own? As for Sandy, I felt certain he must have told Geraldine he was going to be away for the night. Finding herself alone in the flat, without even Thomas for company, she had worked herself up into a panic, then taken enough of her tablets to reduce herself to a state where she couldn't even remember what day it was.

The sky was cloudless and the tarmac shimmered in the sun. I wound down my window and leaned out, and the tractor slowed down even more then suddenly, without any warning signal, turned into a field on the right. I could see the thick woods at the top of the hill and realized if I didn't turn off soon I would be in Clevedon. Just before the turning to the lane I remembered seeing a red bungalow with a weather cock on the roof. Had I passed it already? On my left was a field of stubble and to the right a stone building that might once have been a chapel or a school. The road had straightened. There was no signpost ahead but I was sure the lane was close by, within a hundred yards or so. The car behind me was revving up, desperate to pass. I waved it on, slowed down to a crawl, and spotted the red bungalow, just visible beyond a thick beech hedge.

In the garden, very close to the road, a small boy was sitting on top of a step-ladder with a notebook balanced on his knees. I turned the corner and he swung round, nearly losing his balance. Then a man with a rake in his hand appeared, glaring at me angrily as though he thought the lane was reserved for the people who lived there, not holidaymakers who obviously didn't know their way about.

Steering from left and right I tried to avoid the worst of the potholes, which were deeper than I remembered, although Sandy's car was

large enough to have straddled most of the track. Once the Clevedon Road was out of sight the whole place seemed deserted and almost eerily quiet. No sounds of birdsong, dogs barking, not even a field of cows. I passed the cottage closest to Sandy's a small chalet-like place — but there was no sign of life apart from a cat chewing at something in the long grass. A little further up the lane someone had left a bicycle lying in the ditch but, by the look of it, it could have been there for months.

Sandy's car was just inside the gateway. My hand tightened on the steering-wheel. So he was there after all. Concentrating on the surface of the lane I drove past until it widened a little, then parked as close to the hedge as possible, hoping no tractors came up that far. As I walked back to the cottage a helicopter passed overhead. On its way to the coast, searching for a missing yacht? But it didn't look like Air-Sea Rescue. The edges of the lane had been left untrimmed and the pollen was making my eyes itch. I pushed back my sleeve but I had forgotten my watch and could only guess it must be between three and four, probably nearer four.

The front door was locked and there was no bell or knocker, but round the back the door to the kitchen had been left wide open. Surely if Sandy was there he would have come out when he heard the car? I stepped inside and called his name, an intruder in someone else's property for the second day running. No one answered. Moving from room to room it occurred to me that someone might have forced open the back door, someone who knew the cottage was empty and wanted to have a look round — or even spend the night there. Sandy had told me he worried about squatters — that was why the doors and windows had substantial locks — but

if someone was determined to break in there was very little he could do about it. If anyone was in the house he would have heard me by now unless he was in a drunken stupor.

I picked up a chisel and began to climb the stairs.

The smallest bedroom was empty: no furniture, no tools, just a few scraps of sandpaper and an old tobacco tin full of rusty screws. The next room looked much the same although a window had been left open and the air smelled fresher, less laden with dust. Breathing more slowly I began to relax. Sandy must be somewhere nearby. Not in the garden — it was too small for me to have missed him or him to have missed seeing me. He must have called in at the nearest house, perhaps to borrow a particular tool or ask about the local sewage system. Another possibility was that a friend of his had turned up and the two of them had gone out in the friend's car to buy something to eat.

The door to the third bedroom was closed. The brass knob was loose but I managed to push it against the door until it turned. Inside the air felt oppressively hot. Pushing up my hair I wiped the sweat off my forehead and moved towards the window to let in some air. Then I saw him. He was lying on his back by the grate with his arms flung out and one of his legs twisted to one side. Just above his left ear a patch of dark dry blood contrasted with the whiteness of his skin. One of his eyes was partially open and his lips were parted revealing the backward slope of his long front teeth.

