

Gauntlet Road

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“It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys of London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches*.

The sun dips below the hills and in the twilight the falling leaves look more ochre than chestnut. Running footsteps connect with dry ground, crunching through the forest.

A tall woman in shorts runs beside the river. She's wearing a red sleeveless top even though there's an edge to the breeze. Her long tawny hair is tied up in a scrunchie. She breathes in easy regular beats as she moves through the landscape. One two in, long three breathe out, one two in, long three out. A creamy-brown mutt trots along behind her.

She picks out a route between the twisty branches, slipping in and out like a red silk thread in a medieval tapestry. To the west the rolling chalk hills rise up in front of her. She opts for the steep path and turns uphill. Her legs burn and her chest aches but she keeps up a steady pace. Sweat gathers at the base of her neck and slides down her spine.

A man leans over a white bath and fills it with warm water. He checks the temperature with his hand and then he lifts an infant boy into it. Father and son play with a yellow octopus, its straggly legs tickling the boy's chest. Squeals of laughter erupt from the child. The man fetches the rubber shark with iron-grey teeth and pretends to chase the octopus beneath the boy's chubby legs. The little boy's fists beat up and down in the water as he tries to catch the shark, misses, and splashes the man's shirt.

The man soaps the sponge and washes the infant. He makes large, lazy circles around his back and under his armpits. The boy giggles as he nibbles the shark.

Twilight darkens to dusk. The woman crests the hill and passes a domed barn storing hay. A farmer chugs into the barn and switches off the tractor ignition. Huge bundles of hay are stacked and wrapped in black plastic sheeting.

The woman runs along the ridge then chooses the downward path, running harder and faster, looking ahead for potholes in the ground. Her hair works loose and whips across her cheeks.

A breeze picks up and gusts of drifting leaves bluster across her path. Beech trees molt red and gold, leaving branches bare.

Manure and fertiliser burn her nose. Bits of straw blow in the air. Husks sting her eyes.

A hawk circles overhead then swoops down into the field beside her. When it flies upwards it's carrying a mouse.

The man watches the boy repeat the game with the shark chasing the octopus. He laughs when the octopus flies out of the water and lands on his lap.

A phone rings from another room. The man turns, glances over his shoulder then back to the boy playing in the bath. The phone keeps ringing. The man turns his head again to the noise and back to the boy, letting it ring until it stops. He picks up the bottle of baby shampoo and squeezes some of the yellow liquid into his palm. Just as he is about to rub it onto the boy's soft hair, the phone starts ringing again.

The man frowns. He rinses the shampoo from his hand in the bath. He dries it off with a towel and glances down at the boy.

The phone keeps ringing.

He puts the octopus into the boy's small hands, wipes his brow and stands.

The woman runs through the thick forest beside the river. She comes out of the trees and runs along an open path that stretches away into the distance. Darkness descends. A splinter of moon juts above the hill. She slows her pace just enough to make sure she avoids any ruts. She jogs through the gate, goes through a cool down routine stretching her legs then walks indoors.

Flashes of electric blue explode on and off from an ambulance and the siren wails louder as it approaches. It parks in the driveway. Two officers climb out and head into the house.

The ambulance pulls out into the street. The woman has a blanket wrapped around her. Her red sleeveless top is damp with sweat. She shivers. Her face is tear-stained. The man stands clenched, face wracked with pain. She barely moves. He steps towards her and tries to put his arm around her shoulders but she pushes him away.

They watch the ambulance disappear down the street.

Four Years Later

The Wiltshire chalk hills curved gently, like a sleeping woman. There was nothing extreme about the slope of the land. Even the colours of the amber wheat fields were muted against the milky blue sky. Ancient drove paths dissected the ground. Stone circles, barrows, henges and hill forts dotted the landscape, testament to past lives from long ago. Wide rivers cut through the valleys and ribbon settlements had sprung up beside them. If everything appeared soft and mild then this was an illusion. Emotional dramas, betrayal and even murders were committed here. And it all began with a dog trotting along beside the River Avon, his nose stuck into the air reading the breeze.

Lola watched her daughter reading in bed, lying on her stomach, with the book propped against the headboard. It was too heavy for Greta's small hands to hold. The limp white curtains were still open revealing the overgrown cemetery beyond. Lopsided headstones and putrid flowers, stale yellow like dog-day afternoons. Lola looked at the hole in the worn carpet. She didn't feel like talking. She was restless; she needed to go for a walk even though she had been for a run early that morning.

"Please mum. I can't go to sleep when it's still light anyway."

"Just one more chapter and then I'm taking it away."

"Do you think J K Rowling is a nice person?"

"Why shouldn't she be?"

"It must be very noisy in her head."

"Yeah, I guess so." Lola laughed. "Good night love."

"You can go now," said Greta, turning back to her book.

"I think I'll just take Biff for a quick walk." Lola stepped over the fallen clothes and reached down to kiss Greta's soft cheek. "Won't be long, okay?"

"Okay, come back and give me another kiss so I know you're here when I fall asleep."

Lola left the door ajar and went downstairs into the kitchen. The sink was full of dishes and spilled cereal on the benchtop. The mustard jar was missing its lid. She could clear up the mess later once it was dark, listen to some music and try to enjoy it. She shook her head and grabbed Biff's frayed lead from a hook in the hall. As soon as Biff saw her pick it up he wagged his tail and shoved his face into her leg. He was such a clumsy old

dope, full of slobbering kisses and doleful eyes. Lola's mood lifted almost as soon as she stepped outside in the balmy evening air. She knew she shouldn't leave Greta alone but she locked the door and told herself that Greta would be fine, she was reading, safely tucked up in bed. If Hunter had been there she would have left at least an hour ago but she stopped herself right there. No point in thinking about him anymore.

Lola didn't want to leave Greta long and the light was fading so she chose the familiar loop, past the mill house and along the edge of the River Avon.

Once past the park she walked over the old stone bridge. Biff pulled on his lead when he saw the swans had gathered, their heads dipping in and out of the green water. A fisherman wearing rubber waders stood in the water and cast mayflies into the river. She could see the flies swooping above the surface and a speckled trout come up to feed. She knew better than to call out a greeting to the fisherman and waved instead. He tilted his head in answer but continued casting into the middle of the river. She pushed on, giving in to Biff's eager stride and pricked ears.

The pale moon glinted up above the trees. It wasn't dark yet but the light had taken on a pearly, grainy finish. The blurred edges reminded her of the soft focus wedding photograph of Hunter and Beth that Greta used as a bookmark. She quickened her step.

On the other side of the bridge she turned left past the two white cottages. She unclipped Biff and he bounded off to explore the undergrowth. The path was pitted and the ground was dry. To her left a field of wheat cast a tawny glow and to her right there was a line of willows along the river's edge, soft and frilly. The image of an evening dress quivered in her mind and she raked her fingers through her hair, trying to banish all thoughts of Beth one step behind Hunter.

Biff disappeared into a thicket of bushes. When he didn't reappear after a few minutes Lola followed him. She veered off the path and picked her way over a fallen willow branch and between the nettles. A thorny bush scraped across her shin. *Damn dog!* It was darker here and pools of shadow gathered beneath the tree trunks. She heard a crackle and then a sharp snap. *Biff, where are you?*

A branch broke and she heard a grunt. Then a whimper but it only lasted for a few seconds. She couldn't see Biff.

Something moved on the edge of her vision. A cool breeze fluttered along her bare arms. She froze and then almost jumped when she heard a barn owl hoot just above her but

something instinctive made her keep quiet. The sound stopped and she still couldn't see or hear Biff rustling in the leaves.

She saw a man wearing a dirty brown-checked shirt with his back to her about ten metres off to her left. He was on his knees leaning over something. Biff lay inert beside the man.

An axe was sticking out of his neck. Blood seeped over his shoulders and onto the grass.

Lola resisted the urge to scream and kept still although her heart leapt about like a dying trout. She knew that it would be just seconds before the man stood up and turned around.

The owl let out a prolonged, strangled screech and Lola took it as a cue to move. She crept backwards and stepped her way carefully back over the fallen tree, trying not to make any noise. It was hopeless, of course, and twigs crunched as her feet connected with the ground.

He turned and saw her, his cheeks flushed and contempt in his narrow eyes. As if it was all her fault. She ran back out of the thicket and in an instant she decided not to run along the footpath. There would be no cover.

She darted into the wheat field and crouched down on all fours out of sight. After a few seconds she wanted to stick her head up to see if he had followed her into the field and whether she should run. All her muscles tensed in expectation. She heard him break out of the bushes and lope off down the path back towards the stone bridge. She stayed low and didn't move, the warm soil pressed close to her lips. She stayed like that until it was dark although with the moon up the sky was grey rather than boot polish black.

Once her breathing had calmed down she weighed her options. She could go back and see if Biff was still alive. She could stay where she was until it was much darker and then make a run for it, or she could go now, sprint like hell, all the way home. Then she thought of Greta and her belly turned over.

Lola stood up and glanced all around her. The path was clear so she dashed out of the wheat field. The fisherman had disappeared. She held her front door key sticking out of her fist in case she needed a weapon.

Back inside her house she relocked the door and then tiptoed upstairs to see if Greta was still reading. She lay curled up asleep on one side but she had left the lamp on. It cast a

python of shadow across the ceiling. A tear rolled down Lola's face as she switched off the lamp and bent down to kiss her downy neck.

If Hunter had been there she would have told him what had happened. He would have called the police within minutes. But the last time he asked the cops for help they had made a bad situation worse. She turned off all the lights in the house and kept looking out the window. She checked that every window was closed and that the back door had the bolt up. And then she checked the windows and doors all over again. Bile rose in her gut as she paced around the house. He was out there, not far away, and she felt certain he wasn't about to forget all about her. After a few minutes of pacing and glancing out of the windows she picked up the phone and dialled 999. She waited for nine rings but nobody answered. She knew that rural Police were over stretched but this was ridiculous. Something must have happened.

The house was Lola's sanctuary. She didn't want to leave it, or take a step down an unknown road but her need to protect her child won over her resistance to leave. Lola continued pacing and then she marched upstairs and woke Greta up. Greta was floppy and unresponsive so she picked her up and carried her downstairs and into the garage. She opened the car door and laid Greta in the back seat. Then she ran back upstairs and gathered a few of Greta's clothes, Quizzie, the one-eyed soft cat made of felt and her book. She threw them into a pink canvas bag. Once she was back in the car she opened the garage door and then reversed out at speed. She thought she saw him standing behind the oak tree. Then she told herself it was just a shadow.

Out on the open country road, driving fast past fields and hedgerows, Lola realised she didn't know where she was going. Greta had woken up now and was tugging at her sleeve. But Lola batted her hand away, not knowing how much to tell her. She didn't want to arrive at her dad's house; she didn't want to explain, any of it. Just keep driving. A left here and then a right followed by another left. She saw Hunter waving, beckoning her onwards. She fumbled in her pocket and her fingers closed around her phone but she didn't call him.

Greta started to cry. And seeing her tears slide down her cheek softened Lola and made her slow down.

"It's all right. We're going to be fine."

"But where are we going?"

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s pretend we’re having an adventure.” Lola tried to put some energy into her voice.

“But I don’t want an adventure. I want to go home back to bed.”

“We can’t do that. Look, there’s a rabbit. Did you see it?”

“You nearly ran it over.”

“Big bloody ears.”

“It’s a hare, Mum.”

“I know, silly.”

Greta stopped talking. Just pressed her face next to the window and watched the fields and trees slide by. Eventually she fell asleep with her legs tucked up on the seat. Lola wanted to pull over, get out, spread her hands flat on the bonnet and yell. But she didn’t want to wake Greta up. Not yet, not until she had reached the quiet village of Winterbourne Gunner. Lola turned the car around and then as if on auto pilot she headed east towards her sister. Kate would know what to do. This time she smiled when she thought of Kate and the way she tilted her head to the left whenever she heard about another of Lola’s messes. She saw Kate’s head slide around like one of those daft dog toys. Tap it on the head and it bobs up and down and side to side, agreeing with everything you say. If only.

Lola turned off the engine. She banged on the heavy oak door. It had a black metal knocker shaped like a bear’s claw and felt heavy and smooth in her hand. The stars above her glinted and there was dew on the grass. She banged the door again and then she found her mobile in her pocket and rang Kate’s number.

“Let me in. It’s cold out here.”

“Not again.”

“I love you too.” Lola zipped up her jacket.

“It’s after midnight, or hadn’t you noticed?”

“I know. Let me in.”

“Lola, it’s not funny. I’ve got to work in the morning.”

“Let me in Kate. Something happened.”

“Where’s Greta?”

“She’s asleep in the car.”

“Jeeesus.”

Kate put Greta in the spare room with the green checked curtains, pulled up the covers and kissed her goodnight. Neither of them spoke. Back in the kitchen Lola sat at the round glass table and stared at the coffee cups hanging on hooks along the edge of the oak dresser. She could smell lavender wood polish from the dresser and even the benchtop was spotless. Kate came up and rubbed her shoulders.

“What happened?”

“I put Greta to bed and then I went out for a walk with Biff and, and... We must have disturbed him. He killed Biff with an axe. He was lying on his side and I could see all this blood on the grass.”

By the time Kate understood what had happened she was shaking Lola.

“What aren’t you telling me Lola? Who would want to hurt Biff?”

“Nobody.” Lola’s shoulders slumped forward. “He’s just a sippy old dog.”

“What shall we do?”

“Don’t ask me,” said Lola. “You’re the one with all the answers.”

“We better call the cops.”

“I tried but nobody answered.”

“Well, I’ll try again now,” Kate said.

“You think they’d give a damn about a dog?”

“Of course they will.” Kate stood up and picked up the phone.

“I don’t trust-”

“I know, but this is different.”

Kate dialled 999 and was put through to the police on the second ring. She handed the phone over to Lola. A man’s gruff but bored voice answered, implying he had heard it all before. He announced that he was in Basingstoke, as if that was worthy of pride. Geography wasn’t his strong point and he had no idea that Amesbury even had a river and even less when Lola tried to give pointers about the old Saxon church and the loop the river takes past the mill house.

“Did he threaten you?” The bored cop persisted.

“I ran off and hid in the wheat field. I mean I was hardly going to introduce myself.”

“Are you all right?”

“No, of course not. My dog’s dead.”

“The problem is if he didn’t threaten you I can’t send a patrol car out now. I’ll write up the report and someone will call you in the morning. Have you got a description of this man?”

“Dogs not important, then?”

“I didn’t say that. We have a situation in Andover which has taken up most of our resources. Five cars are outside the train station as I speak.”

“Well let’s hope that Mr Axe doesn’t want to catch a train or you’ll be really stretched....are you still there Sergeant?”

“Yes, Mrs Hunter, I’m still here. Okay, give me his description.”

“I didn’t see him standing up but he looked big. Broad shoulders. He was wearing a dirty brown checked shirt. Marks & Spencers probably. And he looked flushed.”

“I’ve made a note of it. Someone will call you in the morning. And Mrs Hunter, I’m sorry about your dog.”

“Me too. He was a star.”

Lola put the phone down and scrunched up her face. She raised one eyebrow at Kate as if to say ‘told you so’. Kate offered her brandy but she shook her head. Lola’s arms and legs felt heavy, as if her blood had congealed. They hugged and then Lola slipped in beside Greta in the spare bed and folded her arms around her small body, breathing in the smell of her hair. She fell asleep in seconds, dropping like a stone through water.

In the morning Lola woke to hear car tyres turning on the loose gravel. She had slept in most of her clothes and her auburn hair was sticking to her head in matted clumps. When she passed her reflection in the oval mirror she stuck out her tongue because she saw Greta staring with her sensible, too serious nine-year-old face into the mirror. Greta saw her mother flick out her tongue and giggled, putting her thumb to her nose and wriggled all her fingers in reply. Lola ran her a bath and then went into the kitchen to make toast.

Marc was standing with her back to her, watching Kate reverse out of the drive. He was wearing a dark suit and his hair had been combed. His iPad was switched on and lying on the kitchen island. Lola could see he had been reading the Finance Section of The Daily Telegraph.

“She’s in court today.” Marc said, turning to face her. “Had to leave early,”

“That’s okay,” said Lola. “We’ll just make breakfast and then leave.”

“Sounds like a hell of a night.”

“The second worst in my life.” Lola folded her arms across her chest.

“Hmm,” said Marc. “Coffee? I’ve just made it.”

“Yep, black.”

“I’m sorry about Biff.”

“You don’t need...I mean it’s no secret that you’re not a dog person,” said Lola.

“Yeah, well I didn’t grow up with them. My lot struggled enough with the kids so dogs were out of the question.” Marc twisted the cuff-link on his starched white shirt. The cuff-link was made of mother-of-pearl and reflected thin beams of light as he lifted his wrist. He was the only man around her age that Lola knew who still wore cuff-links.

“I always admired Biff’s lust for life,” Marc said.

Marc walked to the benchtop and poured Lola coffee from the gleaming stainless steel Gaggia espresso machine. It was his latest toy. How long would it be before he replaced it with a newer model? One that recognised simple commands, so when you said “cappuccino” or, “double espresso” the machine would purr into action and deliver a perfect measure.

“He was always so damn cheerful,” said Marc.

He handed her a red and white striped cup on a red saucer. All that was missing was a design in the froth. Lola sat at the table and sipped the freshly ground Kenyan Mountain

Gold. She wished she had at least brushed her hair or cleaned her teeth before coming into the kitchen. She tugged her t-shirt, trying to shake out its creases.

“They’re not all like that, you know,” said Lola. “Dogs can get depressed too.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Not surprising when a lot of owners never walk their dogs. Walks aren’t just about exercise. Think of walks as... well, reading the newspaper. Getting the low down on who does what and where. Sniffing is like reading for dogs, Marc. Take that away from a dog and it will get depressed and bored very quickly.”

“Is that why vets prescribe Prozac for dogs? Marc said.

“It’s not funny.”

“Yes, it is. It’s absurd.”

He straightened his tie and opened the fridge, staring into it for a few seconds.

“Lola?”

“Yes?” Lola sipped her coffee.

“Stay here if you want. There’s no need to go home. We’d be happy for you and Greta to stay for a few days.”

“We?”

“Come on. She’s not that bad.”

“Well okay, if you’re sure. I think we will. I just have this feeling someone is watching the house. I know this sounds strange but I think I’ve seen that man before, the one that...”

“Did you see him clearly?” Marc put his sandwiches into a blue plastic box and then slipped the box into his satchel along with his Mac.

“Not really. It was almost dark. I might be wrong.”

“Well you’re the artist. Draw the nutter right now before you forget the details. Gotta go, I’m already late. See you tonight. Tell Greta there’s some pancake mix left in the pantry from her last visit.” Marc moved towards her and leant forward as if to kiss her and then hesitated. He strode out of the kitchen without turning back. “There’s a spare key on the hook.”

Lola opened the drawers in the dresser to look for some paper. Instead she pulled out the guest list for Kate Fielding and Marc Steele’s wedding. She scanned the list and saw

the biro lines running through Mr C Hunter's name. Even here his authority held sway, missing out his detested Christian name.

There were two columns. On the left, Mr and Mrs Peter Greenwood were at the top of the list, Marc's favourite foster parents. Without Pete and Maria's help, Marc reminded them at frequent intervals, he would never have gone back to school, won a scholarship to Oxford and become a barrister. "All those teenage arguments proved good training for life as a commercial litigator," Marc used to say.

Half way down on the right hand column was their dad's name, Charlie Fielding, added like an afterthought stuffed in between Dr Susan Ewing and Marcus Glass. Christ, an afterthought, after all he'd done for them. Lola found some blank paper beneath the wedding list and two pencils with sharp points in the cloisonné holder by the telephone, just where she expected to find them.

When she finished sketching, shading in the bridge of the man's wide nose, the mop of his brown hair falling across his forehead, the narrow eyes staring back at her, Lola felt none of the usual symptoms of impending menace. The picture looked downright friendly. He looked as if he could be an uncle, or her brother if she'd had one. It's all in the context, she thought, as she stared around Kate and Marc's tidy kitchen.

A tingle of electricity shot through her veins as she remembered her fear from the night before. She would give this picture to the cops.

"Who's that?" Greta said.

"Don't know. It's just something I'm working on. Does he look familiar?"

"Bit like Ruby's dad, or maybe Ella's."

"That's the problem."

By the time Greta had finished her pancakes, washed up and stacked the dishwasher, Lola was staring at the face on the table and frowning. She folded the piece of paper in half and slipped it into the back pocket of her faded jeans. But it felt wrong in there. So she took it out and put it into her handbag.

"Come on you, let's get to school. It'll take about twenty minutes from here."

"We're coming back here after?"

"Yep. Marc invited us to stay for a few days. Is that okay? You can have pancakes for breakfast every morning."

"I don't know." Greta fiddled with a strand of her black hair. "Who will feed Biff?"

Lola had put off this moment long enough and knew she had to tell her. How much had Greta overheard? Had Greta had fallen asleep quickly while she was talking to Kate and the cop on the phone last night? She glossed over the details and the shock she had felt. What sort of pictures were forming in Greta's head as she explained that Biff wouldn't be waiting for them at home? Greta started to cry so Lola pulled her onto her lap and stroked her hair until her breathing calmed down.

Neither of them spoke as they drove through the villages to Greta's school. The Happy Gang played on the CD, something about a smooth-backed whale rising, jumping, rising out of the blue, blue sea. Lola dropped her off by the metal school gates knowing she was better off surrounded by her noisy friends than staying with her while she tried to talk to the cops.

Right on cue her mobile rang and Sergeant Tony Baldwin asked her if she could meet him by the stone bridge past the park so that he could remove Biff before the public discovered him. Lola agreed to meet him in ten. First she made a quick call to Stonehenge Secondary School and explained she would be in late as there had been an 'incident' in the night. Pat, the receptionist, sounded harassed and took the message without asking questions. She didn't even ask when her first class started, or what time she might appear. Lola shrugged and clicked the phone shut. She drove through the small town of Amesbury, past The Red Lion and the home-made pies at Reeves Bakery and then down to the park with its bright swings and climbing frame. She parked her car beside the cop's car.

The path through the nettles was overgrown. Sunlight dappled the poplars on either side of her and overhead the blackbirds twittered as she walked along the path. The hill on the horizon was specked with sheep and up above fluffy white clouds plodded lazily across the sky. It could have been a perfect summer's morning.

Sergeant Baldwin was standing on the bridge with his legs apart as he leant over the railing watching the moorhens scour the river for twigs, trying to improve their nests. The cop lived up to his name with a pitted bald head, round as a melon. A small young woman with dishwater-blond hair scooped up into a ponytail stood beside him. If it hadn't been for the uniform she would have looked about twenty.

"Mrs Hunter? This is Sergeant Rash. We've had a quick look in the area but haven't found your dog. Please lead the way and we'll follow." The young woman didn't say hello, just nodded.

With a flash of intuition Lola knew that despite her age the young cop had done her homework and seen her file. Checked her out. Something in the way her pale eyes slid away whenever Lola tried to make eye contact.

“It was just through there,” said Lola, trying to regain control. “I stepped over this fallen branch and then I saw him. He had his back to me. I couldn’t see what he was doing but he was leaning over something on his knees.”

“We’ve just been over this bit,” said Baldwin.

“And we didn’t find anything,” said Rash, lifting her eyes to meet Lola’s. She knew.

“Except that patch of blood on the grass,” said Baldwin.

“Are you sure?” Lola said. “I mean, why would he come back and hide Biff?”

“Fingerprints on the axe,” said Rash.

“Then he’d take the axe but leave Biff. Wouldn’t he?”

“Anything’s possible, Mrs Hunter. At this stage we really don’t have anything to go on. Perhaps your dog is somewhere nearby. We’ll search along the river’s edge. There’s a lot of undergrowth around here. Hiding a dog wouldn’t be too hard.” Baldwin parted the long wiry grass as he spoke.

“A lot of dogs and walkers come round here,” said Lola. “If Biff’s here it won’t take long before another dog tracks him down.”

The three of them spent the next hour scouring the bushes and undergrowth along the edge of the river. They didn’t find Biff. Sergeant Rash asked her to go over the incident again and nodded every few seconds, as if she was trying to convince herself of something. Baldwin told Lola she was a brave woman to hide in the wheat field but when Lola pointed out she didn’t have much choice, he agreed.

They were about to turn around when Lola spotted two glossy water rats swimming fast across the current. She hadn’t seen a water rat for a while and stepped closer to the edge, watching them steer using their bald pink-grey tails.

For a moment it was as if she had turned into Biff, her attention tightly focused on the rats swimming through the reeds.

Then she snapped back into herself, noticed the water swirling, catching around the body lying face-down in the water beneath an arched willow.

All three of them saw the body at just about the same moment. Her yellow skirt had billowed out like a clown's costume. Her arms were swollen and gorged with water. Lola thought she might be sick and turned away.

After that time seemed to speed up. Baldwin suggested she go back to school while they took care of things. Rash was already on the phone saying "I think we've found her." Nobody was interested in Biff anymore. Or Lola.

As she walked back to her car Lola passed more police and then a jeep came trundling down the path with a fat man dressed in green overalls talking into his cell phone. Before she stepped into her car she looked up. Fluffy white clouds looked a bit like Biff. There was even a tail that sort of wagged. She hoped he was happy chasing rabbits in heaven.

Clouds lifted and dispersed so that by eleven it was another clammy summer's day. Even the weather wasn't cooperating and showed no intention of matching Lola's dark mood. As she sat in her car with the windows open she could hear the wail of sirens grow louder as they approached. It wasn't every day that the cops in Amesbury found a body in the river. Lola couldn't see the point in speeding and sirens though. Wouldn't change the outcome for that poor woman.

Teaching art to thirteen year-olds, mashing characters from literature and fanzines into a mixed media collage, had lost its appeal. Lola called Pat again and told her that the "incident" had developed and that she needed to take the rest of the day off. Pat paused for a beat and told her to "take it easy, get better soon," as if she had the flu. Lola said nothing further and clicked the phone shut. She understood that it was always busy in the School office and Pat probably had at least three children asking for something at the same time as a couple of staff telling her something important.

Sergeant Baldwin had taken her to one side and suggested she talk to a friend. Mentally she ran through a list of her friends. They would all be working. Busy, unavailable. There was always Dad but he was occupied laying a new drainage system in his garden, or tinkering underneath his car, or chatting up Anna two doors down. Kate was in court all day and Marc was going to a meeting in London. She hadn't realised she even thought of him as a friend and for a second she felt a flicker of warmth somewhere in her chest. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and then she hit Call on Hunter's name.

"It's me."

"Hey."

"I know you're busy but..."

"What's wrong?"

"Everything." Even she could hear the tremor in her voice.

"Woah," said Hunter. "Are you at school?"

"No. I'm sitting in my car in Recreation Park. I've taken the day off. Can you meet me?"

Another car pulled up beside her. A man climbed out and unclipped two rods from the boot of his car. He fumbled about and brought out a canvas bag and a box.

“What’s this about Lola?”

“I need you to listen.”

“I thought I was good at that. Hang on a mo, I’m shutting the door.”

“Am I interrupting?”

“Uh ha,” he said. “But I’ve got a few minutes before my meeting with bignose.”

“What I’m about to tell you will be on tonight’s news.”

“What?”

“Last night I was walking Biff along the river. A man killed him with an axe. I saw him for just a few seconds and then ran away and hid in the wheat field. Greta and I ended up staying with Kate.”

“Christ! Are you okay?”

“No.” She let out a long breath. Turned her head away from the fisherman.

“Where was Greta?”

“She was reading in bed... can you hear that?”

“Sirens? Is that sirens? You left her alone. Lola, we talked about that.”

“This morning two cops and I were looking for Biff, walking along the edge of the river. One of the cops has read our file. I mean she didn’t say anything but I just know.”

“Let’s not, Lola. Stick to the present, hey? Did you find Biff?”

“I’ve only just begun.”

The fisherman sat on the edge of the boat and pulled on a pair of thigh-length waders, stood up and attached the net to his belt. He opened his box, chose a few flies and hooked them into his cap.

“Go on,” said Hunter.

“No, we didn’t find Biff. But...”

“What?”

“We found a body in the river.” Lola rubbed her lips together. “It was a woman.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hunter, do I sound like I’m kidding?”

“I’ll cancel my meeting. Meet me in the Haunch of Venison in half an hour.”

“Thanks. Text Beth to let her know you’re meeting me.”

The fisherman paused beside Lola’s car, touched his cap as if to say ‘good morning,’ and sauntered off. Poplars swayed in the breeze.

“Don’t worry,” Hunter said. “She’ll understand. Drive slowly, okay?”

“Okay.”

Lola drove the nine miles along the Woodford Valley hoping the rural scenery would calm her down. It bothered her that the cows kept on munching, the farmers continued to pull tractors through the chalk fields, and the other motorists sped past as usual.

She hadn’t read a paper for the last few days. Was she the only one in the area to be unaware of a missing person? Stopping at a corner shop in Middle Woodford she bought a copy of the Salisbury Journal and flipped through its pages as she sat on a stone bench by the side of the road. Over half a page had been devoted to the medieval pageant in Broad Chalke and a full page on the vicar in Coombe Bisset who was fund-raising for a school to be built in Haiti. Road works around the Park & Ride on the edge of Salisbury would continue for another three months. Most exciting was the one-page photo of Sting wearing a black t-shirt and a white bone carving around his neck. He was opening the renovation to Waterstone’s bookshop in Salisbury. Next to it was an interview about his forthcoming world tour which took up the centre page spread. Not one word about a missing woman.

Parking in Salisbury was its usual nightmare so she doubled back and paid to get a space beside the theatre and walked through the covered way to reach the market square. It was French market day, and the ancient central square was heaving with people carrying baskets filled with croissants and baguettes, salted almonds, blueberry jam, crepes filled with crème de marron, and all sorts of useless bric-a-brac. Long trestle tables beneath the Stone Buttery were crammed with oozing circles of brie and cave-aged roquefort. The red-faced seller kept yelling out “Best Cheeses, Ripe Prices” in a Froggie accent.

Lola walked down Blue Boar Row to reach the Lloyds cash machine and discovered that her bank balance had less than a hundred pounds in it. She knew she was getting paid on Friday. A rat must be eating up her cash. Situation normal. But she had more important things on her mind to worry about it now.

On Minster Street she pushed open the lopsided wooden door to the fourteenth century pub, the Haunch of Venison, and saw Hunter standing at the bar. He had to stoop his tall frame as the enormous oak beams were low in the first small room. The barman was telling him about the conditioned cask ales and then stopped when Lola walked in. She could still do that, stop a sentence midway. Even in yesterday’s clothes. Lola saw the crease

around Hunter's eyes as he smiled but it was far too late for that. He ran his fingers through his dark hair and focused his cobalt blue eyes on her face.

Hunter ordered a pint of 6X for himself and a glass of Pinot Noir from New Zealand just to please her. They went up the steep stairs to the tiny room on the left, the infamous room where the skeletal remains of a hand found chopped off and wedged into the walls were found over five hundred years ago. It had been stolen recently from its glass case. The punters insisted a plastic model of bony fingers replace it to remind them of the pub's past as clerics meeting place, brothel and stone carvers drinking hole while building the tallest cathedral spire in England.

"Thanks for coming," Lola said.

The room was crowded so Hunter sat down next to her and their legs touched under the table until she moved her knee to one side.

"As if I wouldn't."

"Still."

"It's all right to ask for help, you know," he said. "It isn't a sign of weakness."

"Right."

"Poor old Biff. Let's hope he turns up later today and once they find him I'm going to give him the funeral he deserves."

"Yes, let's do that." Lola sipped her wine. The table wobbled and Hunter reached down and put a beer mat under one leg to keep it steady.

"Old floor," he said.

"Old everything. Watch your head when you stand up. That beam is right above you."

"How's Greta taking all this?"

"Obviously she's upset about Biff. I didn't tell her much, didn't mention the axe. The fact that Biff's dead is enough. And she doesn't yet know about the woman's body."

The couple opposite didn't look as if they were listening but the word *axe* set off a slight sway between them. To and fro, back and forth, the gap closing until their noses almost touched.

"You better tell her a bit more though. I'm sure you're right that it'll be on the news later. Do you want her to come over to mine tonight?"

"No. Let's stick to the routine. Anyway, we're staying with Kate and Marc tonight."

“Do you think Biff and the woman’s body are connected?”

“Presumably. When we spotted her floating in the water, Sergeant Rash said ‘I think we’ve found her.’ So they must know who she is.”

“Cops say dumb things all the time. We both know that.”

He paused then and reached for her hand. He squeezed it and then pulled her towards him and put his arms around her. She stayed like that for a moment, her head resting against his shoulder and listened to his heartbeat. She sighed, and then pulled away.

“Perhaps it’s karma. I’ve been waiting for something bad to happen and now it has.”

“Well then it should have been my dog and my discovery while out walking. Look Lola, you don’t deserve this. You’ve got to stop thinking like this. It’s just bad luck. Wrong place, wrong time. Anyone could have stumbled into this.”

Lola looked up at the old gas lamp on the wall. She fiddled with her hair, twisting a copper strand between her thumb and index finger.

“Don’t you need forgiveness?”

“I don’t waste time beating myself up. Who the fuck needs it?”

His eyes darkened for a second and then he smiled at her. Lola tried to concentrate on his stubble, like grit, running along the edge of his jaw.

“How’s Beth?”

“Fine.”

“And her kids?”

“Sam’s plugged into his computer 24/7. I think he probably sleeps with his headphones on. And Mia turned 14 last week. She’s got a boyfriend.”

“Don’t suppose it’s serious.”

“I’m not so sure. She jumped out of her bedroom window at ten pm and didn’t come back for two hours. Beth was frantic.”

“Did you talk to her?” Lola rested her chin in her hands.

“Not up to me, is it? If it was I’d put locks on all the windows and bolts on the doors.” He sipped his beer.

“Oh, you forgot the chastity belt made of iron.”

“That too.” He lifted his face and grinned.

“You should talk to her. You live there so get involved.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“That’s pathetic, Hunter, and you know it. Anyway, it would be good practice. We’ve got it all in front of us.”

“Greta won’t be like that.”

“No, she’ll be perfect. Just like her old dad,” Lola said, “immune to others’ charms.”

“You’re still angry with me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Disappointed, yes. Angry, no.”

“Lola, you didn’t want to talk to me either. God knows I tried. But you just couldn’t let it go, could you? It always came back to Stevie, no matter what I did or didn’t do.”

Lola flinched at the mention of Stevie’s name. “That’s not fair.”

“You want to talk about this?” Hunter’s voice rose. “Today, right now? Haven’t you got enough on your plate?” Hunter fixed his eyes on her with an impersonal intensity and she froze, like a rabbit caught in the glare of car lights.

“Calm down,” said Lola, “the barman can hear.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” Hunter said.

“No Hunter, I don’t want to talk about it today. I just wanted you to listen. I need your support.”

“I shouldn’t have come,” he said.

“Then why did you?”

“God damn it, Lola,” he pushed his glass away. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Actions count more than words. If you really cared, you wouldn’t have left. Think about Greta,” Lola said, “she lost Stevie and now she’s losing her father.”

“Here we go, same old, same old. Look, I’m not listening to this. I wanted to help you but you know what? You don’t need me.”

Hunter stood up and knocked the table as he rose. His glass fell over and beer spilt across the table onto his leg. Hunter swore and marched out of the pub. Lola looked at her wine glass and downed the rest of it in one. She went downstairs to ask the barman for napkins and tried to mop up the dark liquid that pooled in an ugly pattern.

The barman came into the room and saw the mess, made a few tsk tsk noises and then fetched a wet sponge.

“Gone, has he?” The barman said in a west-country drawl.

“Yep.”

“Left you to clear up his mess, did he darlin’?”

“What’s new?”

“Never mind, love. This should cheer you up.” He placed the ploughman’s platter on the table with three wedges of different cheese, a thick slice of honey-cured ham, brown rolls, salad and home-made chutney.

“Don’t suppose you want the other one?” He was about to take the second plate away but Lola nodded.

“I want that one too.”

“Don’t know where you put it, love. Skinny thing like you.”

Half-way through the second plate Lola’s phone rang. Sergeant Baldwin asked to see her at the police station in Amesbury. Biff had been found. Lola pushed through the crowded streets, through the market and drove back to Amesbury.

Sergeant Baldwin looked small sitting beside Chief Inspector Morten Fox. Fox was well over a hundred kilograms and his small dark eyes never settled as he scanned the room and Lola's face for fresh insights. He had stubbed out his cigarette but the smoke still lingered around his jowls, giving him an otherworldly look, as if his cheeks might unravel or melt in the heat.

He spread out four photos of men on the table and once again he said, take your time, no hurry, and his eyes roamed all over Lola's top half.

She shook her head. "None of them."

"Are you sure?" Fox's voice was soft and deep.

"Yes, I'm positive." She pushed the photos away.

"How can you be certain when you say you only saw his face for three or four seconds in twilight?"

"The eyes are wrong in all these," Lola shook her head. "His were grey like wet concrete. And narrow."

Lola remembered the picture in her bag and pulled it out. She unfolded it. "He looked a bit like this."

"Doesn't look like a murderer, does he Tony?"

"Do they ever, Sir? But that's because of his mouth," said Sergeant Baldwin. "If we do this," Baldwin placed a hand over the picture's lips and the tension in the room increased, "then I have no trouble with it."

"Oh, that's good, Tony. Very good," Fox said. "Would the lady like a cup of tea?"

"No thanks."

"We can use this. Get our boys to scan it." Fox picked up her drawing and handed it to Tony. "So, you're an artist?"

"Used to be," Lola said. "Nowadays I just teach art at Stonehenge School."

The Inspector's office was all black and white. White plastic chairs around a black desk and white walls. There was no room for confusion. The only grey thing she could see was the folder Fox pushed around the tabletop. Lola shivered even though it was stuffy.

"But you've had exhibitions." Fox watched her carefully.

"Well, small ones. How did you know?"

“I bought one of yours a few years back at the Odstock Hospital exhibition. Funds went to the victims from the Tsunami in Chile, if I remember correctly. Local scene, rolling wheat under leaden thunderclouds. Excellent. Bit like today, wouldn’t you say, Mrs Hunter?”

“Hmm.” Lola looked at the photo on the Inspector’s desk of a toothy boy holding a silver cup above his head. He was wearing a green and white soccer uniform.

“Why don’t you still exhibit? You should keep at it. Talent like that shouldn’t be wasted.” Fox leant forward and studied Lola’s eyes.

“It’s a long story but thanks... Where did you find Biff?”

“Close to the body of the young lady. In the wheat field just across the path.”

“Can I take him away and bury him?”

“Yes, of course you can. We’ll be finished with your dog soon. Tony here will help you, if you like. We’ve run a few tests around the wound on his neck and at this stage it looks as if it was the same axe that was used to chop off her left hand.”

“What?” Lola pushed her chair back, sucked in breath.

“Didn’t Tony here tell you?”

“No. Tony here didn’t mention it.” The room smelt of smoke and sweat and Lola had a sudden urge to fling open the windows. “Why would anyone do that? To keep her hand as a trophy? Who is she?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you Mrs Hunter, although you do need to be aware of the danger,” Fox said. “Those are good questions, all of them, and I don’t know why he mutilated the body. I do know who she is but I can’t reveal that just yet.”

“Do you have any idea who he is?” Lola looked up into his dark eyes.

“No, love, not yet. We’re working on it.”

“Please don’t call me love.” She folded her arms.

“All right, Mrs Hunter. But I think you made a wise choice to stay with your sister for a few days. Don’t go back to your own house until we give you the say-so, all right?”

“I need to pick up some clothes. Can he come with me?” Lola gestured with her chin towards the Sergeant.

“Sure. No problem. The two of you could do that now.”

“Right, let’s go.” Sergeant Tony Baldwin stood up.

“And Mrs Hunter,” Fox was eyeing her legs as he spoke, “stay out of trouble.”

When the two of them pushed open the swing door from the police station they saw it was pouring. Brooding clouds with flat bottoms had rolled across the Plains and the pavement was a mass of puddles.

“Summer, hey?” said the Sergeant. “Over there, I’m driving.”

They ran over to his marked car and down Salisbury Street and through the town’s one-way circuit until they reached her old house on Flower Lane. Lola put her arm up against the side window, trying to block her face, hoping that nobody would recognise her sitting in the cop’s car. She cast the sergeant a side-ways look and saw that with his bald head and ruddy face he looked reliable.

“Don’t let the Inspector get to you. He’s all bark,” said the Sergeant.

“A sheep in wolf’s clothing?”

“Not a sheep, though. He’s a leader, not a follower.”

“You like him?”

“He’s a good boss.”

Once inside her own home Lola felt her heart rate slow and deepen. The cop showed no reaction when he saw the state of the kitchen and she ignored it. Lola went upstairs to collect some clothes. It took her a few minutes to decide what to take. When she saw her unmade bed she longed to lie down, pull the covers over herself and fall asleep. Feel Biff’s wet nose poke itself into her hand, always wanting yet another walk. Instead she pulled open some drawers and threw a pile of clothes onto the bed. Next she fetched some of Greta’s clothes. Then she went into the bathroom and packed a wash bag.

When she came downstairs she saw the cop standing by the sink and washing up. He had wiped down the benchtop and cleared away the dishes. Even the mustard pot had been reunited with its lid. The smell of lemon-scented *Jiff* filled the air.

“Oh, you didn’t need-”

“Might as well,” he said in unison. “You said earlier that you didn’t have time for a shower this morning so if you want one now, go ahead. I’ll be another five minutes finishing up.”

“You’re married? She’s got you well-trained.”

“Seventeen years.”

Lola turned back up the stairs. She stood beneath the hot water and turned her face up to the showerhead. In the distance she heard a bus grind to a halt and it reminded her of

Stevie whose first word wasn't mum or dad but car. His favourite black taxi and London double-decker bus were still sitting on the kitchen window sill. On bad days she found herself on her hands and knees rolling the model bus up and down the kitchen floor. *Catch it Stevie, now roll it back to me.* The water splashed over her cheeks. She turned her head away, shook the water out of her eyes. *Stop it, just stop it.*

Sometimes she thought she could detect a milky smell waft beneath her nose and she wasn't sure which came first – the thought or the smell. At other times she could feel the soft down of his white hair, so soft, so fine against her own cheeks. She could see Hunter holding him in the air, swinging him round, Stevie wearing his blue dungarees with red cars on the pockets. She felt wobbly in the shower and kept it short.