I held my breath. Everything must be left exactly as I had found it so the Scenes of Crime Officer could make his notes, write his report. Calm, objective, I was a pathologist viewing an unknown body, all in a day's work. Reaching out I touched the place where the

leg of his jeans had been pulled up a couple of inches above his sock, feeling nothing but the iciness of my own skin. Then bile rose up in my throat and the room blurred in front of my eyes. There was no phone, the nearest house was some distance away, and whoever had done this might still be close by. Stumbling out of the room I ran down the stairs, pulled at the locked front door then caught my foot against the edge of a rotten floorboard. Wrenching it free I turned and ran to the back of the house, out into the garden, out into the air, past the cottage, past Sandy's car and on up the lane.

For a moment I thought the engine wouldn't start, then I pushed down too hard on the accelerator and it roared so loudly that it could have been heard half a mile away. The only way to turn round would be to go on and hope the lane ended in some kind of open space. Instead I reversed, twisting my head and zigzagging between the hedges, trying to stay in the middle of the track but swinging

wildly from left to right and back again. Suddenly a shape leapt out of my path and I slammed on the brakes, stalling the engine and feeling the sharp pain as my neck jerked back. A woman, holding a spaniel in her arms, shouted something I couldn't hear. Her face was very close to my window and I could see the screwed-up lines between her eyes — blue eyes, rather like Rona Halliwell's — then her expression changed and she yanked open the door.

'What's happened? Are you all right?' The spaniel jumped to the ground and started scrabbling at my leg. I felt its wet nose on my skin and the soft warmth of its fur.

'A phone,' I said, my voice coming out in a croaky sob, 'where can I find a phone?'

Chapter Twenty

I took a different route back to Bristol, skirting the edges of Nailsea then on through Long Ashton and back up Rownham Hill. The police would be on their way to the cottage. I wanted to avoid them, make sure I reached Geraldine before they did, break the news to her as gently as possible. In her present state of mind a police officer speaking into the intercom at the bottom of the stairs would be enough to tip her over the edge.

The nausea that had rendered me almost incapable of rational speech had been replaced by a kind of clear-headed numbness. I thought about the woman in the lane, how she had led me into her house, sat me down with the dog beside me, leaning against my shoulder, then dialled 999, explaining as best she could about the discovery of a body — by someone called Anna McColl. The body of Sandy Haran. She had been instructed to remain where she was — and for me to do the same. I had accepted her offer of tea, gulped it down, made an excuse to leave the house for a moment to check the handbrake on my car, then driven off without explanation.

Later I would go back and apologize, tell her about Geraldine — just enough for her to understand. With a nasty lurching sensation in my stomach I realized that by ‘escaping’ from the scene of the murder I had set myself up as suspect number one.

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Geraldine’s white bath robe came open an inch or two revealing her smooth hairless legs, still red from the bath.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said. ‘I thought I heard someone on the stairs.’

‘Come and sit down.’ I opened the living-room door and steered her towards the smaller of the two sofas. ‘I’m so sorry, Geraldine, I’m afraid it’s bad news, very bad.’

She sat perfectly still. ‘About Sandy?’ Her voice was steady. She could have been enquiring about the weather.

‘I’ve been to the cottage,’ I said. ‘I’m terribly sorry.’

She stuffed her fingers in her mouth then withdrew them and turned towards me, smiling politely. ‘Yes, I thought he’d be dead.’

‘That’s not all, I’m afraid. It wasn’t an accident.’

‘Heart attack?’

‘No.’ I searched for the right words.

There were none. ‘He’s been murdered.’ She nodded. ‘Yes, I see.’

People often respond to extreme trauma by appearing to feel nothing. Something happens in the brain so that normal emotions are anaesthetized. They allow themselves to be interviewed for the news bulletin and everyone is astonished at their courage. Later they can’t understand how they could have sounded so calm, detached. Someone ought to tell the media, explain the psychology of it — not that it would make any difference.

‘Is the cottage locked up properly?’ she said. ‘Perhaps I should ask a neighbour to go round and check.’

‘The police are there.’ I touched her hand but she made no response. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I repeated, ‘it’s such a shock, almost impossible to take in. The police will be here quite soon.’