Tony Baldwin had always found cleaning up a pleasure. It soothed him. He put Lola's worn sponge down reluctantly. Better check the place was secure and all the windows were closed. He waited until Lola came back into the kitchen before asking her if she minded if he checked the windows upstairs too. One of the rooms had the door closed. He opened it and saw a cot in the corner with a mobile with small wooden aeroplanes hanging above it. There was no bedding in the cot and he tapped the mobile and watched while the green and yellow planes did a lazy circuit. Something about it made him frown. Lola hadn't mentioned a baby although he had read the file. It had been written up by Sgt. Max Smith (now retired) and, as usual, Max hadn't bothered to check any of the statements properly. The whole document had more than a whiff of unreliability.

Baldwin drove Lola back to the police station so she could pick up her car.

“Thanks, Sergeant Baldwin.”

“Call me Tony.”

“Thanks Tony.”

“I'll call you tomorrow once your dog has been released. If you need a hand I'll help you bury him.”

Lola grabbed the bag full of clothes and shut the car door. Tony held up his hand as he drove off. He might have been waving.

With less than an hour to kill before she had to pick up Greta from school, she bought an orange juice in The Greyhound on Smithfield Street and read the paper.

The children came out of the school playground in their blue and grey uniform carrying rucksacks and satchels almost as big as them. Lola spotted Greta by herself,

skirting the edge of the playground. What was wrong? She wanted to wrap her arms around her and kiss her but knew that Greta would push her away in front of the other kids.

“How was your day, love?”

“Okay. I played with Ellie on the monkey bars.”

“Learn anything new?”

“No.” Greta dropped her rucksack and walked on. “Can Ellie come for a sleepover on Saturday?”

“No honey, not while we’re staying with Kate and Marc.”

“That sucks.”

“Greta!” Lola picked up the rucksack.

“What?”

“Don’t use that word.”

“Why not? You say it all the time. And the J word.” Greta turned around to face Lola.

“The J word?”

“Jeeesus.”

“Do I?” Lola pulled the rucksack up to her chest.

“Yep.”

“Well, I shouldn’t.” Lola said. “And you definitely shouldn’t so please don’t, okay?”

“No, it’s not fair.”

“I know. Life sucks.” Lola turned to Greta and they both laughed.

“I’ll ask Marc if Ellie can come over but I’m not promising he’ll say yes. Don’t ask Kate as she’ll say no.”

By the time they reached Winterbourne Gunner and pulled into the drive in front of Kate and Marc’s cottage, Greta had relaxed. Lola opened the pantry and the fridge and hunted around for ingredients. Unlike her own fridge this one was packed with neatly wrapped parcels of meat, a smoked trout from the local farm shop, all sorts of vegetables in the chiller and a selection of home-made jams. Together they made chicken casserole for everyone’s dinner.

As soon as Kate arrived home Greta ran up to her and gave her a kiss which surprised Lola. Kate looked at the hob with the pots bubbling away and scowled. She was

wearing a black suit and she kept running her hands down her skirt, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles.

“I’ll just get changed. Long day.”

“Kate, can Ellie come for a sleepover on Saturday? Please Kate, say yes.” Greta hopped at the edge of the sofa.

“Er, I don’t know about that. We’re going to the beach house. It’s not really... It’s only got two bedrooms.” Kate was still holding the car keys and jangled them together.

“We don’t mind sleeping on the camping mats. Mum can have the other bedroom and Ellie and I can sleep on the mats in the dining room. Say yes, Kate, say yes.”

“Greta, leave Kate alone,” Lola said. “You’ve got no idea about timing,”

“It’s okay. Yes then, all right. Ellie and you can bring camping mats.”

“Thanks Kate. I knew you’d say yes. Mum said you wouldn’t.”

Lola shrugged and Kate raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve made dinner,” said Lola. “Want some?”

“In a minute. It’s been a hell of a day.”

“Tell me about it.”

Kate stopped for a second and tilted her head at her sister. Lola knew there was no point in talking to Kate about any of it. She had given up trying. The two of them looked at each other for a few seconds and then Kate turned and went off towards her bedroom to change.

When Marc arrived home the first thing he did was go and find Greta and sit on the edge of the double bed in the spare room. Lola stood in the doorway and watched him. Greta was reading on her stomach with the heavy book propped open against the headboard. She put the book down and turned over to face him. He handed her a plastic bag. Greta pulled out a soft toy dog with a wide blue ribbon. It was a glossy chestnut brown and for a second Marc regretted his choice when he saw Greta’s lip tremble.

“And we can do something about this too,” Marc said, picking up the heavy book and closing it. He pulled out his iPad from his satchel and showed it to Greta.

“Let’s go shopping,” he said. “Touch that, scroll down, enter in the book’s title there, and touch that. You do it Greta. It’s easy.”

“Like this? Is that how you spell Rowling?”

“Perfect. Your book has been downloaded. Now you can read it anyplace and in any position.”

“Wow! I can read lying on my back. How do I turn the page over?”

“Stroke it, that’s it.”

“Can I keep this?”

“No, I need it but you can use it whenever you’re here. Don’t read all night, huh? Turn the light off soon or I’ll be in trouble.” He winked and left her with his iPad.

Marc put his hand on the small of Lola’s back and steered her into the living room.

“I’m glad you’re coming with us to the beach house. It’ll do you and Greta good to get away.”

“I don’t think Kate’s very happy about it,” said Lola.

“God, you two. She’s fine about it. Aren’t you Kate?”

“Look Lola, I’m doing my best. I’ve even said yes to Greta bringing Ellie. So give me a break, okay?”

“Did Marc twist your arm?”

“Come on girls,” Marc said, “sit down and have a glass of wine.” He patted the sofa beside him but Kate marched off and Lola shrugged as she watched her receding back.

Bo Zhang rocked back and forth in her wicker swing chair attached to the porch ceiling with a butcher's metal hook. Her long legs were curled up underneath her, like a Persian cat. She laughed while she read a Chinese comic of the warrior Mulan doing battle with foot soldiers in the mountains of Sichuan Province. It was good practice at keeping her in tune with contemporary Mandarin slang. And it was funny.

Her iPhone buzzed. It was her brother Marc calling from Salisbury station while he waiting to board the express train to Waterloo. He wasn't strictly her brother. For a start he wasn't even half Chinese but she never referred to any of the other five kids she shared bedrooms with at the Greenwoods as her siblings.

"You remember Kate, don't you, when you both worked on that patent case last winter? Marc said.

"Yep, of course. She's a tough fighter. Really got the prosecutor jumping."

"She said the same about you."

"I don't need to fight...the facts speak for themselves."

"Anyway, it's her sister Lola I'm worried about."

"What's up?" Bo could hear his concern mixed with something else.

"Did you hear about the dog killed with an axe?"

"Uh ha."

"And then the woman found floating in the river? Well that was Lola's dog and she was with the cops when they found the body the next day. Sounds as if her dog disturbed the murderer and Lola came face to face with him briefly before she ran off and hid in the wheat field. She thinks he might have followed her home."

Bo missed a beat. "Is she as tough as her sister?"

"She's quite mouthy but no, I don't think so. Lola's much more vulnerable. And she's got a nine-year old daughter, Greta. Her husband left her some years ago."

"I see."

"She's coming to the beach house with us this weekend but when she returns to her own home on Sunday evening she'll need your protection. Someone capable needs to watch over them."

Bo remembered that Marc had bought a 'beach house' in Worth Matravers (and that he loved the phrase and repeated it whenever he could). When he mentioned Lola's

daughter, Greta, Bo could hear his voice soften and for a second she felt a stab of jealousy. Their paths had diverged. Marc seemed to collect people and businesses while Bo told herself she was better off alone.

Bo checked her calendar on her iPhone and told Marc she was meant to be stalking yet another unfaithful male in Steeple Langford next Monday. Marc asked her to find someone else to do the stalking as he needed her to do this job, for him, please. And yes, he would pay top rates.

“Why don’t you join us for lunch at the beach house on Sunday and you can meet Lola there,” he said.

“What will I do in a beach house, Marc?”

“Same as everyone else I guess. Go for walks along the beach, hunt for fossils, get sand in between your toes and play monopoly with Greta.”

“I can’t stand sand. It’s too... sandy.”

“All right. Well bring a Chinese book and pretend you can’t understand English.”

“It’s too Sunday Lunch. You know I don’t do that very well. I’ll do the job but skip the lunch. Tell Lola I’ll meet her in the beer garden of The Antrobus Arms at 8pm on Sunday. Make sure she doesn’t go home first and unlock the front door without me. And text me her numbers, address, inside leg measurement - everything you can.”

“Thanks Bo. I owe you.” He clicked off before she could protest.

Bo leant back against the faded pink velvet cushions lining her swing as she glanced around her garden with approval. There were no flowers but plenty of architectural plants giving texture and variety. She knew that Marc still kept a photo of the two of them in his wallet.

She put the iPhone down and looked into her cottage through the French doors. She had bought it less than a year ago and it still gave her a buzz to think it was hers. The white-washed stone cottage nestled at the confluence of the rivers Nadder and Wylde was a real find. Bo loved the fact that she was one of just a handful of Chinese living in this quintessential English Market town. (And no, she didn’t run the Golden Dragon takeout and no, she couldn’t stand the bright orange sauce that smothered most of its food.)

A light breeze rustled through the bamboo that she had planted along the southern edge of her garden. She had grown it to provide a screen between her and her neighbours rather than for sentimental reasons. She had no illusions that gardens still looked like this

in Taipei either. Not since she had returned seven years ago after the earthquake that killed her parents and found the city transformed. She had been an alien in a world of concrete, firecrackers, smog, and incessant dust from buildings being torn down. In Taipei all her fellow Chinese only saw her British genes, her strangeness, her *otherness*. While in Wiltshire everyone focused on her Chinese inheritance, her narrow eyes and glossy blue-black hair.

Although her eyes and skin colour may have blended in while she had been in Taipei as soon as she opened her mouth everyone knew she was a fraud. She was bombarded with the same questions and insults over and over. *Where are you from? Why do you talk wrong? Don't you know which bus to take? And even, big nose and foreign devil!*

Back in England she still felt an outsider. She was rootless, she didn't belong anywhere but the magnet wasn't the people; it was the colour green and the curve of the rolling chalk hills. Relationships were overrated, she decided. So here she was in Wilton, the ancient capital of Wessex on the outskirts of Salisbury. But now she was here by choice and no longer by circumstance.

Bo stuck her feet out and pushed off against the side table, setting the chair in motion again. The wind continued to pick up and blew a few leaves around the garden. She stretched and stepped out of her swing chair. She had three hours before her meeting with Tom Porter, a long-term client and neighbour from her teenage years in England. Tom was still hunting for his missing twin sister, Pip. Five years ago Pip had driven to work along the A303 to Andover around 8.30am on a cloudless summer's day. She never arrived. As if she had disappeared with the rising sun.

No trace of either her body or her car, a red Mini Cooper, had ever been found. Pip had been a single mother and left a one-year old boy, Jake, who now lived with Uncle Tom and his wife Hilary.

For the first few months there had been an enormous wave of public interest but now the story barely had a mention in the Amesbury Journal on the anniversary of her disappearance.

When Bo heard about the recent discovery of a young woman's body found in the River Avon she was surprised as murder was rare in Wiltshire, although robberies and knife-crimes had surged in the last two years. Further investigations revealed that the body

was missing its left hand so Bo dug deeper. She rang her old pal Chief Inspector Morten Fox and invited him for a drink in The Antrobus Arms.

Talking to Morten was a useful shortcut to solving her work puzzles and she knew that Morten enjoyed teasing her even if she didn't respond to his magnetism. And it was best to keep The Chief on side.

Bo roared off in her black open top VW Beetle. She past Wilton House and once again she tried to imagine what the site had been like when it was a nunnery in the ninth century founded by King Alfred. The grand house had transformed itself over the years and since the Dissolution of the Monasteries by King Henry VIII the house had been given over to the Herbert family. The drive was twisty along the Woodford Valley from Wilton to Amesbury, passing through hamlets dotted along the river's edge.

Bo spotted Morten sitting at a table by the fountain in the beer garden. He was wearing a red and white Hawaiian shirt with huge hibiscus flowers on it. It wasn't the usual country getup for Amesbury (corduroy trousers, checked shirts and green wellies) and with his robust size he made no attempt to blend in. She loved him for that and gave him a wave.

"How's my girl?" He pointed to the seat opposite.

"Don't know. Haven't seen your wife recently."

He shook his head. "Come on Bo, I had to miss Will's soccer practice to meet you...what are you drinking?"

"Not much. Meeting a client soon. What's that?" Bo pointed to his glass.

"Hobgoblin but it's not your thing. Have a Perry. You'll like it."

"Okay."

Morten beckoned to one of the waiters and ordered her drink, two packets of salt 'n vinegar crisps and honey-roasted peanuts.

"Been busy?" Bo said.

"We're all overworked," he said, peering into his half-empty beer glass. "Robberies in Wiltshire have almost doubled since last year."

"Well, what's new in Amesbury?"

"Don't give me that." Morten said. "I know why I'm here."

"It's your irresistible charm Morten. And your taste in clothes."

"Chose it myself."

“I can believe that.”

“Look who’s talking,” said Morten. “You look like a French peasant.” He pointed to her blue and white striped shirt and her denim skirt.

“So who’s the body?” Bo said.

“What, just like that?”

“Come on Morten, I haven’t got long.”

“You’re no fun anymore. I’d have more fun with Miss Louise Rash except that she’d take notes and check her contract to see if it included drinks with the boss.”

“It doesn’t.” Bo arched her fine black eyebrows.

“Well, we’re all right then. You’re self-employed so you can have drinks with whoever you like. And me? I do what I like anyway.” Morten winked.

“How are you getting on with Louise?” Bo asked.

“She’s punctual. She wants to get it right. She’s thorough. In fact she’s a thorough bore.”

“I’d leave her alone.”

“Oh, I do. Trust me. I leave her to Tony. She likes him.” Morten laughed. The beer garden had filled up. All the tables around the fountain were full of locals and American guests staying in the hotel before their visit to Stonehenge.

“It was Tony and Louise that found the body, wasn’t it?” Bo said.

“Yep,” Morten said. “And the lovely Lola Hunter.”

“Coincidence?”

“You haven’t met Lola Hunter then?”

“No. Why?”

“She looks up to the right nearly every time you ask her a question. She’s hiding something but I don’t think it’s got anything to do with finding the body. The Hunters had a baby boy and he drowned a few years ago. There is some suspicion about whether she was responsible.”

The waiter delivered the drinks and the snacks. The Beatles had visited some years ago and now the hotel decorated each bedroom with Beatles regalia. The managers were making the most of it with a Beatle Mania night, setting up a marquee in the garden. Trestle tables were stacked on one side and fold out chairs were lying on the grass.

“Are you getting enough work Bo?”

“Yeah. Not very interesting though. I’m mostly studying patents and trademarks these days.”

“Intellectual Property theft?”

“Yep,” she said, “but I still trail. Wives hire me to follow their cheating husbands and when I deliver the proof they get all uppity and make excuses for them. What makes it so frustrating is that nine out of ten wives decide to stay with the bastards. Respectability is alive and kicking.”

“Guess it works both ways,” he said.

“No, women still cheat but they scheme and make it harder to prove. And most of them leave when confronted.”

“Any surprises?”

“Not these days.” Bo chewed on a handful of nuts.

“Oh, I still get caught out when I make assumptions...big mistake.” Morten laughed at himself and clapped a hand over his round belly.

“Yeah, me too,” Bo said. “I used to assume when a wife wanted me to follow her straying hubby that I’d be looking for another woman. Now I know better.”

Morten scrunched up his nose. “No regrets then? I could make you a better offer.”

“No thanks Chief. I’m fine. Really.”

“Regular salary,” said Morten. “Doesn’t that sound attractive?”

“What? And have you breathing down my neck all the time?”

“It’s not your neck that I’m interested in.”

“Pity it isn’t mutual,” said Bo.

“All right.” He sighed as if he meant it. “Let me know if you find out anything useful about the body. We work best as a team, remember that.”

“I hadn’t forgotten,” said Bo. “So start talking.”

“Stella Jacobs, aged 21, lived in Countess Road with her husband, Corporal Adam Jacobs.”

“So young.”

“One other thing,” he said.

“What?”

“She had her left hand chopped off. It wasn’t hard to identify the victim so I don’t know why at this stage. I don’t think this is someone new to killing. That kind of behaviour isn’t consistent with a first time murder.”

Bo said nothing for at least a minute. Only the police, Bo, Tom and his immediate family, knew that Pip had a sixth finger removed from her left hand. This detail had been omitted from all press releases and Tom felt it was irrelevant anyway since Pip had the offending extra finger next to her thumb removed not long after birth. It had made her hand look a little knotted on one side but most people never noticed anything strange about it. Tom’s own operation on his right hand had been much more ‘elegant’ (according to the surgeon,) and it really was difficult to see anything unusual around the base of his thumb.

Thirty minutes well spent. She stood up and blew Morten a kiss as she left him sitting in the garden nursing his beer and a packet of honey-roasted peanuts. Strains of *Hey Jude* played through the speakers across the garden...“*the minute you let her under your skin...*”

Once the dragon returned to its cave Tom stopped reading and closed the book. He pulled up the duvet around Jake's shoulders, switched off the overhead bulb and turned on the night light before he kissed Jake goodnight. Lego monsters, Roman soldiers and gladiators were lined up three rows deep on the shelf and kept a watchful eye on the boy tossing about in the bed below.

"I can't fall asleep," Jake said, the second his head hit the pillow.

"Well snuggle down and count the elves at the bottom of the garden," Tom said. "You've got to watch them carefully. Elves are sneaky and like to dip their green satin toes onto the mushrooms for just a second before they dart off again towards the moon."

"No," said Jake, "they're too fast for me and I can't count them."

"Try harder; you've got to really concentrate."

"Can't. Tell me the story about Mum. Please Tom, please."

"Only if you promise to lie still and go to sleep as soon as I've finished. Deal?"

"Deal." Jake slipped his red woolly rabbit into his fist, his fingers toying with its button eyes. His black curly hair spread out on his pillow like a frayed jumper unravelling.

"It was raining buckets and spades, cats and dogs, and your mum Pip was driving and skidding about all over the place. A lorry had to swerve as she almost drove into him. It was a great big lorry carrying leather sofas and button-backed velvet chairs and the driver said he could see your mum was in a real hurry."

"I thought it was fridges and freezers."

"No, it was a furniture lorry."

"But Grandma said--"

"I know what she said. Stop interrupting. You've got to hear the rain...listen..."

Tom tapped his fingers on his arm as if it was a drum.

Jake gripped Tom's hand to make him continue.

"It was the middle of the afternoon and the driver of the lorry could see your mum was having difficulty driving in a straight line, she was swerving about all over the road, so when she pulled into the car park of the High Post Inn, he followed her and parked right beside her."

"Why?"

“I don’t know,” said Tom. “Perhaps he wanted to tell her off for making him swerve in the rain. He might have hit someone, she could have made him crash. Perhaps he thought she was drunk.”

“But she wasn’t was she?”

“No. Great big pains like a roller coaster were sweeping up and down her body because a very impatient little boy wanted to appear right then, in the middle of a car park in the pouring rain. That little baby didn’t want to wait. He just wanted to get on with living and having adventures of his own.”

“What happened next?” Jake wriggled in his bed, the duvet down around his waist.

“Well, the driver of the lorry came over and rapped on the window yelling at your mum. The next thing he saw was her feet up on the dashboard and your mum’s face making some strange shapes, like this.”

Tom leant in close to Jake and his mobile features made all kinds of extreme expressions and they both giggled in the semi-darkness. This was the best bit, the bit Jake liked to join in and beat Tom at his own game.

“No Tom, it was like this.” Jake sat up and made a series of ugly, spectacular, demented faces.

Hilary’s voice came sharp and angry from the kitchen. “I thought you were trying to settle him down, not excite him. Honestly Tom, you’re hopeless.”

This made Tom and Jake giggle even more but then they quietened down, afraid that Hilary might come upstairs and yell some more.

“And then you appeared, right in front of an angry man who turned white and ran into the hotel and told them to ring for an ambulance to help your mum. She counted your fingers and toes and there were twenty, all present and correct. *Knee naw, knee naw, knee naw.*” Tom did a sing-song take of the siren.

They were both quiet for a moment. Tom and Jake tried to taste the memory, to test it, but it wasn’t theirs to test and no matter how many times Tom told the story he knew he hadn’t really got it right. He couldn’t leave Jake like this, he would have to stay and wait until he fell asleep.

Toys were scattered around the room and Jake’s clothes lay in a rumpled heap on the floor. His jeans were half standing up by themselves, as if another boy might emerge and walk out of the room.

“Didn’t she like me?”

Jake had curled into a ball beneath the sheets.

“If I’d been born in hospital like other babies would she have stayed?”

“Pip adored you,” Tom said.

“Then why did she leave me?”

Why had he chosen this story in the first place? He felt tired just thinking about it as he stroked Jake’s dark curly hair and hugged him. Answering it honestly was always fraught with problems.

“Go to sleep now. She didn’t want to leave you, you know that. Something happened but we don’t know what. I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep. We can count the elves together... One, two, three... are you counting?”

“No. I want Mum. I miss her.”

“So do I,” Tom said. “She’s my twin.”

Silver cat streaked out behind the curtains and sped across the room. Tom and Jake jumped and then laughed.

“Do you think about her on your birthday?”

“What do you think?”

“I think your birthday must be a happy-sad day.”

“Yes, love, it is.”

Jake sat bolt upright and his arm shot out to the shelf above to grab one of his fantastic Lego monsters. Red wings and long black legs with about seven joints, a face with brilliant yellow orbs for eyes swooped down in ever decreasing circles until the creature landed on Jake’s pillow.

“Can’t we have another look for her? Please,” Jake said.

“Shh. We made a deal, remember?”

Tom tried to get comfortable but the bed was too narrow for his tall body. He didn’t move until he heard Jake’s breathing come in regular, steady beats then he unfolded his fingers from Jake’s grasp and tip-toed out of his bedroom, down the stairs and into the kitchen. He wanted to slap his sister. If only he could.

“He’s still fretting about Pip.”

“What do you expect?” Hilary said. “Mothers don’t usually disappear in broad daylight. You shouldn’t mention her. Stop telling him that ridiculous story...I can’t take it anymore.”

Hilary turned around and faced Tom. She pulled her black hair into a pony tail and put her hands on her hips. The curves of her mouth were drawn down.

“Please, don’t start.”

“Well, he’s not your kid and I’m sick of you spending our money and all your energy on him. He’s gotta go and soon. You never ask me about me anymore.”

“And how are you, Hills?”

“Aw, give over.”

“So where do you think I’m going to send him? A Foster home? An Orphanage? For God’s sake, after all he’s been through.”

“You said six months and it’s been over five years. I thought you wanted our baby. You think it’s fair to put me on hold just because we can’t afford to look after two kids? You think Chief Inspector Morten Fox will ring up one day and announce he’s found her alive and well? And then what, Tom? Pip will swish up here in her high heels and grab darling Jake and off they’ll trot into the sunset.”

“Shut up. That’s my sister you’re talking about.”

“When are you going to face facts, Tom? When are going to wake up and act like a man?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do but you know that really, don’t you? This is just another of your windups. If I didn’t know you better I’d...I’d...”

Tom unlocked the back door and stepped into the garden. It was cold outside and he heard the distant rumble of the train as it wove its way towards him along the embankment up behind the garden shed. The sky was dishwater grey. It was only a week ago that Hilary reminded him that her clock was ticking.

Staring upwards he saw a few clouds scud past the moon and stars. Somewhere, somehow, the same stars shone down on his sister. He didn’t want to choose between his wife and nephew but at that moment he felt ready to make that choice and Jake won. Not because he thought it was the right thing to do but because he loved him and wanted to protect him, this child he has known and played with since birth.

The back door opened and Hilary stepped towards him. He felt her fingers caress his neck.

“My big mouth.”

“Fit a train in there.”

“Come on back inside,” Hilary said.

“I like it out here. Helps me to think.”

And then he pulled her towards him in an embrace.

“What?”

“I don’t blame you, Hills. I’m fed up too. Just look at this place...” He waved his arms around at the piles of rubbish, the rusting baby gate leaning against the fence, and the paint pots with brushes sticking up. The tracks were still humming as the train receded.

“Let’s look for her ourselves,” said Tom.

“Well that should be easy after five years of total silence.”

“Come on Hills, I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“No really, I’m not going to work tomorrow. We’ll set off in the morning. I’ll ring the school and tell them Jake’s got the measles. You can do the same.”

A thin slice of ghostly cat, silver whisp, shot out across the garden and then disappeared down the train tracks.

“What makes you think you can find Luke when that chink failed?”

“Don’t call her that.” he said. “I found a photo of Pip and Luke together. Bo never saw that, she never knew what he looked like. I know it’s not much but it’s worth a try.”

He pushed her away but kept hold of her hand and then he brought her in close towards him so that she was forced to swing under his arm.

“Look at you,” he said. “You’re dancing.”

“I’m not in the mood.” She dropped his hand and looked off down the train tracks. Two parallel iron lines stretched into the distance with no crossover in sight.

“Stop being Miss Sensible,” he said. “What have we got to lose?”

“Our jobs,” Hilary said. “Oh, and if we don’t pay the rent, then our home.”

“Say yes, Hills. Come with us, please.”

Perhaps it was the dying sound of the 9.10 to Waterloo but as Hilary listened to its low hum, she nodded. The stars dissolved into a blanket of grey. She couldn't leave him, not now.

They went back inside and Hilary made coffee for both of them. Sitting at the kitchen table Tom heard his name called in a clear voice somewhere in the back of his head. The overhead light bulb cast flat grey shadows about the furniture and from this angle even Hilary's face looked like a series of blocks of colour, juxtaposed with unnerving rigidity.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Hills?"

"Don't be daft. Why? Do you?"

"I don't think so," he said. "At least I've never seen one. But sometimes I think I hear a woman calling my name. I can be walking down a street, or setting up the cameras, or in the middle of a meeting and suddenly I hear this girl's voice... it's a tinkling, clear voice like a bell ringing...does that make any sense?"

"Not really... it's Pip's voice, isn't it? Look, you probably see something and it just reminds you of her even if you're not really conscious of the memory."

"Maybe," he said. "But I've heard this voice when I've been really focused on what I'm doing. It sort of sneaks up on me when I'm least expecting it and then pops out."

"Well, that sounds like Pip."

"I didn't mean..."

"Perhaps I better start whispering in your ear." Hilary winked at him and he smiled, letting it drop.

"I'm going to practice," he said.

"Good idea, bring you down to earth and anyway, I've got to finish marking these," she said, tapping the pile of exercise books on the table.

Tom walked into the small sitting room, shut the door and closed the heavy curtains. Two tall ivory candles stood on a chest at one end of the room, tongues of flame licked at the edges of his brain. Rifling through his sheets of music he wanted a demanding piece, one that would reduce his mind to a still point. His fingers traced the notes, paused to emphasise a phrase, and then he settled on a piece by Ravel. Even the touch of the cool, smooth wood around the base of the violin soothed his warm cheeks. He played for over an hour, until the piece began to melt into his fingers and he was no longer sure which bit of

his body was flesh or instrument. Shadows played around the candles but Tom didn't look towards what Hilary called 'the altar' – he no longer cared if he played to remember or forget.

On Saturday morning Lola packed her car with a picnic rug, two self-inflating camping mats for Greta and Ellie, sleeping bags, swimsuits and a box of food. They headed southwest via Ringwood and into Dorset and the Purbeck Hills. Lola had been to Kate and Marc's limestone cottage in Worth Matravers once before when they had first bought it two years ago. Since then they had knocked down walls to make the living areas open plan and let more light into the house. Even though they called it the beach house, it was a few miles from the rocky beaches of Winspit and Chapman's Pool but Lola could sit in the rambling garden surrounded by blue hydrangeas and see sparkling water glint through the bushes.

They stopped in Salisbury to pick up a bag of fresh doughnuts. The girls stuck their tongues into the hole in the middle while the sugar granules sprinkled over their legs and shorts. For the first time in days Lola sang along to the songs on the radio and Greta upstaged her with a louder voice.

Marc had announced over dinner the previous night that he had invited Charlie to join them since it was Charlie's birthday and he was bringing Anna. Marc booked a room for them in the B & B just down the road. Neither Kate nor Lola had any idea the relationship had progressed beyond coffee. But then Lola never asked her dad about his girlfriends.

As they drove towards Worth Matravers it was easy to see its farming heritage in the shape of medieval terraces cut out of the steep, chalk Purbeck Hills so that the land could be cultivated more easily. Today fishing, quarrying and tourists kept the village afloat.

Marc and Kate arrived first and had thrown open all the doors and windows. The cottage was opposite the one local pub, The Square and Compass, and when the wind blew from the south the cottage reeked of beer.

After they unpacked Marc suggested they eat the local speciality, crab sandwiches, in the pub for lunch. Charlie arrived in his beat up Ford just as they ordered the food. He parked the car and then kissed Anna. He had one hand under her chin, lifting it up so that he could reach her mouth more easily. Anna stepped out of the car and came over to Charlie and draped herself around him. She was wearing a simple cream linen dress which showed off her shapely legs. And high heeled black strappy shoes so she wobbled as she

walked over the uneven cobbled flag stones. Anna had been head girl at the same school Kate went to and they had overlapped for one year.

“Hello Dad, happy birthday.” Lola kissed him.

“How are you, love?” Charlie hugged her. “Hear you’ve been in the wars. Sorry to hear about Biff. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“I’m all right.”

“You remember Anna?”

“Sure. Hi.”

“Hello everyone.” Anna tightened her arm around Charlie’s middle and leant into him. Her dark eyes scanned over Lola quickly and settled on her amber necklace.

When Charlie and Anna went up to the bar to order their lunch Lola turned and caught Kate’s eye. Kate was gagging. Greta watched Kate and joined in. Lola lifted her index finger to her lips and made a shh noise but it was too late, Anna turned back and saw the women were mocking her. She thrust her shoulders back and almost climbed inside Charlie’s shirt. Charlie came back with the drinks beaming, oblivious as usual. He patted Anna on the thigh and smiled at her. She gave a tight smile back, like Madonna after her first facelift.

“What are we going to do after lunch?” Greta asked.

“Let’s go and look for fossils at Chapman’s Pool,” said Marc.

“I found an ammonite last time Ellie.”

“Yup, we’ve still got it. It’s sitting on the kitchen window so you can show Ellie after lunch,” said Marc.

“What’s an ammonite?” Ellie leaned forward across the table.

“It’s amazing,” said Greta. “I’ll show you.”

“Did you bring any other shoes?” Kate said, looking at Anna’s heels.

“No, but that’s okay. Fossils aren’t really my thing. I’ll be fine reading my book while you go off fossiling or whatever.”

“I’ll stay with you, darling,” said Charlie. “Long drive to get here, a real snarl up around Ringwood. Could do with a nap.” He raked his grey hair and smiled at Anna. He was wearing a dark blue polo shirt and Lola could see his wiry chest hair at the top between the buttons.

“Can we swim?” Greta said.

“Why not?” Lola said. “Cold water never stopped us before.”

Anna did an exaggerated shiver and Charlie laughed as he bit into his crab sandwich. A bit of mayonnaise dribbled down his chin and Anna reached over and wiped it off with her finger.

“The curtains are ready so I won’t swim,” said Kate. “Jill finished them yesterday so I’ll collect them and put them up. Turquoise and white check throughout, should look very fresh.”

“Well that just leaves Lola and the girls to come with me,” Marc said.

“Great, as long as everyone’s happy,” Charlie said.

Anna twisted the ring on her hand. Lola knew that she’d been divorced just over a year ago and that her ex was now living in Gloucestershire with a horse breeder. The ring looked familiar, three square-shaped emeralds separated by round diamonds. It was one of her mother’s. The shock was sudden and violent. She wanted to throw her drink over her dad but she didn’t. Lola stood up and put her hands on the edge of the table as the blood drained from her face.

“Are you all right?” Marc said.

“I just need some air.”

“Kate?” Marc said, nudging Kate in the ribs.

“What?”

“Why don’t you go with Lola,” he said. “Take her back to the house.”

“Come on Mouse,” said Kate. She hadn’t called her that for about twenty years.

“Let’s get you outside.”

Lola lay on the sofa back at the house while Kate made her some coffee. There was no fancy coffee machine here, just instant granules and chipped mugs. Even the sofa looked worn.

“Did you see mum’s ring?” Lola asked.

“Yes. Does that mean they’re engaged?” Kate handed her the coffee.

“Thanks for telling us, dad.”

“I’m not saying congratulations,” said Kate.

“Well, I guess that’s why he didn’t tell us. Knew we wouldn’t be hopping up and down.”

“Typical dad,” Kate stared at the blank wall. “It’s just a pretty ring to Anna but to us it’s a piece of mum. Can’t he see that, or doesn’t he care?”

“Don’t suppose he meant any harm.”

“You would say that,” said Kate. “You two.”

“Come on, Kate, he’s not the villain you always make out.”

“Might be different if Anna had known mum...I thought dad had more taste,” said Kate and then smiled. “I guess not.”

“He must be chuffed that he’s pulled a bird twenty years younger than himself.”

“She can’t be there for his money so what do you reckon? Do you think its lurrrrve?” Kate said.

“How should I know? The resident expert...”

“She’s only four years older than me,” said Kate.

“You could have a double wedding.”

“Ha, bloody ha.”

They both giggled and when the rest of the group came back from the pub the two sisters both had rosy cheeks. They were sitting on the sofa with their knees touching, looking relaxed and comfortable. Marc smiled when he saw them and put his arm around Kate.

“Feeling better Lola?” Marc asked.

“Yes, I’m fine now.”

“We’ve got something to tell you,” said Charlie and he picked up Anna’s hand and squeezed it.

“We know,” Kate said. “We noticed.” Charlie ignored her and moved into the centre of the living room.

“Anna and I are going on holiday together. We’ve got round the world tickets with stops in Rome, Shanghai, San Francisco and Auckland. We’ll be gone about six weeks.”

Lola could hear the kitchen clock tick. Outside she could hear someone laughing. She knew that her dad couldn’t afford this kind of thing; he never went further than Cornwall.

“That’s fantastic,” said Marc. “You must have backed the right horse!”

“I did,” said Anna. “I mean, I won the holiday in a raffle. I spent ten quid on a ticket for the Heart Foundation and won the top prize. First thing I’ve ever won in my life.”

Anna smiled. "And I can't think of a better man to come with me than Charlie." She dug him in the ribs so that he squealed.

"So you're not getting married then?" Lola said.

"No need," Anna said. "We live practically next door which means that whenever we get bored of each other, or I'm fed up with Charlie snoring, or he wants to watch yet another game of cricket then he can do so in his own home without me nagging him. Keeps the romance alive, doesn't it Charlie? It's a great arrangement."

"It sounds very...modern," Kate said.

"Marriage is for you young things," Charlie said. "It's not as if we want babies, do we, darling?"

Anna laughed and the way she looked into Charlie's face was beginning to make Lola feel sick again.

"But we still want to come to your wedding Kate," said Anna. "We've booked the tickets so that we arrive back a week before your big day. We'll be over jetlag by then."

"Couldn't miss giving you away," Charlie said. "Not after the rollercoaster we've had together, eh?"

"Is that mum's ring you're wearing?" Lola was fearless now. Her face flushed as she spoke.

"Yes," said Charlie. "I'd rather see it on Anna's hand than sitting in a box in the bottom of my wardrobe."

"What about me?" Kate stood up from the sofa and faced her dad.

"Marc has bought you a beautiful ring. And I'm sure it won't be the last one he buys you either." Charlie turned away and folded his arms. The clock ticked.

"Come on, let's go swimming," Greta said. "I'm bored."

"Yes, let's go." Marc was holding a towel and already out the door. Lola, Greta and Ellie grabbed their suits and followed him. They drove past the village green complete with ducks and then south towards the car park between the village and Chapman's Pool.

After they had parked the car they picked their way down the steep path cut into the cliff to reach the remote cove. It was tricky and rocks often slithered down the cliff but today it was calm, warm and quiet. At the bottom of the path the four of them hunted for fossils and Ellie shrieked when she found her first recognisable reptile embedded in the rock.

“Last one in is a monkey,” Marc said. He stripped off his t-shirt and ran into the waves. The water was so arctic that he hollered but kept on running. He was stocky with wide shoulders, much shorter than Hunter, and he kept his dark hair closely cropped.

Lola followed him and splashed water on his back. He turned around and splashed her too, soaking her red bikini. She yelled and then they both ducked under the green water. She came up again fast, gasping with the shock of the cold water. Then she felt him pull her beneath the waves. His broad hands were tight around her waist. She struggled up for breath and for a second their faces touched and then they swam apart as if stung. Both of them were suddenly quiet.

Ellie and Greta swam up to her. They wanted to play the same game and tried to make her duck under the waves but Lola was having none of it. She swam off by herself and left the three of them to muck about. With the sun in her eyes and the biting cold of the water, her heart lifted.

Lola climbed out of the sea first and lay down on her towel. She shut her eyes as she stared up at the sky. She remembered her dad saying ‘the smart one,’ as he pointed to Kate, and ‘the pretty one,’ as he pointed to Lola whenever he introduced the sisters to new people. Kate had hated it and Lola was wise enough never to mention Charlie’s faux pas as adults. Hadn’t done her any good, though, had it? She was the divorced one. And now Kate was engaged to Marc. Lola rolled over onto her stomach and caught Marc staring at her. He didn’t look away and she felt his eyes travel the length of her body.

“What?” Lola said.

“I was just wondering if you wanted me to help you bury Biff when we get back.”

“Funny that, you’re the third man to offer.”

“So you don’t need me, do you?”

“I didn’t mean that. Sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“It’s just that...you’re about to become my brother-in-law.”

“So that means I shouldn’t help you. Is that it?”

“I don’t want to give you the wrong signals.”

“Oh, I see.” He sat up and hugged his knees. “Listen Lola, I like you and I want us to be friends but I love Kate. I always have and I hope I always will. That’s why we’re getting married.”

Lola smiled then looked away. She felt an ass. Greta and Ellie grabbed their towels and then wandered down the beach looking for shells.

The more Lola thought about it, the more she felt that Marc was lying, even if not intentionally. Men were never just friends, it seemed to Lola, sooner or later they always wanted more from her. Perhaps they could be friends with Kate, with her sensible thoughts and her wide hips and her no-nonsense, don't-mess-around-with-me attitude. But in her experience she could tell from the way a man looked at her whether it was friendship he was after or not. And it usually wasn't. That was the problem with being the 'pretty one'.

"Remind me how old you were when your mother died?" Marc asked out of nowhere. "I wouldn't ask it's just that, well, we've got this in common and Kate never talks about it." Marc inched closer towards her.

"I was ten. So Kate was fourteen. What about you?" Lola drew circles in the sand with her finger. Only the ends didn't quite meet.

"I don't remember my mother. I was four months old when I was fostered out to the Crudwells. Then the Smiths, then Mrs Albright and I joined the Greenwoods when I was twelve."

"Christ!"

"There were plenty of good bits, you know," said Marc.

"So I've heard." Lola smiled.

"Was Kate a good mother to you?"

"She was great at first. Then she got fed up with the job."

Marc reached out and laid his warm hand over her foot. Lola wanted to pull her foot away but she couldn't move. The sun shone directly into her eyes.

"There's someone I want you to meet," said Marc. He lifted his hand and sat up. He made it seem so natural, so uncomplicated.

"Who?"

"I think of her as my sister. We met while living with the Greenwoods. She likes to think of herself as Chinese but her mum was English. She's called Bo Zhang; she's a private investigator now."

"A private investigator?" Lola's eyes narrowed.

"I've asked her to keep an eye on you and Greta once you move back into your house on Sunday. I think it's best..."

“You think I could be in danger?” Lola hugged her knees up close to her chest.

“Best not take any chances, huh?”

“It’s okay. We’ll be fine, Marc, really. I don’t mean to be ungrateful but I can’t stand the thought of some woman I’ve never met following me about like a bad smell.”

Marc laughed. “Poor Kate, you must have been a nightmare to look after.”

“Yeah, I probably was. Okay, still am.”

“But I don’t give up easily.” Marc said. “Bo will be waiting for you in the beer garden at the Antrobus Arms at 8pm tomorrow night. Don’t give her a hard time, Lola. Please. Just meet her for Greta’s sake, okay?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary but all right.” She was surprised he had taken the initiative, hadn’t discussed it with her first. *As if she belonged to him.*

“Good. And don’t be fooled by her looks, remember she’s a whizz with computers and surveillance equipment.”

“Why? What does she look like?”

“A Chinese waif with black and white hair. Bit like a zebra.”

“Fancy her, do you?”

“Used to but she’s got her own agenda.”

Ellie ran up to Lola and held out her hands.

“Look what we’ve found,” she said. “It’s a crab, look!”

“Poor thing, let’s put it back in that rock pool,” said Lola.

The four of them dried off and retraced their steps back up the steep path and arrived home just as Kate had finished hanging up the new turquoise and white checked curtains. She was right, the whole house looked brighter.

Kate had chopped vegetables, tossed them into an oven dish and drizzled them with olive oil. Charlie was sitting next to Anna looking over photos showing the limestone cottage in its original condition and its gradual transformation to the beach house it was today. Greta and Ellie were already sitting on the floor, counting out orange 100 pound notes as they began their game of Monopoly.

After dinner Lola brought out the cake she had made her dad for his birthday. She had used icing pens to create a picture of a boat leaning over with full sails. They didn’t have any candles but everyone except Kate still went ahead and sang Happy Birthday. Kate was still nursing a simmering anger. Seeing their mother’s ring on Anna’s hand must

have added a splash of petrol to the flames. Kate didn't have a piece of the cake; she turned her back on the group and looked out at the sea. Marc hissed at Kate to come over and join in. He repeated it with a grim stare and an expression that said 'don't pass Go, don't collect 200 pounds, go straight to jail'.

The flower-rich hay meadows of Dorset gave way to the rolling hills and chalk grassland in Wiltshire on the drive home from Worth Matravers to Amesbury. Greta and Ellie sang songs from *Mamma Mia* most of the way home (Lola considered tossing the CD out of the window but resisted the temptation.) Lola returned Ellie to her parents and then drove to The Antrobus Arms to meet Bo Zhang. Huge vases of lilies decorated the hotel's living rooms left over from the function on Saturday night.

Even though Lola had never met Bo before she spotted her instantly. Bo's black hair was short and spiky with bleached blonde highlights so that she looked like a rare breed of a cross-pollinated orchid. She was wearing a tartan skirt and red cowboy boots with silver caps even though it was mid-summer. Sitting to one side of the fountain, alone at the wooden table reading a book and listening to her iPod, she looked sealed off and out of place in an English country garden.

Greta ran off ahead of her mother, identified Bo from Marc's description of her 'zebra hair' and made a direct line for her, sitting down at the table opposite. Bo smiled when she read Greta's black t-shirt *forget princess, I want to be a vampire* stitched in red sequins across her front.