She placed her feet together and folded her hands against her stomach. ‘You found him, did you, Anna? What did he look like? I’d rather know the truth.’

I pictured the body, sprawled on the bedroom floor. The slightly parted lips. The half-open eye. 'He was lying near the fireplace,' I said, 'in one of the bedrooms. He'd been hit on the forehead, near the temple.'

'Yes, I see.' She patted her hair, almost as though she was touching Sandy's injury. 'The police — what will they want to know? I don't really see how I can help.'

'Just background stuff, I expect. Sandy's friends, acquaintances, anything he might have mentioned that would throw light on the —'

'Oh, he never told me anything.' She yawned, leaning her head against the back of the sofa. 'I don't know why but I feel terribly sleepy. To tell you the truth I can hardly keep my eyes open.'

'Why don't you lie down for a bit? Perhaps you'd like one of your tablets.'

'You are kind.' She stood up, holding on to the arm of the chair to steady herself. 'Actually, there is one thing you could do for me. The washing ... Lynsey hung it out ... must be two days ago, more.'

'I'll fetch it now. No, stay where you are, I won't be long.'

Out in the garden the air was full of midges. There was no sign of the Sealeys. I wondered if Rona had gone to collect Bidy from the home so she could take her back to the flat in Sutton. But surely she wouldn't leave that quickly. She had been so exhausted and, in any case, she would want to stay with Helen until someone else had been found to look after the baby.

Geraldine's washing hung on a line at the back of the house, stretched between two trees. It didn't amount to much, just a couple of white shirts, some underpants, bath towels, and three blue seersucker table napkins. I gathered them up and started back to the

house, then realized one end of the towel was trailing on the ground and stopped to hitch it up. If it hadn't been for the towel I might never have noticed. Geraldine's grey Morris Minor was parked in its usual place but the film of dust that had settled on it during the weeks she had been housebound had been wiped clean at the bottom of the door and along the edge of the wings.

Dropping the washing on the grass I approached it, wondering if the clean areas were a trick of the light. They weren't. Perhaps Thomas had decided to wash the car, then changed his mind or been called away to practise his violin. But when I inspected it more closely I could see that the hub caps had been wiped clean too. I peered through the smeared glass next to the passenger seat, then walked round to the other side. The driving seat had one of those backrests made of wooden beads. I tried the door and it came open with a loud creak. The keys had been left in the ignition. A map of the British Isles lay on the back seat, its cover bent back by the weight of a pair of brown lace-up shoes. The seat belts, which must have been installed when they became compulsory, looked at odds with the rest of the interior. One half of the driver's belt had slipped down the side, the other lay across the red vinyl of the passenger seat. I stared at it and my heart began to thump. Caught on the rough webbing of the belt were unmistakable traces of blue and pink wool. The pale colours of Geraldine's blue birthday sweater with its pink birds — one crouching, one strutting.

Backing out of the car I looked up at the windows of the top-floor flat. There was no one there but when I raised my eyes higher, to the floor above, to Thomas's attic bedroom, the evening sun caught the lenses of a pair of binoculars.

I could have run round to the front of the house and jumped in my car. By now the police would be on their way to the house. If I drove towards the cottage I might pass them or we might take different routes. Why was I so reluctant to leave? Because I was afraid Geraldine would escape from the flat? Because I wanted to protect her? Or because I had to know the truth?

The outside door had swung shut. I put my key in the lock, gave the door a shove and stepped noisily into the narrow hallway.

‘Geraldine?’ My voice sounded unnaturally loud. ‘I’m coming up — so we can have a talk. It’s all right. Just stay where you are.’

Removing my shoes I started up the stairs, listening for the smallest sound, pausing on the landing then continuing on up to the top. Thomas’s penguin was still propped up on the bottom step leading up to his room. When I moved it to one side its head sagged limply where the stuffing had leaked out of the threadbare material.

‘Geraldine, are you up there? It’s all right. I just want to talk.’

I held my breath but the whole place was silent and there was an odd smell I had failed to notice before, like a mixture of dried herbs and toothpaste. At the top of Thomas’s steps the door had been closed, cutting out most of the light. Turning the handle I pulled it open and stepped inside, my eyes darting round, searching for any tiny movement. The bed cover was caught up at one end. I pulled it off and bent down all in one movement but the divan base had drawers that reached to the ground. There was no space to hide.

A fitted cupboard with a long mirror was partly concealed by a jogging suit that had been left hanging over the door. I snatched at the trousers and the door swung open, revealing a solitary grey duffle coat hanging on a metal rail.

If Geraldine wanted to escape now would be her chance, while I was in Thomas's room and out of sight of the stairs. But why would she want to? Apart from me no one need ever know she had been out in the car. If she could kill once she could kill again. I ran down the steep attic steps, knocking my head on the ceiling, calling her name, but more to break the silence than because I expected any reply.

There was no cupboard under the stairs, just an empty space. Stupidly I wondered where the vacuum cleaner was kept. It was a problem in my flat, I had to shove it at the back of the wardrobe. In a flat like this there could be hiding places I could never imagine. She could be close by, inches away, waiting, poised, with a kitchen knife or a heavy tool. When they found me the weapon would have disappeared and she would describe how she had left me in the living-room while she went to lie down. Later she had heard someone breaking in, then a scuffle, shouting. She had run out of the bedroom and found me. It had been too late.

But just at this moment I doubted if she was thinking that far ahead. I doubted if she was thinking straight at all.

Suddenly a muffled sound came from somewhere on my left — like someone trying not to cough. I stood still, listening, but it was so quiet I thought I must have imagined it. Then the same sound again but this time it seemed to come from a different place. Running from room to room, I turned my head in all directions, pulling open cupboards, looking under beds, behind chairs. Nothing. Then I remembered. Halfway down the stairs, below the window-sill with the green parrot I had noticed a small brass knob on the wooden panelling. It was one of those pieces of information the brain

absorbs, almost without consciousness, something unimportant, unlikely to be of any future use. I started down the stairs.

The parrot was in its usual place, staring at the orange and yellow stained-glass window. I picked it up, feeling its leaden weight, and with my other hand I took hold of the brass knob and wrenched open the door, almost pulling it off its hinges.

She was curled up in a foetal position with her arms round her head, half covering her face, and she was so still I had to edge closer to make sure she was breathing. Even then I couldn't be certain until one of her knees suddenly gave an involuntary jerk.

'It's all right,' I said softly. 'I won't hurt you.'

Slowly, painfully she uncurled her body and sat, still half inside the cupboard, looking up at me with the same blank expression I had seen the first time we met.

'You wanted me to go out,' she said, speaking so quietly her words were barely audible, 'that's why you told me the story about the man who drove to the cliff top.'

'Tell me about it, tell me what happened.'

The tears began to slide down her cheeks. She made no movement to brush them away, just sat with her legs stuck out in front of her like a small child, staring straight ahead, with her eyes focused on my legs.

'He killed him,' she said. 'He killed my Walter.'

'Walter Bury?'

'He thought we were going away. And Thomas, I wouldn't leave Thomas. He hates me. He's hated me for years.' Her voice was louder now. 'Ever since Thomas was born.'

'Come on out,' I said, 'then you can tell me all about it.' I held out my hand and she took hold of it but made no effort to raise herself up.

'He's not Thomas's real father,' she said. 'Sandy can't have children. Artificial insemination by Donor, you've heard of it I expect. Sounds like something they do to farm animals. Well, it's just the same, I suppose.'

We sat on the stairs. It was cold, colder than it had been for a long time. 'Sandy must have agreed to it,' I said.

'Oh yes, we had counselling, it was all done properly.' Her voice was a little shaky but having started to talk she seemed more in control of herself. 'At the best of times men don't like babies very much and Thomas was the kind that sleep all day and cry all night. I didn't breast feed so that meant we could share the bottles although quite soon he took over most of the feeds.'

'Sandy did? I thought you meant ... because Thomas wasn't his own ...'

'Oh no, just the opposite. Thomas was to have everything he could ever wish for.'

'So what went wrong?'

She shivered, turning towards me, her face contorted with the effort of trying to explain. 'You see I was never allowed any say in how Thomas was brought up. If I made the slightest suggestion Sandy said I was trying to undermine his authority because he wasn't the biological father.'