"You must be Greta."

"Yep. And you must be Marc's friend, Bo. He told me to watch out when I'm around you 'cos you're sharp."

Bo smiled but raised her eyebrows.

When Lola reached the table she hesitated and then took Bo's outstretched hand. Bo had stood up and was taller than Lola had expected. Bo looked her directly in the eye, exuding a quiet confidence as if she was used to taking charge of situations. She had luminous skin and high arched eyebrows suggesting a constant state of surprise even though Lola knew that Bo must have seen enough to know the world was a strange place.

How could such a skinny woman be relied upon to fend off a crazy man wielding an axe? It was ridiculous and Lola's irritation with Marc began to niggle all over again. Strings of small blue fairy lights wound through the trees blinked on.

"I expect you're wondering how I can protect you," said Bo.

"Well yes, not to be rude but you're not what I was expecting a private investigator to look like."

Bo stared back at her for a few seconds. Her dark eyes were candid and inquisitive. “Let me guess... a six foot two inch macho hunk wearing a trench coat with deep pockets and a ciggie hanging out of my mouth. In my left pocket there’d be a gun and in my right a bottle of whiskey. Huh?”

“Oh God, was it written on my face?” Lola said. “I guess I’ve just read too many thrillers.”

“I get it all the time. These days my best defense is this,” Bo tapped her laptop, “and oodles of patience. The main danger I face isn’t men with guns. It’s stress but that goes with the territory.”

“Guess so.”

“But I carry pepper spray and I’ve got a black belt in karate although I’ve only had to use it twice. And I’m a big believer in calling the cops if need be. We’ll just take things one step at a time, okay?”

“You think he might ...”

“I don’t know. Let’s not worry about that right now. Would you like an orange juice Greta?”

“Yes, please.”

“And you, Mrs Hunter, what would you like?”

“Call me Lola. The same thanks.”

Bo went inside to the bar and came back with the drinks. She opened her satchel and pulled out a piece of paper with a picture of a woman skydiving and a packet of crayons and gave it to Greta.

“Here, I brought you this. Could you colour it in while I take your mum around the garden and test her on names of country flowers? We’ll be just over there and keep you in sight, okay? We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Mum’s no good on flowers but she’s great on birds, aren’t you Mum?”

“Not bad.”

“Well she better meet Fang, my budgie; he’s a non-stop chatterbox. All right Lola, shall we go?”

When they were out of earshot Bo asked her to go over the incident again. She listened without interrupting and nodded several times. She explained that Marc had hired

her to keep an eye on her, not solve the mystery of who Mr Axe was, or why he had murdered her dog and a woman.

“Have you looked at the Facebook page for Biff that Marc set up yesterday?”

“Only briefly, when he’d just put it up,” said Lola.

“Tributes have flown in. Seems your dog had a lot of admirers in the neighbourhood. All very touching, except one.”

“Oh, what did it say?”

“Bitch.”

“Except he wasn’t. You think...?”

“It was him? Probably.”

“Can you trace it?” Lola cast a backward glance at Greta who was busy colouring her picture.

“It came from a fake IP address, easy to do but not so easy to trace. Anyway, it’s been removed now as someone reported it as abuse.”

The two women walked back to Greta and admired her picture. The woman skydiving now had a red and blue suit so that she looked a bit like Superwoman. Greta spread out her arms and made a few zooming noises. They sat down and finished their drinks.

A hawk soared above the garden and landed on a branch above them. Had it spotted a vole or a mouse in the garden? Bo followed Lola’s eyes and saw it too, scanning the people below as if they were bait, contained in the high walls that surrounded the garden. The bird swivelled its head as if deciding something then flew off, spreading its flecked wings as it mewed above them.

They chatted for a few more minutes then agreed they might as well walk back to Lola’s house in Flower Lane, just around the corner. Bo made a quick check of the house and then settled down to read while Lola hustled Greta into bed. Bo made it plain she wasn’t there to chat and pulled out her book (*The Philosophy of Mind, a short introduction*) as she settled onto the sofa with her back to Lola. Her overnight bag was open and Lola could see a towel and a hairbrush at the top.

Lola felt reassured by Bo’s presence, especially knowing Bo had already been in the garden and set up night vision cameras trained on her house with a feed to her laptop.

Climbing the stairs to her bedroom Lola decided she was quite happy to be alone too. She closed the faded yellow curtains in her bedroom and turned on the lamp in the corner. It cast a muted glow through its blue glass shade. As she undressed she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her reflection revealed the swell of her breasts, the slight curve of her belly, and the honey-red streaks in her hair falling around her shoulders.

She turned away, back towards the large bed, now empty. What had Hunter seen in her? But it wasn't just her body he wanted; she knew that. He needed to see himself through her eyes. As if it gave him another layer of solidity, of reliability, but they both knew he had failed her.

What sort of wife had she been? She picked up her hair brush and pulled out a few strands of her hair, then brushed it teasing out the knots near the end. She turned towards the pillow, now flat and neat, pressed hard against the headboard. She took off her earrings and undid the clasp on her necklace and shivered even though it was a warm night. She climbed into bed and began to read.

Her mobile rang. She reached over for it on the bedside table and flipped it open.

"It's me."

"Oh... what's up?"

"Don't be cross."

"Well you shouldn't have stormed out of the pub like that."

"You drove me to it," said Hunter.

"No I didn't, you just can't stand the heat." Lamplight flickered across the walls. Shadows shivered and grew large beside the curtains.

"Well I can't stand it when you get on your high horse and tell me what to do."

"Silly me," Lola said, "there I was thinking you might want to apologise. Why did you ring?"

"I rang to check you're okay." Lola heard him let out breath. "I've been thinking about you."

"We're back at home and Marc hired a private investigator to babysit us. Just in case." Lola toyed with the edge of the sheet.

"Oh, what's he like?"

"She's fine...not much small talk though." Lola stressed the pronoun.

"Good. That's good. What's her name?"

“Bo Zhang.”

“Her? I’ve interviewed her,” said Hunter. “She wrote a book last year about the myths that surround infidelity.”

“I hope you paid attention.” She heard Hunter suck in his cheek.

“Lola...”

“What?”

“Where are you now?”

“In bed,” she said. “I was reading.”

“All alone in our bed.” The yellow curtains lifted and stirred in the breeze.

“Where are you?”

“In the study,” he said. “Sounds like you need a back rub.”

“Fat chance.”

“All right. Turn over...oh boy, you’re tense...you’ve got a real tight spot right there. This could take some time...how’s that?”

Lola closed her eyes. It had been such a long time. “Up a bit to the left.”

“Yup, got it...any better?”

“Hmm.”

“Lower?”

“Er, where’s Beth?”

“She’s watching House downstairs.”

“Well this isn’t just what the doctor ordered so you better stop,” Lola opened her eyes and sat up. Her fingers were still clenching the sheet. “Although knowing House it probably is.”

“I miss you.”

Lola shook her head. This was a mistake. “Don’t, just don’t.”

“Good night kiddo.”

“Good night,” and she clicked off fast.

Lola looked at the phone for a full minute wondering whether he was going to text and was almost disappointed when he didn’t. She tried to continue reading but gave up and switched off the light.

As she lay in the darkness her thoughts kept returning to Hunter. She had listened to him when he was anxious about the escalating costs of starting up a magazine, or the

problems of finding enough talent in the small city of Salisbury. She had tried to please him, rarely pushed him away when he touched her, even in the middle of the night when he woke her. He used to tell her she belonged to him and she always wanted to believe it, connecting with him somewhere behind the eyes, just as strongly as between the thighs.

Bo was downstairs reading. Lola had made up a bed for her on the sofa, even given her the patchwork quilt. Part of her wanted to talk to Bo, to get through her frosty exterior but the stronger part was glad she was alone now, able to focus her thoughts on Hunter.

Lola remembered how she and Hunter had talked for hours, explored ideas and each other hour after hour. He enjoyed her art and pushed her into experimenting with acrylics, oils and even sculpture. They wrote songs together – his lyrics and her on the guitar. She shouted, lost her temper, banged her fist if he deliberately misunderstood and then laughed. He could be cruel; she had heard it first and seen it later. The way he talked about his mother or his sister, and he often called them callous names. But then he could be so soft, so gentle, that she asked herself if she really understood him and decided it was impossible to answer because he didn't understand himself.

He stood by and helped her breathe all through Greta's birth. And he encouraged her to put her feet up against his chest and push hard against him. When Greta slid out he cut the cord, clipped it and walked around their bedroom cradling his daughter in his arms before the midwife had a chance to clean up the baby. He told her afterwards he was unaware of Lola for several minutes while he stared into Greta's fierce face, her eyes scrunched up against the light. He wanted Greta in the bed with them, stroked Lola's back when she breastfed.

With Stevie it had been different. Lola's waters had broken in a restaurant three weeks before the due date. Lola wanted to finish her curry but then Hunter insisted on driving her to hospital, just in case. Then the doctors wouldn't let her go home. Before she knew it she was hooked up to tubes, had an epidural and an induced labour. Hunter was angry with the doctor, swore at the nurses and impatient with Lola as her body shut down and refused to cooperate. Stevie was born in a halo of electric blue theatre lights and a team of paediatricians took him away to empty his lungs and attach him to oxygen in an incubator.

Little Stevie, so different from his father, with his white blonde hair so pure as if it was spun from light that Hunter sometimes called him an angel.

She grabbed a pillow and hugged it against her chest, buried her face into its softness. *If only she hadn't gone for a run that evening and left the three of them alone.* She smelt the now familiar waft of milk and then her tears fell.

Just after midnight Lola woke when she heard a single knock on her door. It opened before she had time to reply. Bo was fully dressed and hovered by her bed. She lifted her hand to her lips, trying to reassure but also restrain Lola from making any sound. She pointed to the window and Lola's heart flipped when she saw the curtains rustle. The wind had grown and made a slight moaning noise.

"What is it?" Lola whispered. "Is he outside?" Her fear grew. Her mouth felt dry and her heart pounded.

"There's a man standing beside my car. He's peered in through the windows of the house. I think he knows someone else is in here and he's wondering what to do. Get up quietly. Take a good look. That's it, easy now."

Lola stood behind the curtains and peered through a crack into the inky darkness. It took her a few seconds for her eyes to adjust and make out the plants, the trees and then in the charcoal shadows she saw a man with his hands against Bo's car. Deep in her stomach she felt a flash of recognition, something about the way the man leant forward with his broad shoulders and although she couldn't make out his features she knew it was the same man she had seen bending over Biff beside the river.

"That's him." She wanted to scream. Instead she dropped to the ground and buried her face in the curtains.

"Quiet now, move away from the window," Bo whispered.

"Shall I bring Greta in here?"

"Leave her sleeping for the moment. Morten Fox and his Sarge are on their way."

Bo went to the window and saw that the man was spraying something onto her car. Then he ran off through the trees and out into the lane. In the distance a car could be heard screeching around a corner too fast and then braking hard as it slid across the road. Two minutes later Fox and Baldwin pounded on the front door. In the narrow beam of yellow torch lights all of them could see the uneven red letters sprayed over Bo's car: BITCH.

Deep in the night, between shadows and inky layers of darkness, Tom woke. The only sound was Hilary snoring. He slipped out of bed and opened the curtain to see a faint light in the sky. Hilary's white linen shirt hanging on the back of her chair fluttered and in the dim light it looked like Pip sitting there watching him. He slipped back into bed. It was just a whisper, a slight rustling of his breath, but he told his sister he heard her, he wanted her to know that he was coming.

It was still cold at dawn when Tom rose and packed a small bag for himself and Jake. He woke Hilary and Jake and told them to hurry as he wanted to miss the early morning rush. He told Hilary that they must visit his mother to explain they would be away for a while.

Outside thin ribbons of fog unravelled above the sheep in the fields. It would be hot once the sun burnt it off.

"Can we stop for lemon sherbet?" Jake asked.

"After," said Hilary.

"After what?"

"After you behave yourself in the car."

"But I'm always good."

"And I'm always fair," said Hilary. She twisted around and stared at Jake, as if noticing him for the first time. "In that case when we stop for petrol we'll buy you lemon sherbet with liquorice. But only if Tom and I agree that you really are this good boy you say you are."

"Deal," said Jake.

"Deal."

They drove into Amesbury along the Woodford Valley. Jake pressed his nose to the window pane when he spotted the cows and made low mooing noises then he plugged in his earphones and drifted into silence. They went past Stonehenge, with its inner circle of spotted dolerite bluestones ringed together and the outer circle of sarsens.

Tom remembered a time before the fences when he and Pip played hide and seek there, running between the stones and trying to climb onto the top lintel. How many times had he rolled on his stomach into the ditches that surrounded the stones, dug out with tools made from the antlers of red deer nearly four thousand years ago? They rarely played

cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, no; they were archers and farmers wearing wrist guards to protect their arms from the sting of the bowstring. And at summer solstice they were chief and high priestess in a gruesome ritual. Rabbit blood stained their fingers, sticky and sweet. Tom rolled his tongue, recalling the metallic tang of blood he sucked off the edge of a sharp knife.

A few miles further on, down hedgerows and past round barrows, Tom turned off down a lane with pink-washed terraced houses. He pulled up at the last one, turned off the engine and gathered himself before he climbed out of the car to greet his mother. He told Jake and Hilary they wouldn't stay long, five minutes tops.

Matilda was sitting on the back steps, hand feeding some grain to one of her chickens. She was wearing an old apron that was covered in chicken shit and she was clucking to the chicken she was feeding with conspiratorial little clicking noises. Her unbrushed grey hair was wild but still thick and it stuck out like a mad halo all around her small lined face.

"If you get down on your hands and knees and look around under the hedge, you'll find her eggs," she said to Jake. "Have a good dig around. Brown speckled ones. Three yesterday."

Tom stretched out his hand to help her to her feet but she shook it instead.

"And how's my boy?"

"Hello Mum."

The chicken looked up and scratched at the dirt, legs kicked back and forth, sending a fine spray of warm earth over Matilda's lap. Beside her were stems of blue and pink sweet peas she had picked from Maria's garden as they trailed from the fence into her own space.

"You're staying for breakfast?"

Tom and Hilary glanced at each other and nodded.

"Yes," said Tom, "let's have the eggs, if Jake can find them."

Matilda scabbled around on her hands and knees beside Jake while she hunted for the eggs under the hedge. She giggled when she found a new one and Hilary fetched a bowl for the eggs.

"Last night I dreamt I had a baby with soft blue hair," Matilda said. "I picked up the baby and turned it over to see if it had any hair on its back."

“Did it have hair on its back?” Jake asked.

“No. It was smooth and creamy just the way babies should be.”

“Was I smooth and creamy?”

“No, you were a squealing mess, honey, but you know that. You turned out all right once they cleaned you up though.”

In the kitchen Hilary scraped off the mould from the bread and toasted it. She rolled her eyes at Tom when she saw the sink full of dirty dishes but she ran the tap for hot water and cleared up the mess.

Jake cracked the eggs and whisked them together. He ran out into the garden to find some parsley and gave it to Matilda to chop finely.

“No school today?”

“Nope,” said Jake, “we’re going on holiday.”

“Holiday? Oh, lucky you. Where are you going?”

“Scotland,” said Jake.

Matilda clapped her hands together. “Can I come, honey? I could do with a holiday.”

“It’s not that sort of holiday, really,” said Hilary.

“Not that sort of holiday,” said Matilda.

“Well, we won’t be staying in hotels. We’ll be camping, trying to keep it cheap,” Hilary said.

“Tents! Oh, I love tents!” Matilda picked up Jake and lifted him into the air as she swung him around. In another few months he would be too big to lift.

Tom sat at the table and pulled out the creased photo from his wallet of Pip with her arm around a young man. The two of them both had brown skin and wide smiles. The man was caught full on in the picture and his almond-shaped brown eyes were smiling. He was wearing a green t-shirt with four silk screen images of a wide-mouthed Marilyn Monroe. Pip was in profile, staring up at him, laughing.

“Have you seen this before?”

“What’s that?”

“Sit down.”

Matilda looked pale when she saw the photograph. She ran her finger over the face of her daughter and then she sighed.

“She looked so happy,” said Matilda, “so beautiful. Where did you find this?”

“I found it here, in your house last week. It was inside a back pocket of her pink shorts.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought we’d all had enough,” Tom shook his head. “I didn’t think it would help.”

“So why now?” Matilda took off the apron. She picked up the bowl of eggs and the parsley and threw them together into the pan while Hilary continued washing up.

“I don’t know,” said Tom. “But this was probably her boyfriend. It’s time to find out if he’s Jake’s dad.”

“Funny sort of holiday,” said Matilda. “You think it’s right to take Jake?”

“He’s old enough.”

“Why don’t you focus on finding your wife when she’s right in front of you, instead of your sister who was always losing herself?” Matilda said.

Tom stared at Matilda, at her unkempt hair and tried not to smile. Matilda scanned her hazel eyes over her son’s face and saw him draw back just a fraction. She looked across at Hilary’s back as she bent over the sink and scrubbed. And then she looked at Jake, petting the chicken as it pecked the dusty floor, hunting for stray bits of grain strewn across the worn vinyl.

“Have you shown that photo to anyone else?” Matilda said.

“No,” said Hilary, turning back from the sink. “He hasn’t even shown that Chinese scarecrow.”

Tom caught Matilda’s expression but they both chose to ignore Hilary’s remark. Matilda set out three plates of scrambled egg on the burnt toast and then went upstairs to shower. When she reappeared her hair was brushed and pinned into a bun. A few stray strands fluttered about her face and her large silver earrings glinted in the sunlight. She was wearing clean jeans and a loose blue shirt with several chunky necklaces. She held a rucksack and announced that she was packed and ready.

“I’ll just ask Maria next door to feed the chickens and then I’ll wait in the car,” said Matilda. “Slam the door when you’ve finished your eggs.”

When they were all in the car Matilda squeezed Jake’s hand as they drove across Salisbury Plain. Bright yellow fields of mustard and waving fields of wheat spread out over

the softly rolling hills, blocks of yellow and gold growing ever paler into the distance. Metal signs warned of tank crossings along the road edges.

“Has Grandma told you where those stones came from? Did she tell you it’s the oldest monument in Britain?” Tom asked Jake as Stonehenge appeared on the horizon, just meters from the road.

“Tell me Grandma.”

“Once upon a time it didn’t look like the ruin it is now. Those stones were dragged by roller from the Preseli Mountains in Wales. Each bluestone needed hundreds of men to drag them up the steepest hills.”

“Is that true Tom?”

“Yes. Grandma knows all about Stonehenge, don’t you?”

“Not really, but I like to read the articles. It wasn’t just a week-end project, Jake. It must have taken over a hundred years to finish Stonehenge.

“But what was it used for?” said Hilary.

“A long time ago people used it as a sacred site,” said Matilda. “There were rituals to do with fertility, death and rebirth. There’s a lot of hype that surrounds it today but it’s still steeped in magic and mystery.”

“Not much magic when you’ve got the car park, ice-creams and gift shop right next door,” said Hilary. “It’s just another commercial circus with too many fat tourists.”

“Your mum and I used to play around those stones when we were kids,” said Tom.

“Well those days have gone. It’s fenced off nowadays because vandals spray painted some of the stones and tried to carve their names into them,” said Matilda.

On the most southerly stone on the outer ring about six inches up from the bottom were four small letters chiselled into its base. PP and TP - linked for all eternity. A flicker of shame spread through Tom’s belly but he also felt a small thrill of gratitude that something endured. He hasn’t told anyone, not even Jake, but one day he will take him there and get him to wriggle down in the ditch on the ground and show him.

“Did mum have long hair when she was my age?” Jake said.

“Longer than yours, honey. She wore it in pig tails,” said Matilda.

All kinds of things had been found in the barrows. Pottery jars, golden buckles, bronze daggers, cups, necklaces and sceptres made of various stones and precious materials. Tom used to bury tin soldiers and old plates in the soft earth after a storm, just to

dig them up and run home to show his mother what he'd found. Dig deep enough and he might find a clue that would lead him to trace Pip's past and future. He nodded and Matilda seemed to feel his thoughts. She rubbed his shoulder then stared out the window in silence.

The petrol gauge flickered into orange so Tom pulled into a station. He filled up the tank while Hilary took Jake inside and helped him find the promised tube of lemon sherbet with its stick of black liquorice. Jake unpeeled the white paper down the top of the tube and dipped the liquorice into the bright yellow powder, screwing up his nose as the fizzy crystals melted onto his tongue. The car bumped along as it sped north. Jake sucked on his sherbet.

Thanks to the news and radio bulletins most of Lola's pupils knew about Biff's brutal death so it seemed fitting to ask them to focus on animals in their art classes. The older students took this one step further and designed futuristic animals based on technology and fused them with living feathered and furry friends. Lola enjoyed the results of her ideas, the distraction, the demands of thirty children, even the inevitable mess they created. By the time the last bell had been rung it took her a few seconds to remember that outside the classroom her life was unravelling fast.

After she had cleared up the Art Room she drove over to collect Greta from her primary school. A circle of high pressure idled over the south of England and that afternoon there wasn't a cloud to be seen, just a blue sky that rolled on forever. In the car park she spotted Hunter's car. He sat with his arm resting on the open window and his hand outstretched down the side of the car in a way that suggested he wasn't in a hurry. She walked over, curious.

"What are you doing here?" Lola said, admiring the definition of his brown arm.

"I bought some locks to put on all the windows in your house. I've been meaning to do it for years." He rattled the bag of locks.