I thought about Thomas, listening outside the door, overhearing part of a discussion about the nature of his birth and assuming, quite understandably, that he must have been adopted. Then I thought

about the music lessons, the judo, gym club, drama group. I had blamed Lynsey for interfering, and all along Thomas had been only too willing to give up some of his out-of-school activities and play in the woods like a normal little boy.

Geraldine's eyelids were drooping. 'He never loved me,' she said. 'But I was useful, as a hostess. Then later when I became depressed I was a patient for him to practise on.'

'Tell me about Walter.'

'Walter?' The tears returned. 'I met him at the French class. He was terribly unhappy — people who go to classes often are. We didn't speak to each other for several weeks, then I plucked up courage and asked if he'd like to join me for a cup of coffee.'

'In the cafe at the museum.'

'Oh, you know it.' For some reason this seemed important to her. 'Very occasionally you meet someone and it's as though you've known them all your life. He loved the countryside — plants, birds. There are dormice in Leigh Woods. I think you call them dormice or is it dormouses?'

'How did Sandy find out — about you and Walter?'

'He must have followed me. I was so careful, so discreet, but he must have become suspicious.'

'Perhaps because you seemed happier.'

'Yes, I suppose that could be it. Later he found out where Walter lived and how he used to walk in the woods in the evening. You see more at that time of day, even in the summer when it's still quite light.'

'Sandy told you he knew — about you and Walter?'

She nodded. 'He said one day I was sure to leave him and he couldn't live without me. I think he meant it. You can depend on someone without actually loving them.'

'Perhaps he did love you?'

'He needed me,' she said flatly, 'and Thomas. People he could control, people who made him feel part of a proper family.'

'But no one knows for certain that he killed Walter Bury.'

'Oh, it was him all right. He used the club hammer, the one Thomas spilled blue paint on when Sandy was teaching him how to use tools. After Walter died I found it in the shed.'

'But you couldn't have known ... Surely he'd have got rid of it, thrown it away.'

'The best place to hide something is where it's supposed to be. A knife in a kitchen drawer, a hammer in a tool box. It was spotlessly clean, as though it had been wiped all over. There were still a few traces of paint of course but it smelled of bleach, that's how I knew. Then I did a very stupid thing.' She stared at me and her eyes looked almost amused. 'Later, much later, when the house was empty, I crept downstairs and threw the hammer over the hedge, on to the grass verge by the side of the road. I suppose I wanted someone to find it, pick it up.'

'Dean Koenig.'

'Wasn't it unfair? I couldn't let the young man take the blame for what Sandy had done. Sandy had to be stopped. We never talked about it, not a word, but he knew.'

'That you'd guessed. So yesterday, when Rona and Lynsey had gone missing and the Sealeys were in Cornwall, you drove out to the cottage and killed him.'

Her teeth had started to chatter. I heard a car pull up in the road, then turn into the drive.

'You see Walter loved me,' she said.

I went downstairs and let the police into the flat.

'She's up there,' I said. 'Look, before you go up ...'

Howard Fry strode past me, speaking over his shoulder. 'The head wound was relatively superficial, there's no way anyone could have died from it.'

'I don't understand.'

He paused, three steps up. 'Someone'll have to identify the body. If you'd stayed at the cottage as instructed ... The doctor's ninety-nine per cent certain the victim died from an overdose.'

'Overdose? But —'

'Probably a mixture of sleeping tablets and alcohol. We found an empty container in the bathroom. The drugs themselves would be unlikely to be fatal, even in fairly large amounts, but combined with a bottle of Southern Comfort ...'

'But the head wound,' I said, holding the door open to let in Graham Whittle.

'He must have hit it on the edge of the grate,' said Howard. 'Stood up when he was already pretty groggy and —'

'Why would he do that?'

'Who knows? To find more alcohol, write a suicide note?'

'You found one?'

'No. Now where's the wife? According to the doctor the victim had been dead for some time. He was cold but flaccid, rigor mortis had already worn off.'

He turned away but I grabbed hold of his arm. 'Listen, if Sandy had fallen the gash would have been underneath.'

He hesitated. 'Not necessarily. What are you getting at?'

'Could the wound have been inflicted after death?'

'After death? Who's going to do that? After death there'd have been no bleeding, although with a head wound it's just possible ...'

He started up the stairs, two at a time. I raced after him and we entered the living-room together. Geraldine was sitting on the window seat with her ankles crossed and her hands folded in her lap.

'I'll fetch my things, shall I?' she said. 'What will I need, just my nightdress and a toothbrush?'

Howard glanced at me.

'She's been to the cottage,' I said.

'How d'you mean? When?'

Geraldine made a move to stand then sat down again heavily. 'I killed him,' she said softly, 'you can take me away now.'

Howard was balanced on the edge of the antique chest where Sandy had once told me he kept the board games he and Thomas played during long winter evenings. 'Your husband died of an overdose, Mrs Haran. I'm very sorry. You probably don't feel up to answering questions just now but there's no urgency, we can come back —'

'What happened, Geraldine?' I interrupted. 'Tell Inspector Fry what happened.' She smiled at me, opening her mouth and closing it again, then starting to talk in a bright, artificial voice. 'Yesterday evening, about eight o'clock I think it was. There was no one in the ground-floor flat when I left, I checked before I started the car. I

hadn't driven for — oh, it must be nearly two months. I was afraid the engine wouldn't start but of course it did. Sandy's so good with cars.' She paused, looking round to make sure we were all listening. 'It takes about twenty minutes to reach the cottage. Less if the roads are clear. I parked in the front garden then went round the back. Sandy was upstairs, doing something or other.'

Graham Whittle looked first at me, then at Geraldine. 'Your husband died at least thirty-six hours ago, Mrs Haran.'

She started to scream. First a small distressed noise, like an animal caught in a trap, then a loud angry shriek that continued for several moments before she put her hands up to her face and slid to the ground.

'I'm going to call a doctor,' I said. 'I'll try and get her admitted to hospital, just for a day or two so they can keep an eye on her.'

Howard raised a hand. 'Mrs Haran, you say you visited the cottage yesterday evening?'

She nodded vigorously. 'You see, he killed Walter.'

'And you found your husband dead.'

'I wanted to kill him.' Geraldine's voice was high-pitched, hysterical. 'So what's the difference? I lifted him up but he was very heavy, much heavier than you'd think, and he looked so young. I couldn't hold him, he slipped out of my ...'

'What makes you think your husband killed Walter Bury, Mrs Haran?'

She pressed her lips together then sat up straight and threw back her head. 'Walter loved me.'

'And your husband knew about the affair? Do you have any other evidence, anything else linking your husband with the murder in

Leigh Woods?’

I wanted to tell Howard about the hammer in the garden shed — but not now, not with Geraldine in such a volatile state. Had she really thrown it over the hedge, or were her thought processes so confused that the story about the hammer was as much an invention as her original insistence that she had murdered Sandy?

Howard was staring at me. His face was expressionless. I stood up and went to phone the doctor.

The ambulance had come and gone. Howard had bombarded me with questions. Why had I gone to the cottage? Had Mrs Haran asked me to look for her husband? Had I known for some time about her involvement with Walter Bury and kept the information to myself? And another thing: Lynsey Wills, the girl who had *left me holding the baby*, where was she now?

Later, at the police station, I would have to answer more questions. Bryan and Helen Sealey would be interviewed too, and Rona — and Lynsey unless she had disappeared into the anonymity of London. None of them had any connection with the murder — I was certain of it and none of them was likely to provide Howard with the hard evidence he needed. Evidence, not hearsay, that proved Geraldine was right and Sandy was the killer the police had been searching for.

The sky had clouded over. I could hear the church clock striking six and the harsh sound of a strimmer in the next door garden. Left alone in the Harans’ flat I had wandered from room to room, making sure the windows were closed, washing up the mugs that stood on the draining board alongside a spoon and a collection of cold tea bags. Now I was up in Thomas’s room, with my elbows on the window-sill, staring down at the roof of the Morris Minor and

wondering, for no particular reason, what Geraldine had done with the binoculars.