"Oh, well we're moving back in with Kate today." Lola was about to launch into telling him about the visit from Mr Axe when she saw Greta waving.

Greta bounced across the car park when she saw Hunter's car. He climbed out and she jumped into his arms, legs around his waist.

"Daddy," she said, "what are you doing here?"

"I've come to see my favourite girl," he said, looking at Lola as he hugged Greta.

"I got an A in Social Studies," Greta said.

"What for?" said Hunter, putting her back down on the ground.

"We had to write an essay on whether animal testing was good or bad."

"What did you say?"

"Bad, silly. Everyone knows that."

"But...well...that's great."

Lola and Hunter exchanged looks. Greta saw them and folded her arms across her chest.

"It's not Thursday," Greta said.

“No, but I’m coming over to install window locks to keep you safe at home. Do you want to ride with Mum or me?”

“You!” Greta jumped into the front seat of his shiny black car and pushed the button to make the top go down. It made a loud purr.

“See you there,” said Hunter to Lola.

“Fine,” said Lola, walking back to her own car. It was old, dirty and the bumper needed replacing.

Inside her own kitchen Lola watched Hunter change the drill bit and lay out all the tools needed for the window locks. The brown tool bag with a broken zip had still been in the bottom drawer where Hunter had left it years before. The kettle turned itself off and Lola made tea.

“If you look on the back seat you’ll find a white box,” he said to Greta. “Bring it here.”

Greta returned holding the box, grinning.

“Is it carrot cake? From Reeves?”

“Yep, get some plates.”

“No deadlines today then?” Lola said. “Did you have a quiet afternoon?”

“Not particularly,” he said, “I postponed our meeting with the printers because this couldn’t wait.”

“Oh.”

“I’m glad you’ve moved back in with your sister but sooner or later you’ll be coming back here and I’ll sleep better once I’ve done this.” He smiled and plugged in the drill.

Greta handed her parents two plates with a small piece of cake on each. Her own plate had an enormous piece.

“Greta!” Lola said. “Cut that in half.”

“No, I’m hungry.” She picked it up and took a huge bite. Icing squirted around her lips. Hunter laughed.

“Leave her be,” he said.

“You’re not doing her any favours,” said Lola.

“Come on,” he said, “just relax.”

“I haven’t told you about our visitor last night,” said Lola.

“Bo Zhang? Yes, you told me about her.”

“Not her.” Lola studied the cake. “Just after midnight that creep turned up skulking around my house. Bo saw him peering in through the windows then he sprayed the word bitch in red letters all over her car.”

“Bloody hell!” Hunter pushed his plate away. “Did she call the cops?”

“Yep, they came within a few minutes but didn’t catch him.”

“So what happened then?”

“Greta slept with me while Sergeant Baldwin and Bo stayed downstairs keeping watch but Mr Axe didn’t come back. Bo got a photo of him from the back on the night cameras that she set up but so far it hasn’t helped the cops identify him.”

“You mustn’t come back here until they’ve caught the bastard,” he said.

“He’s really provoking the cops, isn’t he? Slinking around here then giving them the slip.”

“Sounds to me like he wants to get caught,” said Hunter. “Won’t be long, sweetheart, then you can come home.” Hunter looked surprised by his own words, glanced around to see if Greta had heard and then he picked up the locks and set to work.

Lola went upstairs to sort out the laundry. She didn’t want to follow him around her own home while he secured each window. She sorted out the clothes to be washed from the weekend.

After a while she heard the door to the next room open and she walked into it, following Hunter. He went over to the white cot in the corner and moved it away from the window. He had to duck beneath the mobile and then turned when Lola stood right behind him. There was a frieze of bunny rabbits hopping around the room. Benjamin bunny in his blue coat held carrots in a basket over his shoulder while a trio of smaller rabbits ran over fields of buttercups. Did rabbits feel emotion in the same way she did? Lola suspected that Beatrix Potter would have nodded. She hesitated as she stood beside Hunter and placed a hand on the cot to steady herself. Stevie should have been six this year.

He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her towards him.

“I’ll put it all back,” he said.

“Good.”

“Don’t you think it might be time to...turn this room into an art studio or something?”

“No.”

His head collided with the mobile and the little wooden aeroplanes jerked about, making uncertain loops. They both moved to the left.

Hunter stroked her face with his fingers, one hand under her chin and then moved in to kiss her. She closed her eyes, shocked by how much she wanted the kiss to last and then pulled back.

“Oh,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Nor me,” he said. “But I don’t want to stop.”

“Don’t,” she said. “Not here, not now.” But she smiled as she spoke, walked out of the room and went downstairs into the kitchen.

Greta had cut herself another slice of cake. Her cheeks were working overtime to finish it before her mother could object. Lola picked up the box, closed the lid and said “oink oink.”

“Is daddy staying for dinner?”

“No, we’re leaving as soon as he finishes. He’s got three more rooms to do and then we’re driving over to Kate’s so go and pack some clothes.”

“Can’t we stay here?” Greta said. “Can’t Daddy stay with us to keep us safe?”

“No. Go and pack.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Don’t you want him to help us?” Greta stuck out her chin.

Hunter leant over the banister and arched an eyebrow at Greta. “It’s time you learnt how to use a drill,” he said. “Come up here and give us a hand.”

When she trotted off up the stairs Lola packed some clothes into a bag and sighed. The kitchen seemed too small. Furniture jostled for space. Pots and pans began to argue. She needed a run.

“How long do you think you’ll be?” Lola called out. “I need to go for a run.”

“About thirty minutes. Where are you going?”

“Up by the farm. Do you think it’s safe?”

“Guess so. With all the police crawling round there recently I doubt he’d show up.”

“I’ll take the pepper spray that Bo gave me...see you later.”

Lola put on her shorts and trainers. It was still warm outside and balmy. She tried to concentrate on her breathing, keeping it steady and counting her breaths.

She ran down the narrow path with nettles either side. Tall poplars arched above her. Over the stone bridge there were several fisherman casting into the water. She ran past the cottages and then uphill towards the barn, pushing herself as fast as she could take it. Her legs burned and her chest ached but when she crested the top of the hill she looked back at Amesbury, at the houses spread out like white dots and dashes, and seemed to fly along the horizon. It was easy then and she imagined herself lifting off the ground and floating into the sky. Parallel with the tops of the beech trees, chinks of cerulean blue merged with the soft green leaves, looking down on the woman running smoothly over the land. A magpie flew past and they came eye to eye. Blueish green gloss on its back with a long graduated tail. When it saw Lola it let off a harsh, chattering chuckle. A few cows lifted up their heads, swayed a bit while chewing, then continued munching. Returning to her body she focussed on her feet in her trainers as they hit the ground, toes against rubber. Lola ran on along the top of the hill and then back down to the river's edge, around past the mill house with its sluice gates and back along the river and into the cemetery. She reached home just as Hunter finished the last window lock.

“All done,” he said, returning the tool bag to the bottom drawer.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Good run?”

“Fantastic.” She breathed heavily, stretching her quads.

They stood facing each other and neither spoke for a few seconds. She saw him looking and didn't look away.

“Well, I'll be off then,” he said, still staring at her legs. “Call me when you're allowed to bury Biff, okay?”

“Tomorrow.”

“All right, I'll see you after school.”

“Bye Greta,” he called out. She ran down the stairs and they hugged. “Love you,” he said.

“Devoted pet owners agree that the unconditional love a pet brings to their lives is special. Cherishing this non judgemental love is nothing new. Egyptian pharaohs were buried with mummified cats, monkeys and birds because they believed animals shared an afterlife with humans. Even Anglo-Saxon warriors were interred with their stallions. With the rise of Christianity this practice declined as pet rituals were regarded as pagan.

Things changed again in the 19th century with the creation of a pet cemetery in London's Hyde Park complete with tombstones. Today's interest in all things green has accelerated a trend for alternative, 'natural' cemeteries throughout England for humans and pets together, sometimes in the same plot, using biodegradable coffins and woodland settings.

In the four counties that make up Wessex today (Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire) there are several woodland cemeteries. This month we interview the owner of the first one of its kind in the country to allow pets to be buried with their owners...”

By C. Hunter, Editor of *Wessex Life*.

After school Lola collected Greta from the primary school nearby and then delivered her to Ellie's house as Greta didn't want to see Biff buried. Take your time, Ellie's mum said, don't hurry back. Lola drove to the park where Hunter was already waiting for her. Together they set off in his car and drove to Cholderton, to an organic estate with a 'green' cemetery for both humans and pets. Hunter knew the owner, Gaylene Shaw, and had given her a double page spread in his magazine, *Wessex Life*, last winter. When he phoned Gaylene to give her the background she was more than happy to waive the fee and take Biff. After all, her bookings had doubled in the last few months thanks to Hunter's publicity of her new business venture.

Hunter had already collected Biff from the cops. Lola knew that he had bought a wicker casket and that the dog was lying inside it in the back of his car.

Music played quietly and Hunter kept the windows open. When he asked Lola if she wanted to buy a plot so that she could be united with Biff in the future Lola didn't know what to think. It seemed surreal but she didn't think so. She hadn't sought out a dog. Biff had found her. And stayed for eleven years. She had been running through Mr Crace's farm, past hay barns, fields of barley and wheat, when he appeared from nowhere and just

started trotting along beside her. She could see he was a malnourished pup with long legs and loose skin he hadn't yet grown into. He had floppy ears and a big pink tongue that lolled around so she tossed him the remains of a cheese sandwich from her pocket and that was it. He followed her home. Lola phoned Mr Crace that evening and told him about the hungry pup that had already eaten a bowl of mince and spaghetti (last night's remains) and Mr Crace sniffed and said he had no bloody idea who owned that stupid mutt. He had seen a litter of four in the barn and the other three were missing, presumed dead.

Hunter put up a fence but Biff was having none of it. He should have been called Houdini. Lola tried but he just ignored her, although he answered to Biff immediately. Biff became a well known fixture around Amesbury and greeted everyone as his long-lost mum, dad, brother or sister. *Wag wag, any food? Give it to me now. Wet kiss kiss, see ya later, wag wag.* Biff entertained the locals while Lola was at school and trotted home in the late afternoon full of stories about his day's adventures.

"Have you got the bulbs?" Hunter asked.

"Yes, daffs, do you think those were the right choice?"

"Lovely. We'll come back in the spring with Greta."

"And I bought the sapling. We'll plant that first and then put the bulbs around it, okay?"

"Yep. Biff needs a tree to pee against."

"But he won't be peeing."

"You know what I mean."

"Hmm."

"I know this isn't really the right moment to ask but I was wondering if you'd like me to get Greta a puppy. No disrespect to Biff because no dog can ever replace him." Hunter glanced over his shoulder into the back of the car. Lola saw him bite his lip for a second.

"Puppies shouldn't be left at home all day so it's not really a good idea," she said.

"I thought about that...how about if we look after it for the first few months and Greta can bond with it when she visits us and then when it's house-trained and fence-trained we'll hand it over."

"Really? Have you asked Beth about this?"

"Um, briefly."

“What did she say?”

“She said if we were taking the trouble to look after a puppy and putting up with accidents night and day that we’d have to get two. One for you and one for us.”

“Really? I know Beth works at home but has she got any idea how much time pups take up?”

“She grew up with dogs.”

“Oh, well I don’t know what to say. Greta would love it.”

“Yes will do nicely.”

“Yes then...Hunter?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re a good man.”

“I know.”

Lola reached over and squeezed his arm. He turned and smiled at her. A couple of swifts flew past the windscreen, chasing each other in mad circles.

“And that’s kind of Beth. How are you two?”

“She wants me to take up yoga with her.”

“Can’t see you saluting the sun,” Lola laughed. “Or doing the down dog position. Aren’t you spending enough time with her?”

“You know how it is.”

Gaylene was standing in the drive with her hands on her broad hips and smiling. She was wearing jeans, lots of silver bracelets that jangled up and down her arm, and a multi-coloured scarf tied around her head. She kissed Hunter as if they were old friends and chatted easily with him for a few minutes. Then she pointed to a group of young English hardwood saplings and explained they were an ideal choice for chalk plains needing only a couple of inches of topsoil. Gaylene went to the shed and handed Hunter a large spade and left them to it.

The late afternoon sun had dropped but it was still warm. How long would this patch of high pressure last? They walked through the woodland. A hare sat on its haunches, white paws up as if almost praying, sniffing the air and watching them. Without speaking the two of them knew that this was the spot, just where the hare was sitting. It was a little apart from any other trees, and since Biff liked his independence it felt just right. Hunter

began to dig. Lola watched the rhythmic bend of his back and arms as he lifted the soil. The chalky earth was paler underneath the grass.

He must have felt her eyes watch him as he looked up, straightened, and stared at her.

“You’re beautiful in that dress.”

Then he went back to digging.

They peered into the hole and decided it wasn’t deep enough so Hunter dug some more. It was hard work and a thin film of sweat built up around his face and neck. He went back to the car and carried the wicker casket out in front of him.

“Have you got the poem?” he asked.

“Yep. I can’t do it. You say it...” Lola avoided his eyes.

He stepped into the hole and then Lola handed him the casket. It was heavier than she expected and she almost dropped it, so that it slithered in with a thud. Typical Biff, eager to the end. Hunter straightened the casket in the hole. She took his outstretched hand and pulled him out. He brushed his hands down his thighs trying to shake off the sticky particles of soil and then he took the piece of paper from her hands.

“Epitaph to a Dog by Lord Byron,” said Hunter quietly.

*“Near this Spot
are deposited the Remains of one
who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
and all the virtues of Man without his Vices...”*

“Stop,” said Lola, a fraction louder than she had intended. She straightened her back and looked up at the sky for a moment. Cirrus clouds scudded past.

“This isn’t right. Biff never had a formal education. Let’s do it his way, okay?”

“Go for it, sweetheart.”

“Biff...at last you’re free to chase rabbits, to steal food, to explore the next life. Do it with as much guts as you did in life. You were our friend. You gave us so much. I loved you and I will miss you... Okay, cover him up.”

Hunter picked up the spade and began to heap the earth over the casket. When he patted down the top layer of soil they squatted down and planted the bulbs. They planted

the sapling to one side. When they were finished they put the spade back in the shed. Lola turned back one last time. At the edge of the wood she saw the hare hop away.

“Now for the wake,” said Hunter.

They stopped at a pub with a thatched roof that Lola had never been in before. In the car park Lola spotted a goshawk soar above them with small wings, recognisable with its short tail. It called out a shrill *gek gek gek* and landed near the top of a tall beech to their left. Suddenly it darted down to the ground and swooped in to catch a mouse scuttling along which it carried off with its talons.

The pub was in a tiny hamlet with a footbridge over a stream. They had been driving through Army training ground and the hamlet was set just off the road. On the edge of the Ranges tank tracks had been gouged into the grass and beside them there was an orange sign warning civilians not to pick up any shells or cartridges found on the ground. A red flag was fluttering on the pole, showing the firing range was in use and every now and then they could hear a volley of gunfire as bullets blasted into metal targets.

They took their drinks inside to escape the noise. The pub was full of chunky wooden furniture and low beams. A young couple walked in and sat down opposite them. The mother had a baby boy strapped into a carrier on her back. She set it down and lifted him out and jiggled him up and down on her knee while he made slurping noises between giggles. Lola looked away.

Hunter began with a story about Biff. That time when he caught a rat and offered it to Lola when she was cooking the evening meal. She turned around and a black thing scuttled across her feet. Biff was so thrilled with his present that he just stood there, tail wagging furiously, while the rat darted helter skelter all over the kitchen. It was clear that Biff was puzzled by her screaming. She just didn't seem to appreciate his gift. *People! I ask you.*

The conversation dwindled. She downed two glasses of wine in rapid succession. She didn't want to think about Biff anymore. Or Mr Axe. She just wanted to lean against Hunter and forget all that had happened in the last few days. The early evening light hovered over his profile and made her ache. Hunter had one hand on her thigh and began to stroke it. She thought about all that she had lost and then her attention went back to his hand under the table. She knew what he was doing but she didn't have the strength to make him stop.

The pub filled up fast. The noise level rose so that they had to shout to hear each other. Not that they were saying anything important, in fact not much at all. And then silence filled up the space between them like water rising. Hunter had slipped his hand under her dress and his eyes darkened. A few minutes later the man with the baby sitting opposite began to notice the expression change on Lola's face. She rearranged her features and whispered into Hunter's ear.

"You better stop, he's looking at me."

"Let's book the room upstairs," he said.

"I don't..."

"You'll feel better. I'll make sure of it." He leaned over and kissed her in the dip above her collarbone.

"I've never stopped loving you," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

"Really?" *Let's turn the clocks back. Make all this disappear.*

"Hmm," his lips moved up to her mouth.

"Come on," he said, "I'm going to book the room and then I'm taking you upstairs."

Hunter stood up and went to the bar; he leaned across it and said something quietly to the barman who nodded, smiling, and handed him a key. When he came back he held out his hand and she took it, raising her eyes to meet his.

The wooden staircase was narrow and twisty. He unlocked the door with *Buzzard* written in elaborate italics on the outside. At the foot of the bed was a brown faux mink blanket. At the other end there were enough tapestry cushions to stuff an elephant.

He unzipped her dress and let it drop to the floor. She stepped out of it and he brushed off a few specks of soil from her neck. He took her by the hand and led her to the bed. With his mouth on her neck she felt like a rabbit, caught.

"Five long years," he said. "I've missed you."

"Shh, don't say a word."

A while later they walked out of the pub and into the car park. The shooting on the Ranges had decreased but still pattered intermittently. A grainy dusk was falling and it was quiet, the only sound apart from the shooting was the burbling of the stream running beside the pub. Hunter had one hand on the small of Lola's back as he moved her towards his car.

“I’d better hurry,” he said, opening the door for her. “I’ve got to pick up Mia from tennis in twenty minutes.”

“Oh...you didn’t mention that.” Lola sat down in the car and pulled the door shut louder than she meant to.

Hunter turned the key in the ignition. “I love Beth you know.”

“So what was all that about then?” The muscles in her stomach clenched. Lola fidgeted with the hem of her dress.

“I, er, well...I felt close...”

“Oh my God, Hunter.” Lola slumped against the side of the car and stared out of the window.

“I can’t...I can’t...”

“Don’t tell me this was a mistake,” said Lola, crossing her legs. “It was, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t leave Beth, you know that.” He took a bend too fast, cursed, and slowed down.

“Oh well, that’s all right then,” said Lola. “Perfect! Now you’ve got that off your chest. And where does that leave me? Hey? Where does that leave me?”

Lola folded her arms. Far away she saw a goshawk circle in the pale sky.

“I’m still your friend.”

“I should have known,” said Lola biting her lip, “you always let me down.”

“I didn’t hear you objecting.”

“Stop! That’s it. Just zip it for the rest of the drive. Take me back to my car and then I don’t want to hear from you again.” Lola went rigid and gripped the safety belt with both hands, knuckles turning white. They drove past a scarecrow, its scraggy arms twisting in the breeze. The sky had lost all colour, leached, bleached, ashen.

“Lola, I-”

“Shut up!”

Bo had her feet up on the dashboard as she recited Spanish verbs from *Learn Spanish in Three Months* while she waited outside the pub for Hunter and Lola to reappear. They were taking their time.

Her years with the Intelligence Corps working as a Target Audience Analyst in a Psychological Operations Unit taught her that despite her formidable powers of concentration, she wasn't a natural team player. She only lasted on one tour of duty in Afghanistan listening in to Taliban 'chatter,' before her commanding officers took her aside to discuss her future.

Switching to the Police proved more successful until she fell out with the Big Cheese. Working as a private investigator suited her much better even though the quality of the work was rarely stimulating. Despite all those noir movies and hard boiled thrillers, her job was often boring and repetitive. It meant long hours sitting and waiting. But Bo didn't mind boring, it gave her the opportunity to read or listen to books while she watched people, everything from the Russian Classics to Scottish crime. Oh, and Spanish verbs.

When Hunter and Lola walked out of the pub Bo readjusted her legs and sat up straight. He had one hand on the small of her back and from the way Lola smiled Bo decided there was still chemistry between them. What had driven them apart some years ago?

From years of discipline she jotted down *8.16pm exit from pub*. Bo remembered Hunter well. Almost all the other reporters wanted titillation when her book came out. They wanted salacious stories intended to shock and then poured scorn and derision on those caught out. Hunter had been different. He had asked her serious questions about infidelity. (Is there a more creative response to infidelity than divorce? Is female infidelity in emerging economies an indicator of social evolution and female power? Even, is there a *benefit* to feeling jealous?) Would his article in *Wessex Life* have been better suited to a London magazine? Or did he have an ulterior motive? Bo took a swig from her water bottle and then turned the key in the ignition.

She kept her distance behind Hunter's car. The hired car she had collected was an old Ford with wonky balance but she had been told it would only take one day to clean off the red paint that had been sprayed over her car, she could put up with it for a few more

hours. As she drove past the distant shapes of the stones bulked together at Stonehenge, she felt as if they were ringed in conversation, one she was never invited to join.

Bo followed Hunter and Lola to the park. Lola slammed the car door when she climbed out but she didn't say anything that Bo could hear. What had they argued about? Lola drove off at speed in her own car, collected her daughter from a house in Countess Road, and then returned to Marc and Kate's house. Bo watched Lola march and Greta saunter into the cottage and bang the front door behind them. She made a quick note in her file. *9.07pm Lola & Greta return to Marc's house.* Then she texted Marc: *L & G in ur care now. Goin hm.*

Back in her own home she let Fang, her turquoise budgie, out of his cage. He was an unwanted house-warming present from Maria, Bo's foster mother, and since Maria asked after Fang at regular intervals Bo felt she had no choice but to keep the bird. *Closest I'll get to motherhood*, she mused. But although she resented keeping a pet, Fang was cheerful and chatty, so happy with his lot, that Bo felt a grudging respect.