There was no sign of them in the room. Apart from the jogging suit on the cupboard door it was exactly as I had seen it the first time Geraldine showed it to me. The expensive computer and printer, the rocking horse with its genuine horse-hair tail, the rows of model planes and boats and dinosaurs. Next to a brown triceratops a space had been made for the wooden owl that Thomas had given his mother for her birthday. I wondered if it had been Lynsey who had moved the owl from the mantelpiece downstairs. Perhaps she and Thomas had played with it together regularly, filling it up with pieces of paper, then making vomiting noises as the head swung back. Stretching out my arm I lifted it off the shelf and tipped its contents on to the carpet, scattering screwed up balls of newspaper — and something else — a sheet of stiff cream notepaper, folded, then folded again.

Sitting on the floor with my back against a shelf of encyclopaedias I smoothed it out and started to read. It was Sandy's handwriting all right. I recognized it from the time he had scrawled his address on a scrap of paper, less than three weeks ago.

Small, neat writing with very few of the letters joined together.

My darling, We didn't have to talk about it, did we? You knew it was only a matter of days. When I followed Walter that evening, I did it for all of us — you and me and Thomas. I couldn't live without you, you've always known that. Goodbye, my darling, I did try, I really did. Be happy — both of you. There's enough to live off if you sell the house. I'm sure you'll want to anyway. S.

The note must have been there for several days. Had Sandy hidden it just after Thomas left to catch the coach to Plymouth? I remembered his anguished expression as he said goodbye to his son. Was it then he had decided that time had run out, he had no choice left?

Geraldine could have seen the note already but I was certain that finding Sandy's body had been as much of a shock for her as it had been for me. Had she really gone there to kill him, and if so how had she intended to do it? I doubted if she had made any realistic plan.

Stuffing the note in my pocket I picked up the crumpled pieces of newspaper, returned them to where they belonged, then ran down the two flights of stairs and let myself out into the fresh air. Howard would call in a handwriting expert but there would be little doubt now that Sandy had been responsible for Walter Bury's death.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was cool on the Downs. Lynsey walked a few paces ahead of me, talking nonstop. She had taken the news of Sandy's death amazingly calmly. Perhaps it hadn't sunk in, perhaps she had too many other things on her mind.

'Geraldine might've been able to save him,' she said, 'given him mouth-to-mouth.'

'No, it was far too late for anything like that.'

'How d'you know? She could've gone there sooner than she said.'

I shook my head. 'There's a boy lives in the bungalow at the end of the lane. He wrote down the registration of the Morris Minor and the time it came past.'

'Whatever for?'

'He's a car fanatic. Geraldine arrived there just before eight and left about fifteen minutes later. By then Sandy would've been dead for over twelve hours.'

She thought about it for a moment. 'Poor old sod.'

I wasn't sure if she meant Sandy or Geraldine but in any case it was time to change the subject.

'Lynsey, do you still think Chloe's your baby?'

She slowed down till I drew level. 'Not really. Could've been, except mine had sticking-out ears.' She laughed, trying to force me to join in. When I refused she looked as though she was going to cry. Then she glared at me, muttering something barely audible, something to the effect that I surely wasn't going to force her to face up to the loss of her baby — not today of all days.

'Funny to think Sandy's dead,' she said. 'Still I suppose it's better that way — if they're sure he killed that bloke.'

'They're sure,' I said.

'What'll Geraldine do? Sandy dead, her boyfriend done in, doesn't have much luck, does she?'

'You liked Sandy, didn't you?'

'He was all right. Oh, you mean I fancied him? Bryan maybe. Sandy's not my type.' She folded her arms. 'My baby — I did love her you know. It wasn't that I wanted to get rid of her, it was just, like what sort of a life would she have had?'

'I know.'

'Now Rona's gone what d'you s'pose Bryan and Helen'll do, find another nanny or look after the baby themselves?'

'I have no idea, but I'm sure she will be well cared for.'

She gave me a push. 'Always look on the bright side, eh? I'll tell you something, I hated that Helen.'