"Hola!" Fang said.

She continued talking in Spanish to him in broken sentences while she cooked some pasta. Her progress was too slow if she was really moving to Seville before Christmas so she went to bed with Spanish Grammar.

The next morning Bo rang Tom.

"How are you?"

"Good," Tom said. "I'm driving north right now, taking the family on holiday. A road trip to Scotland."

"Scotland? Tom, a development has occurred. I wanted to talk to you about it."

"Do you have news of Pip?"

"No but I think this could be important. We ought to meet. Where are you now?"

"Heading towards Wantage," said Tom.

"Good, you haven't gone far. Can you wait for me there? I'll meet you in the market Square beside the statue of King Alfred in two hours, okay?"

"My mum's here, Hilary and Jake."

"No problem," said Bo. "Find a nice café for them so I can talk to you alone. All right?"

"I've got something to tell you too," said Tom.

“Okay. See you soon.”

At the same time Chief Inspector Morten Fox was jogging in the park beneath the leafy oak trees when his mobile went off with a snippet of an energetic rock song. ‘Leave it alone Will,’ he said out loud to himself, realising his son, Will, must have changed the ringtone without asking. Payback for missing yet another of his soccer matches.

“Fox,” he said, admiring the crisp white lines on the cricket pitch.

“Morning,” said Sergeant Louise Rash. “Sorry to interrupt but I got a call from King’s Primary School just now.”

“What’s happened?”

“Remember Pip Porter? Her kid Jake hasn’t been at school for a while. Uncle Tom rang in to say Jake had the measles last Tuesday but he’s missed the parent teacher interview and hasn’t returned any of the school’s calls since. That’s not like him, is it Sir?”

“Louise...since when was measles and not answering phones a crime?”

“Thought you’d want to know,” said Rash. “You told me to try and notice the little things.”

“Yeah...well. Okay go to Tom’s house and nose about. Talk to him and if he’s not answering the door, try the neighbours.”

“Me?”

“I’m trying to run. Doctor’s orders.”

He clicked the phone shut. This morning when he pulled on his trousers the top button had pinged off and disappeared under the bed. It annoyed him that his wife and doctor had a point – he really ought to lose some weight. He dug around under his gardening clothes in the bottom drawer until he found an old pair of shorts and put them on instead. He didn’t look at his reflection in the mirror just headed out the door for a ‘short run.’ Even that sounded a bit optimistic.

A few minutes later his phone went off again with another burst of the same rock song.

“For God’s sake...what is it this time, Louise?”

“It’s me, Bo... Morten? Gosh, you’re breathing heavily. What are you doing? You sound like you’re about to have a heart attack.”

“I was trying to run. It’s been a while...” Morten stopped and moved under a large spreading oak tree as the rain began to pelt.

“Okay, I’ll try not to laugh. Just can’t imagine....”

“I’m not in the...what do you want Bo?” Rain drops splashed over his face.

“Have you found out any more about Stella Jacobs?”

“I’ve talked to her husband,” said Morten. “He was in Afghanistan when she died so he’s in the clear. Stella was a nurse at Odstock Hospital so I’ve talked to a few people there.”

“Yep, I know she was a nurse. Worked in theatre. In fact, Morten, she had an operation herself. D’you know about that?”

“No. What sort of operation?” Puddles of muddy water grew around Morten’s feet as he watched the rain strengthen.

“She had an extra finger removed on her right hand. It was next to her pinky. Thought you ought to know.”

“What made you...Bo? Let’s meet. We need to talk.”

“I can’t make it today. I’m driving to Wantage...another case but there might be a link. Keep in touch. Enjoy your run.”

Bo picked up a dry sheet and folded it into quarters. She tried to imagine Morten running. A cartoon picture began to form in her mind but it skidded around like a hippo on ice. She chuckled.

The rain fell heavily now and she thought about Tom taking his family camping. What was it that he wanted to tell her? She bet herself a caramel frappacino it had something to do with Pip. It usually did.

Bo remembered playing with the twins occasionally as kids. Maria and Tilda would sit and have a smoke on the back steps while the kids played in the garden. After Bo’s parents died in the earthquake her grandmother Justine collected her from Taiwan and brought her back to live with her in Amesbury. Five months later Justine died of a heart attack and Bo moved in next door with Maria and Pete Greenwood and their foster children.

Bo had never really taken to Pip Porter all those years ago. And since her disappearance it hadn’t become any easier. The boys all liked her though...even Marc.

From Marc her thoughts looped back to Lola. The connections must be closer than she first thought.

As she folded the laundry on top of the kitchen table she became aware of a tight feeling somewhere in the pit of her stomach. *All paths led back to herself.*

Bo finished folding the laundry and then drove off to meet Tom in Wantage. The rain fell in sheets and even with the windscreen wipers on at full speed there were moments where she couldn't see where she was going. The tall beeches on both side of the road seemed to lace their branches together forming an arch, so that she drove through a dark tunnel heading for the bright light at the other end.

As Bo drove towards Wantage, the birth place of King Alfred the Great, she remembered her history teacher when she first joined an English school. British History had been taught by Miss Saga, a passionate teacher who always started the lessons with insignificant details which could then be used as an entire preface for a theory about why Brits are the way they are today.

She remembered the story about Alfred. In the ninth century King Aethelwulf and Queen Osburga had four sons born in Wessex. Queen Osburga must have been quite a lady as she could read at a time when most people were illiterate, especially women. The story goes that she read her sons stories from a manuscript painted with gold and coloured letters that sparkled like jewels. The boys loved the magical book so mum promised to give it to the first son that learnt to read. It was, of course, the determined Alfred that won the book despite being the youngest brother. After he defeated the Danes, Alfred had schools and monasteries built to educate his people and established laws that form the base of the judicial system still in use today. Quite a man, thought Bo, quite a man.

Bo parked outside a row of shops with eighteenth century facades. She saw Tom standing beside the marble statue of King Alfred. The statue had been vandalised twice and part of Alfred's arm and axe had been removed.

Tom shook hands with Bo, ever the formal gentleman. Even though they had played together a few times when they were children, both Bo and Tom had remained a bit formal, even a bit distant since they had become professionally involved. Bo wasn't sure if this was her fault or his.

Tom's intense blue eyes kept shifting focus. *What was bothering him?* He asked her if she would like coffee and gestured towards a café with lacy net curtains across the road.

The blackboard outside the cafe was littered with spelling mistakes and a rash of apostrophes where none should have been. It made Bo cringe. She took a chance and suggested a caramel frappacino. Right on cue Tom dug into his pocket and handed her the creased photo.

“I found this in a pair of Pip’s shorts at Mum’s house last week. I was going through all her clothes. Had decided it was time to throw some out. Progress, hey?”

“Who’s that?”

“That’s Luke,” said Tom. “Jake’s dad I presume.”

“Whoa. Come on let’s find a Starbucks instead of that sad looking café.”

They couldn’t see a Starbucks so they went into ‘Philippa’s Tea Rooms,’ which seemed the obvious choice. Old ladies sat at small round tables eating Banbury cakes. Bo and Tom sat down in the corner and within seconds Bo could feel their stares begin to crawl over her head.

“And you want to find him,” said Bo, taking the photo. “Do you know his family name?”

“Turn it over.”

Bo flipped over the photo and in huge looping letters Pip had written “*Lovely Luke Buchanan and me at the festival.*”

“Even if he isn’t Jake’s father, he might know who is,” said Tom. “He was at the Solstice Festival with Pip and at least that’s something concrete, isn’t it?”

“Yep, Tom it is,” Bo gulped down her iced coffee, “best we can do”, according to the waitress.

Bo looked up at him and for the first time she saw a glimmer of hope light up his face. His eyes widened and he smiled almost as if his sister might appear at their table and join them for drinks. Bo didn’t want to ruin the moment but she couldn’t keep quiet.

“Tom, last week, you might have heard or read about the murder of a dog and then the next day a woman was found in a river in Amesbury.”

“Yes, I heard about it on the news. What’s this got to do...?”

“She was found with her hand cut off. A few months ago she had an operation to remove a sixth finger.”

The hope went out of Tom’s eyes. He picked up a napkin and dabbed at his neck. Bo watched him reach one hand over the other, rubbing at the scar at the base of his thumb.

“I don’t think that’s relevant, do you?”

“We can’t ignore it, Tom. It was never made public that Pip had the same operation. There are several cases of missing people in other counties and I’ve been looking into their medical histories. There doesn’t seem to be any connection, except for one.”

“Oh?” Tom looked up, resigned.

“Another woman,” said Bo. “She disappeared nearly three years ago. An elderly nun from here in Wantage.”

“Did she have a sixth finger too?”

“A sixth toe on both feet. Only she never had the operation to remove them which was a pity as it cost her a lot of time and money dealing with them, according to her records. She needed handmade shoes to accommodate the extra width.”

“Have you told The Chief?” Tom asked.

“Some of it, yes,” said Bo. “And I’m meeting him tomorrow. The point is this would suggest that Pip might have been targeted. You realise what this means?” Bo waited for a few seconds before continuing. “The chance of finding her alive isn’t looking so good.”

“Pip never spoke about her hand,” Tom studied the tablecloth. Then he looked around the room and watched the dust motes float in a haphazard pattern across the tables. “I think she was ashamed of it.”

“Hmm. What about you?”

“It never comes up. I haven’t had to think about it for years.” He looked up at Bo’s face and turned his hands over on the table.

“Under the circumstances,” said Bo, “do you think it’s such a good idea to take the family camping?”

“No, we better head home and get Jake back to school. Here, you take this. I don’t know why I didn’t ring you up as soon as I found it. Perhaps I wanted to play the shining white knight or something like that.” Tom gave her the photo.

“I’ll find Luke Buchanan,” said Bo.

“Yes, I’m sure you will. This isn’t going in the direction I wanted it to but after all these years I think we’re ready for you to bring it to a close.”

“I’m a long way off that, Tom, but I’ll do my best.”

The two of them stood up and Tom shook Bo by the hand again. He squeezed her fingers a moment too long and then smiled when he realised he was still holding her hand. She watched him walk out of the café, his head bowed. Bo felt her muscles contract in her chest. She pushed the feeling and then the thought aside. Don't dwell on it. Not professional. *Don't kid yourself.*

Wantage was the home to one of the largest communities of Anglican nuns in the world, the community of Saint Mary the Virgin. The missing nun, Vanessa Manson, was much older than Pip Porter or Stella Jacobs. She was seventy two according to the police reports.

Bo caught sight of her reflection in a shop window. She had not dressed appropriately for a meeting with a nun. She was wearing a bright red top with a multi-coloured skirt that ended above her knees. Not that Tom had noticed. And she had all five blue glittery studs in her ears. She took off the earrings and put them in her bag. Then she marched over to Woolworths and chose a pair of black trousers and a plain black cotton shirt.

She looked at herself in the shop mirror and saw a demure Chinese woman (apart from the streaked hair) and if she bent her head forward a fraction, she even looked obedient. She knew that her father would have approved.

Respect your elders was a mantra her father always repeated whenever they visited his friends. Nodding to herself she left the shop with renewed confidence and set off to meet the Mother Superior.

Bo took out the map she had bought and oriented herself before she followed directions to the convent. She walked along the busy streets. People made way for her. Was it her clothes, suggesting a serious demeanour?

Fifteen minutes later she entered the convent. She pushed open the heavy oak door and walked along a corridor with a series of stone columns forming arches on either side of her. A few nuns wearing black habits glided down the corridor. A thin light came through small round windows and lit up circles of yellow on the cold stone floor. Sounds were hushed as if noise had been smothered, sucked out of the air, so that Bo felt she should keep even her thoughts to a minimum in case they disturbed the atmosphere.

"Can I help you?" said a young nun. "You look lost."

"I'm looking for the Mother Superior," said Bo. "I have an appointment with her."

“Please follow me and I will take you to her office.”

Bo followed the nun along the corridor until they reached a closed door. The nun knocked and then said good bye.

“Come,” said a strong voice.

Bo straightened the collar on her shirt and chided herself for feeling as if she had been summoned to the headmistress for bad behaviour.

She had been expecting an office filled with the heavy atmosphere of a funeral home. Instead she was greeted by an animated mess that almost hummed. There were Piero della Francesca prints on the walls in pale oak frames. On the back wall was a tapestry hanging beneath a round stained-glass window that cast a warm magenta light over a desk strewn with papers.

“Good afternoon. Miss Zhang isn’t it?” The Mother Superior held out her hand and shook it firmly. “Please, sit here.”

The Mother’s head was covered with a veil but a few wisps of curly grey hair had escaped and framed her oval face. She had intelligent brown eyes.

“It’s good of you to meet me,” said Bo.

“If it helps to find out what happened to Sister Manson then I’m happy to help.”

Bo took the upright chair with a hard wooden back. The room was untidy and stacked full of cardboard boxes on the floor. Books had fallen over on the shelves and files were lying all over the large, ornately carved desk.

“I know,” said the Mother Superior reading Bo’s expression of surprise. “I have to move out of here tomorrow. There’s a leak over there and every time it rains a steady trickle of water falls into that bucket but the time has come to fix it. Dreadful nuisance. I’ve been in here for sixteen years. Sixteen years! Do me good to move, won’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” said Bo, smiling.

“Hmm. Now then, how can I help you?”

“As I said on the phone, I’ve been going over Vanessa Manson’s medical records. I presume you knew about her feet?” Bo looked her straight in the eye.

“Yes, of course. She never once complained but I know that her feet caused her a great deal of discomfort. And she walked everywhere, never caught a bus.”

“Yes, it must have been very awkward for her,” said Bo.

“Yes, it was. She had to have her shoes made specially. Dreadful nuisance.”

A John Grisham novel stood on the shelf.

“Where did she get them made?”

“I don’t know but it wasn’t around here. She always took the day off when she needed to collect a new pair of shoes. Let me see...I think it was Salisbury she went to. Yes, yes, that’s it. Salisbury. I don’t know any more than that, I’m afraid.”

“What sort of work did Sister Manson do?”

“Sister Manson was an exceptional woman. Exceptional! She spent her life helping criminals adjust to life outside prison, finding them jobs or helping them stay off drugs. She even taught a few poor souls to read.”

“What sort of woman was she? I mean was she a very private person or was she chatty like you?”

“Chatty! Oh, I’m so sorry, I’m just upset about the move. I’m not normally...”

“No, no, I didn’t mean to be rude,” said Bo.

“No, dear, you’re not rude at all. Chatty, goodness me! But you’re right about Sister Manson, she was very private.” The nun placed her hands on the desk and leant forward, her beady eyes darting over Bo’s face. “How on earth did you guess?”

“I was just wondering if she ever discussed her feet with one of her clients. It seems unlikely, doesn’t it?”

A bell began to chime. The sound was so loud that it made Bo jump out of her seat.

The Mother laughed not unkindly and then said “I’ll have to go in two minutes, I’m afraid. I have no idea if she ever discussed her feet with her clients. I doubt it but then again if she saw someone with a disability she might have shared her own problems...yes, that’s a possibility. She was very empathic. Do you know, Miss Zhang, I’ve never thought of that before?”

“Could you give me a list of all the names of her clients for the last five years of her life?”

“Not now but yes. Yes, of course. If it will help you to find out what happened to Sister Manson, then of course. It would be a great weight off my mind to know what happened even if...even if...”

“Thank you so much.” Bo stood up to shake her hand.

“My dear, do you mind if I say something personal?” said the nun.

“Not at all, please go ahead.”

“It really doesn't suit you to wear black against your lovely pale skin. Wear some colour! You're not going to a funeral, dear.”

“Oh, well I usually...” Bo ran her hands down her black trousers.

“I hope you don't think I've been impertinent?”

“No, no, of course not,” said Bo.

“It's just that I see you're not wearing a ring and you're such a pretty girl, dear, I wouldn't mention it otherwise,” said the nun.

“Thank you, I'll experiment with some colour.”

“That's an excellent idea, Miss Zhang, excellent! Try red, I have a hunch it would suit you.”

Ever since Mr Axe had peered in through the windows of Lola's house everyone agreed it was best if Lola and Greta stayed with Kate for the time being. The kitchen smelt of fresh bread, cooling on a wire rack beside the oven. The smell hooked Lola straight back to her childhood AM (after mum) when Kate had bought a bread maker and set about experimenting with different types of flour... warmth, safety and sometimes even normality. Her father hiding behind the newspaper, leaving everything to Kate although she was only fourteen years old. Lola wanting to help, sticking her fingers into the dough and her big sister slapping them away.

Their Dad wasn't really interested in what they ate, only its regularity, so cooking was yet another task that had fallen to Kate. She planted vegetables in tidy rows in their garden, bought a revolving spice rack, and a shiny silver thermos flask especially for homemade yoghurt. The early catastrophes were replaced by healthy choices – Kate was a fast learner.

Despite another long day in Winchester, Marc was working in the study, preparing his next case. Through his closed door they could hear the background beat to *Common People*.

Cold and silver shone the full moon. It radiated a harsh light through the window; its beams cast shadows in front of objects, illuminating a row of wooden elephants. Backlit with a streak of white light they appeared to move, one foot in front of the other – a silent journey along the bookshelf.

Lola picked up the photos on the kitchen island that Bo had sent through to Marc's computer. He had printed them off although they weren't much help. Mr Axe had managed to avoid the night vision camera full on. The best shot showed a bulky man from the back with his arm raised while he was spraying Bo's car. Another zoomed in shot revealed that he wore a Timex watch with a black leather strap. More telling was the wide gold band on the fourth finger of his left hand. The poor woman.

Lola paced around the island, trailing her finger across the black granite. Two circuits later she stopped and stared at the photos lying on top.

"I can't remember what Mum looks like," she said.

"Really? Well I stole a family photo album from Dad if you want to have a look at it."

"I remember she had auburn hair like me, great thick stuff like a rope hanging down her back," said Lola.

"Yep, she was lovely. You look more like her than me."

"And I remember she had a particular smell."

"No she didn't," said Kate.

"Oh I don't mean she smelt. No, it was appley."

"Don't be silly."

"Apple pies with cinnamon."

"Here we go," said Kate.

"All right, well what do you remember?"

"She read us stories," said Kate. "Do you remember *The Hound of the Baskervilles*?"

"Yes! She sat on my bed and stroked my back while reading. Have you still got it? I want to hold that book right now," said Lola. "Mum always used to quote Arthur Conan Doyle, do you remember?" Lola deepened her voice and lifted up her chin as she pretended to be her mother quoting Doyle. "*The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.*"

A few minutes later Kate came back into the kitchen holding an old leather-bound copy of the book. She sniffed it, remembering. But she didn't hand it over. Instead, she walked over to the sofa and patted the space next to her.

"Are you sitting comfortably?" Kate said. "Then we'll begin."

"*Mr Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night, was seated at the breakfast table. I stood upon the hearth-rug and picked up the stick which our visitor had left behind him the night before. It was a fine, thick piece of wood, bulbous-headed, of the sort which is known as a "Penang lawyer."*"

Kate paused where she should, stressed the right words, just the way their mother would have done so that Lola was again transported back through time. She shut her eyes and it wasn't long before the smell of the bread cooling on the wire rack had transformed itself into apples and cinnamon.

"...*Now is the dramatic moment of fate, Watson, when you hear a step upon the stair which is walking into your life, and you know not whether for good or ill.*"

Kate lingered over the phrase ‘for good or ill’. She looked up, caught Lola’s eye then stopped as if paralysed.

“I don’t think I can go on,” Kate said. She fingered the soft worn leather of the bound copy and then closed the book, hugging it to her chest. “I miss her too, you know.”

“It’s all right,” said Lola. “I’ll read it later, once I’m in bed.”

Kate walked back to the sink to finish washing the dishes. Lola picked up the book but she didn’t read it, just ran her fingers up and down the smooth leather cover.

“Did Biff’s burial go okay?” Kate said, as she scrubbed out the bread tin.

“Fine.”

“And how’s Hunter?”

“How the bloody hell should I know? He never gives me straight answers.” Lola turned her back on Kate.

“Only asking... wanna talk about it?”

“No, I’m fine.” said Lola, straightening her back.

“Okay, you’re fine. That’s good. You’re over him.”

Lola brought her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. “Well, I should be by now, shouldn’t I? He’s married to Beth and...”

“Do you still love him?” Kate said, turning to face her. Lola raised her eyebrows. Kate walked towards her and sat back down beside her on the sofa. She reached over and picked a strand of hair off Lola’s cheek.

“It was once so strong, so wild, so exciting and...so damn complicated,” Lola tugged at her ear.

“That’s more than most couples ever have.” Kate reached out and touched her arm.

“Is it like that for you and Marc?”

“No, no. We’re down to earth,” said Kate. “We’re solid. Neither of us can be pushed around. Marc’s reliable...when he’s not falling asleep with exhaustion.”

“Trouble in paradise?” said Lola.

“No, no, we’re fine.” Kate crossed her arms and looked away.

“Are you saying I can be pushed around?”

“You’re easily persuaded, Lola. A river would flow around me but go through you.”

Lola spread her fingers, as if imagining water seep between them. And then she shook her head, dismissed the image, knowing it was big sister slap down.

“What a mess,” Lola said, scrunching her fingers into a tight ball, a fist ready to hit something.

“What?” Kate gave Lola a searching look.