'Because you thought she had your baby?'

'I s'pose. Stuck up though, isn't she, thinks she's so fucking good looking.'

'Lynsey?'

'What?'

'Did you know Walter Bury's wife had been killed by a hit-and-run driver?'

She laughed. 'Might have.'

'Who told you about it?'

'I forget.'

'Was it someone called Colin Elliot?'

‘Never heard of him. Oh, Col, yes it could’ve been Col. He goes to the Ostrich, that pub down by the quay, d’you know where I mean?’

‘And you wanted Helen blamed for the hit-and-run.’

She jumped on to a tree stump and stood like a statue. ‘Well, she’d given up driving, hadn’t she? S’posing it was her. Walter Bury might’ve found out so she had to get rid of him. Anyway I didn’t say anything to the Old Bill so what’s the problem? Where’s Thomas?’

‘He’s staying with his friend’s mother but I expect Geraldine will be home quite soon.’

‘Like she hasn’t done a crime or anything.’

I shook my head. ‘When she’s back I’m sure you’ll be able to see her — and Thomas if you want to.’

‘Maybe. Think I’ll ask Deb if she can find me some work at the store? Oh, not selling all that muck on the make-up counter. Can you see me all got up like a dog’s dinner?’ She flopped down on the grass, rolling on her back. ‘Something in packing, something where the customers don’t set eyes on you so you can’t say the wrong thing, wear the wrong clothes.’

‘You can do better than that.’

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’ll start at the bottom and end up running the place.’ She sat up, staring into the distance. ‘That Geraldine — was she really agoraphobic or like just putting it on?’

‘I don’t know. It’s not that simple.’

‘Don’t know nothing, do you.’ She jumped up, brushing the dry grass off the back of her shorts. ‘Only joking. But if Sandy knew he’d done a murder why did he want you to talk to his wife? I know, it was a kind of death wish! He knew he’d get caught. Wanted to be. Was that it, d’you s’pose?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe,’ she mocked. ‘Here, you met Hal and Greg — what d’you think of them? Wish I was gay. Gays are nice to each other.’

A car had pulled up near the water tower. When the driver got out I recognized Owen and cursed silently. What on earth did he want? He seemed to have a habit of turning up at the worst possible time.

He waved, then started walking towards us, pushing back his hair so that it was smoothed down on one side of his head and sticking up the other. Lynsey glanced at me but said nothing, just stuck her hands in her pockets.

‘Pure luck I saw you.’ Owen was out of breath and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. ‘I was driving round and just happened to — ’

‘This is Lynsey,’ I said. ‘Oh, I forgot, you met before. The statue of Neptune, near the Watershed.’

He held out his hand. ‘How are you?’ Lynsey smiled. ‘Could be worse. Here, d’you want an ice-cream?’ She started running in the direction of the van, calling over her shoulder. ‘Strawberry or vanilla, or one of those choc-ices on a stick?’

‘Hang on,’ I said, ‘I’ll pay for them.’ She held up two fingers. ‘D’you mind, I’m not that skint.’

I turned to Owen. ‘Look, if it’s about Walter Bury and the French class — ’

‘I wanted to explain,’ he said. ‘I only saw Barry on Friday, I’d no idea it was important, didn’t even cross my mind.’

‘It wasn’t, not really. I’m sorry if I shouted, I was feeling a bit — ’

‘Where did you find Lynsey?’

‘I didn’t. She turned up at the flat.’

‘Oh good, I’m glad.’

Lynsey was returning with three cones balanced precariously in one hand. ‘Quick,’ she yelled, ‘they’re melting, there’ll be nothing left.’ Then she put her face very close to mine and frowned. ‘Now what’s the matter? Thought we was enjoying ourselves.’

She handed one of the cones to Owen. ‘Always like this, she is,’ she said, jerking her head in my direction. ‘Can’t you do something about her?’ An ice-cream was held up to my mouth, forcing me to take a lick. ‘There, that’s better. I’ll tell you something for nothing.’ She paused for maximum effect. ‘I wouldn’t look so miserable — not if I had a bloke like him who couldn’t take his sodding eyes off me.’

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