She let out a long, slow breath. “I slept with Hunter after we buried Biff.”

Kate rubbed her lips together and then frowned. “Oh no,” she said. “Bad idea, for you I mean. I don’t give a damn about him.”

“Why?”

“You want my professional opinion, or a sisterly opinion?”

“Not now, Kate, just talk to me properly.”

“Well, you think you have a secret buried in your mind and you can’t get at it. This secret has something to do with Hunter, doesn’t it? Connecting with him isn’t dealing with it though. Using sex like that, even if he seduced you, well...it’s just suppressed the problem even further. You need to talk to him across a table, at a distance so he can’t touch you. Don’t stop until it’s out. And don’t leave it too long. There.”

Lola stared at Kate with her mouth open. Kate put her arms around Lola and stroked her back.

“It wasn’t me...I went for a run...I wasn’t there at the time,” Lola searched the floor for answers.

“It isn’t me you need to talk to. Come on, Mouse, it’s time for bed.”

“I won’t be able to sleep,” said Lola. “You go but I think I’ll just go for a short walk.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“Of what? The dark? Of tripping over another lunatic? No, I’m more afraid of Hunter than what’s out there.” She gestured to the window.

“Then I’m coming too. So long as it’s a short walk as I’ve got to drive back into my office after this,” said Kate, “I’ll just tell Marc.”

They closed the door behind them. Outside the full moon seemed to pulse with life, as if it was breathing heavily in the starry sky. A startled squirrel darted up a tree and Kate jumped and then laughed. Lola made ghost-like ooh-ooh noises that rose and fell and lifted up her hands, spread her fingers and rolled her eyes. Kate drew back so she stopped.

A few street lamps were switched on further into the village but here the narrow lane was murky and quiet, a jigsaw of mottled shadows. A stoat scuttled along beside the

edge of the hedge and then underneath it. Further on a few black and white cows looked up, surprised, shook their heads and then went back to munching the grass.

“We never do this in the dark,” said Kate.

“Why not?”

“We’re usually tired by the time we’ve eaten, washed up and done the preparation for the next day’s work,” said Kate.

“How romantic.”

“We can’t all be unpredictable.”

“Hey, I’m tired of this,” said Lola. “What’s wrong with spontaneity?”

“It doesn’t go with planning.”

“You work too hard, Kate, you bake too much, you worry too much and you plant too many bloody vegetables that nobody eats.”

“Well, I eat them and-”

“Admit it,” said Lola, “you’re just too perfect.”

“If only. I can’t...we’ve been trying...we didn’t think we’d wait until after the wedding-”

“Look out!” Lola grabbed Kate’s arm and shoved her into the hedge as a car skidded around the bend, almost knocking them down. A young blonde driving a black Volvo made no attempt to slow down.

“Crazy woman!” Lola said. “What were you saying? Something about your wedding?”

“Nothing. Let’s go back. Come on, let’s go home.” Kate linked arms with Lola and pulled her back towards the cottage.

The moment they opened the door the yeasty whiff of the bread cooling hit Lola in the nose and then in the stomach.

“I’m glad I’m here,” said Lola, “with you.”

“Me too,” said Kate. “Good night, sleep tight.”

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite,” Lola blew Kate a kiss.

Kate opened the door to Marc’s study. “I’ve left some files I need to work on at my office. I’ll have to drive in and get them.”

“Must you?” Marc looked up.

“Yep, it can’t wait.” Kate folded her arms across her chest. “My meeting’s at nine and I need to prepare some stuff.”

“All right, love,” said Marc. “You know best.”

“Don’t wait up for me,” said Kate and closed the study door.

In the gloaming the soldiers march, left right left right left right, the guns heavy on their shoulders, shiny barrels polished sharp, reflect the moonlight and show their faces in blocks of grey and less grey, rectangles of jowels, cheeks, sunken faces, hollow eyes, keep it up, keep it going, left right left right left right, the volley of gunfire comes louder, nobody reacts, just keep marching, through the woods, tall trees, thick here, fat bark dark bark, wide trees, thin trees, difficult to see but just keep marching left right left right let right, black polished boots, silver eyes and thick laces, stomp the mud, squelch, splat, left right left right left right, deep puddles, wet and slick, through the trees, into the night, deeper, further, onwards, onwards, find a deep hole, dug out, digging, soil over shoulders, soldiers digging, earth flying upwards, dark brown, deep brown, earthy brown, inside, into, deeper now, darker flecks of soil, there now, there it is, babies, bodies, fat little legs, heaped on top of each other, lots of chubby little thighs, an arm pokes out of the soil, so many, not smiling, not jiggling, still, inert, with soil for blankets, covering, cover ‘em up, now, cover ‘em up, heap up the earth, pat it down, dead babies, dead, dead, dead, look up and there’s the poacher, shoulder bag, leather, straps silver buckles and creased leathery dark, rabbits slung over his shoulder, rusty brown and white, floppy ears, bunny tail, bobby tail, white fur, in it goes, on top of the babies, so many rabbits, bob bob bob, in they go, into the hole, soft and fluffy, bloody fluff, flecks of blood, the poacher looks up, sees you watching, watches back, takes his time, watching, waiting, running now, faster, fast, fast, faster, darting through the trees, faster, faster, or you’ll be next.

When Lola woke up she had twisted the sheet across her chest and her legs were uncovered. She was groggy and sweaty, unable to lift her head off the pillow, heavy with fear. Marc was beside her, running his hand over her back saying “shh, it’s just a dream, it’s over.”

Even though her eyes were open and she could see Marc she was still pulled downwards, unable to focus or organise her thoughts. She was naked beneath the sheets.

Marc had slipped in beside her and continued to stroke her back. His fingers ran up her spine and began to knead her shoulders. He repeated the same phrase, and then said “go back to sleep.” She could feel the warmth of his leg pressed next to hers and then she realised he was naked too. She snapped fully awake and sat up with a gasp.

In the same instant the overhead light switched on and Kate stood in the doorway.

“What the fuck are you two doing?” Kate was still dressed in her suit, carrying her brief case and jingling her car keys.

“Nothing,” Marc leapt out of the bed. “Lola was shouting, she was having a nightmare, didn’t you hear her?”

“No, I bloody didn’t,” Kate shouted. She scrunched up her beetroot face, taking in her naked sister with her copper hair rippling down her shoulders.

“Shh, Kate, you’ll wake Greta,” said Marc.

“Don’t tell me to shh in my own home, you skunk,” said Kate. “Get some clothes on. Now!”

Marc disappeared into the other bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

“And there’s me thinking we’d made progress,” she shouted at Lola. “Ha bloody ha.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking Kate,” said Lola, covering herself with the sheet. “I didn’t ask him to wake me up, for God’s sake.”

“Get out! Get dressed and leave this minute. My own bloody sister.”

“What about Greta?”

“Take her too.” said Kate. “Go on, get dressed and fuck off.”

“Where shall I go? Lola said.

“Your problem. Go on, get out of here.” Kate yanked off the sheet and stood bunching it in her hand while Lola scrambled into her clothes. The yellow light elongated her limbs and the smooth flat muscles in her legs.

“Should have known,” Kate said and then she picked up the leather bound copy of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and threw it at Lola. It caught her on the shoulder and Lola spun around. The spine of the book broke and pages fluttered to the ground. Sentences, words, dots and dashes slithered in a heap around her painted toes.

“Stop it, Kate, you’re hurting me. You’ve got it all wrong. I’m going but just stop it, please.”

Lola fetched Greta in the next door room. She was already sitting up in bed staring wide-eyed and she leant forward to hug Lola. Greta grabbed her bag and followed Lola into the car. She didn't even bother to ask if they were having another adventure as they sped off into the black, black night.

An almost full moon stood high in the sky. It lit up the dew like diamonds sprinkled on top of the hedgerows. Lola didn't know where to drive. She left the village and continued south towards Porton, searching for a hotel although she knew there were none in the vicinity. She glanced at her watch, 3.48am. It would be impossible to find a B & B open at that hour. She pulled her jacket closer around her shoulders. The moon shed a bluish light over the trees and branches, turning them into the smooth, metal barrels of guns. *Was this a sign?*

Greta yawned and rubbed her eyes. Lola came to a crossroads. On impulse she turned left and pulled into a lane, found a gate open and drove into a field. It would be just over an hour before dawn rose. They bumped along for a bit and then stopped in the lea of a tall hedge. It would have to do. She adjusted the back seats to lie flat and spread out Biff's worn car blanket on top of Greta and herself. His rank, doggy smell was comforting.

"I'm sorry, sweat pea," Lola whispered into Greta's ear. "Tomorrow will be better, I promise."

"It's all right, Mum. We're together, that's all that matters."

"Try and get some sleep. Oh!" Lola jumped. "What was that?"

"Just an owl," said Greta. "It's saying goodnight. There it goes again, hoot toot. Are you all right, Mum?" Greta snuggled up close. "Shall I tell you a story?"

"Not now, love, let's try and sleep."

When Lola felt Greta's body relax and her breathing deepened, she turned over, brought her knees up to her chest in a tight ball and thought about Marc. Was he really that stupid? Was it lust, concern, or something else that brought him into her bed? Then she went over the scene with Kate walking along the lane in the darkness and remembered that Kate had been trying to tell her something just as the Volvo almost veered into them. Something about the wedding...*we've been trying*...and then it hit Lola. She stared out into the darkness and could see the vague tree trunks huddled together, guarding her. Was Kate infertile?

And then she allowed herself to switch her focus to Hunter. Analysis slipped away and all she could do was slide back into body memories. She felt the caress of his hands, the warmth of his breath, trusting him, believing in the moment. And then the ice needle of his words. The sharp sting of Beth's name, one short syllable, just after she had knocked

her own barriers down, brick by brick. Even pressed against Greta's back, Lola felt the night chill seep into her bones and thicken her blood. She shivered like a yo-yo on a taut string.

The hard surface of the car seat dug into Lola's back and she turned, trying to get comfortable. She wanted to be home, in her own bed, not trying to sleep in the back of her car. It was undignified. *It's not fair. It's not my fault. I've got to turn things around, but how?* The wafting smell of baby milk took advantage, exploited. It barged into her head and lingered. Lola clung to Greta's warm body and wiped her nose with Biff's blanket and tried to steady her breathing. Through the car window she could see hundreds of stars. Brilliant galaxy. Somewhere up there Stevie rocked in a cradle stitched together from tiny gems of blue-white light.

In the cold dawn blush Lola woke, sat up and rubbed the grit out of her eyes. She left Greta sleeping inside the car. A fog had rolled in over the field like skeins of grey wool, bunched and knitted together over the summer grass. She studied her surroundings. Layered, quiet, deceptive. Lola walked towards a river. A few black moorhens dipped their heads in and out of the water. What should her next move be? Fog started to unravel above the flat water and beams of sunlight broke up the grey blanket. It would be hot later. Squatting down to splash water over her face she caught sight of her reflection. A brown trout broke the surface just inches from her nose, buttery yellow with orange spots. She jumped back, startled. It wracked the picture with lines, broken glass, her face disappearing then reappearing in a different guise.

They drove into Amesbury, past the old church and towards her home. Greta spotted a large bouquet of flowers lying on the doorstep in front of their house so Lola stopped and Greta ran out. She came back to the car carrying a bunch of white lilies wrapped in pale blue cellophane tied up with string. The small card tucked into the bouquet read "For Mrs Hunter, in memory of Biff who brightened up my days. God bless, Mrs Wyse."

The lilies had opened up. How long they had been sitting on her doorstep? There was no point in keeping them as Lola had no intention of staying in her own home for the time being. It didn't seem right just to chuck them in the bin. She brushed off the orange pollen from Greta's nose and together they tried to think of someone to give them to.

"Peace offering to Kate," said Lola, more to herself.

“Give them to Grandpa as a late birthday present,” said Greta.

“No, he gave mum’s ring to Anna. Who else?”

“The lady that died in the river,” said Greta. “Her family must be sad.”

“Bingo.”

Lola found a telephone directory in a café and then looked up Stella Jacobs’ address. She lived in Gauntlet Road. She removed the card from Mrs Wyse and set off, driving north of the village until they found the right road and parked. Lola was about to ring the door bell when she hesitated, unsure what to say to the husband just back from Afghanistan. She left the bouquet on the doorstep.

Lola took Greta for breakfast at the Friar Tuck Café at one end of the town’s main drag on Salisbury Street. She pushed the brass scimitar door handle and settled into a booth with fake red leather seats. There was a slash on Lola’s seat and she prodded the brown foam underneath. This morning she didn’t care that the café was furnished with white plastic chairs, enormous strip lights that cast a yellowish tinge over the customers, and massive plates of food that glistened with oil. Greta deserved all the comfort she could eat. “Have whatever you want,” Lola said, pushing the menu towards her.

“Really? Even the Stonehenge Special?” Greta’s eyes widened. “With venison sausages and honey-cured bacon?” She tapped the menu.

“That’ll put hair on your chest.”

“But Mum, I don’t want hair on my chest.”

“It’s just an expression...you won’t...never mind.”

The deep-fat chip pan sizzled even though it wasn’t yet eight o’clock in the morning. The overhead extractor fan wasn’t working and a warm, greasy fug settled over the customers like a favourite jumper worn three days in a row.

Lola ordered the Stonehenge Special, coffee and toast for herself. Just as she was sitting back down she heard a knock on the window. She glanced up. Chief Inspector Morten Fox smiled at her. He waved then opened the café door, marched towards them and sat down opposite her.

“Mind if I join you?” He was wearing uniform and everyone stopped talking for a couple of seconds. “Morning all,” he said in a loud voice, waving one arm around the neon-lit room until the squaddies, bikers and lorry drivers started up again with a hub-bub of escalating noise.

“Please do, Inspector,” said Lola, feeling her cheeks colour slightly, as if she was guilty.

“Don’t mind them,” he gestured towards the staring customers. “Surprised to find you in this greasy spoon.”

“Long story,” said Lola, looking at the table. She picked up the ketchup in a bottle shaped like a tomato and felt the weight of it in her hand.

“It usually is.” He straightened the collar on his shirt.

The white Formica table hadn’t been cleaned. The previous customer left a trail of crumbs and eggy spittle across the top. Morten fetched a paper napkin and wiped up someone else’s mess. The room doubled up inside like the Tardis, with its mirrored walls echoing into eternity.

Lola put the ketchup bottle back and tried to smooth down her unbrushed hair. Morten’s eyes took in Greta’s rumpled clothes and matted hair.

“And you must be...?”

“Greta.”

“Good morning young lady. Didn’t your aunt give you breakfast?”

Greta was about to speak when Lola gave her a soft kick in the leg. “Not this morning,” Lola said. Fox glanced at Greta, caught the wince on her face and then sighed.

“More trouble?” He raised his bushy eyebrows.

“A little misunderstanding, that’s all.” Lola smiled. “Families, huh?”

Fox chuckled. “Tell me about it.”

The waitress put down an enormous plate of sausages, eggs, bacon, hash browns, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms in front of Greta and gave the coffee to Lola.

“Tuck in,” Fox said to Greta. “Morning Susie,” he said to the waitress. “I’ll have one of those too.”

“Have you found out anything else about that creep?” Lola said.

“Not much. Our boys in forensics have used laser techniques to try and lift prints from the body but without much success. Pity we haven’t found the...” Fox glanced at Greta, “weapon.”

“Do you think he knew the young woman?” Lola looked up into his face.

“Good question. I have a hunch that he did but I’m not sure at the moment. Anyway, we can’t assume that he was acting alone.” Fox was eyeing Greta’s plate.

“Are your hunches usually correct?”

“Yes. Unfortunately,” he said. “That’s why I smoke.” He drummed his fingers on the table.

“I keep thinking about the hand...you know,” she looked at Greta. “I keep wondering about what hands *mean*. How we use them to connect with people. They’re our social glue, if you know what I mean.” She picked up her coffee and blew across the surface. “Do you think this man is part of a sect and he wanted to punish that young woman?”

“Maybe he was just high on drugs. Don’t think about it, Mrs Hunter. Leave that to me.”

Lola looked at his wide hands resting on the table. He had clean, clipped nails and a few dark hairs on the back of his fingers. She had a sudden longing to reach out and touch them. The need was so strong that it shocked her. She barely knew him. *God, I’m so tired of all this. Let me curl up and go to sleep beside you.* She rubbed her eyes and yawned. *When I wake up I’ll discover this was just a bad dream and things will go back to normal.*

“Do you think you’re dealing with a madman?” she said instead.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Fox brought out a cigarette, looked at it and then put it back in the packet. “Madmen don’t act in predictable patterns. It isn’t easy to categorise them.”

“Well, do you have a better theory?” Lola leant her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands.

“We’re following up all the leads we can. That’s what we do...we don’t rush into theories.”

“Do you think you’ll catch him?”

“Yes. Definitely. It’s just a question of when.”

“Are you always this sure of yourself?” Lola was surprised by her own cheek. She didn’t mean to give offence; in fact she was encouraged by his confidence. Right now she needed him to be certain.

Fox laughed. His eyes creased and he threw back his head as if she had said something funny or daft. She didn’t know which. But he didn’t reply. She laughed too and for a moment the simple reflex of her own laughter made her feel happy. And then Greta put down her fork and joined in and that made Fox laugh even louder.

One of the squaddies with a number one haircut looked up. "Crime's such a joke these days." He spoke in a loud voice.

Fox's laughter extinguished. "Give over," he said, without a hint of animosity.

Lola took another sip of her coffee. "I wish I'd been braver and confronted him. That woman might not be dead if I hadn't run away and hid in the wheat field." Lola played with the ketchup bottle again and a red slurrp oozed from the ill-fitting lid over her finger.

"You don't really mean that, do you?" Fox said. "I'd be dealing with two bodies right now if you'd been stupid enough to take him on. There's a time and a place for bravery and that wasn't it." He watched her put the bottle down then lick her finger clean.

"Do you know when she died? Was it after Biff or before?"

"A few hours before your dog, between two and three hours to be more precise, so you couldn't have saved her even if you'd tried." He moved the ketchup bottle out of her reach.

"I still wish I was brave." Lola smiled at the admission, twirling her springy, copper hair.

"Are we talking about something else?" He toyed with his cigarette packet. "You seem plucky enough to me."

When she looked up she saw a row of Inspectors reflected in the mirrors, each one a little smaller than the one before but each one had raised eyebrows with a furrow in between. There was no place to hide.

"Really?"

"There are two types of people in this world, Mrs Hunter. Those that face trouble and those that run for cover. It might surprise you to know that making a run for it is the smart choice." He twisted the cigarette packet in his hand.

"Am I making you nervous?" Lola pointed to the packet spinning in his hand.

"No, no," he said, "it's not you." He looked out the window, then back at her face. "I've got a meeting with the press next. It doesn't matter how careful I am with my answers to their questions because they always manage to twist my words and make us look incompetent."

Lola wanted to say something reassuring but she wasn't sure what. She hadn't expected the inspector to reveal any anxiety. Just as she was about to say something Susie returned with a second heaped plate and gave it to Fox.

“Here you are, Sir. No mushrooms and extra hash browns.”

“Thanks Susie.”

“That’ll put hair on your chest,” Greta said in a serious voice.

Fox smiled and clapped a hand over his broad chest. “You bet.” He winked.

Lola watched the two of them eat, noisily. They were busy comparing sausages. By the time the waitress brought over her toast she had lost her appetite. She peeled back the lid of the tiny plastic container and spread pink goo on her toast. Must be someone’s idea of a sad joke to call it Raspberry Jam. The toast was too hard to swallow so she pushed the plate away. She wanted to ask the Inspector if he knew about Stevie, if he had talked to that woman, Sergeant Rash. And how much did he know about her ex-husband? *It wasn’t my fault*, she wanted to say. *Even if that’s the way it looks.*

Fox looked up and caught her staring at his face. His sharp brown eyes flickered back and forth, as if trying to gauge her thoughts. “Things aren’t always what they seem, are they?”

“No,” Lola said. “I mean yes, you’re right.”

“There’s been many a time when I read a file and found out later that mistakes had been made. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes not.” Fox put his knife and fork together and pushed his plate away. “The trick is knowing which is which.” He looked at his watch and stood up. “Better be off. If you see my wife or doctor, just keep this big breakfast a secret, all right Greta?” He patted her on the shoulder. “And Mrs Hunter, if there’s something else you want to ask me, or tell me, you know where to reach me,” he slid his card across the table. “I’m all ears.”

He stood up from the cherry-red booth and left. When he reached the café door he turned back and gave Lola a half salute, as if she was his boss. A few minutes later they followed him out of the café. She felt Susie’s eyes all over her back.

Lola dropped off Greta at her school and then drove to work. She stayed in the car for a few minutes as she gathered herself together, then climbed out and locked it. She joined the throng of teachers and noisy pupils for another working day. Her pupils had brought in unwanted old hardback books, encyclopedias, dictionaries and art books. The plan was to cut into the books, exposing select images and text to create intricate three-dimensional new works. As examples Lola had experimented with a few of Hunter’s old dictionaries and created fantastical stories that she had carved out and then sealed with

varnish. Grotesque stories within stories now emerged from these old books that would otherwise have ended up in bins. While her pupils loved the ripping up part of the lesson, they were less keen to reinvent new works. Next week's project, she decided, would involve melting down old cassette tapes and turning them into full-size figures or animal skeletons.

At lunch time she was sitting in the prefabricated Staff Room - grey carpet and beige walls with no pictures, not one - sipping tea out of a stained mug and eating a stale digestive biscuit. Lola was wedged between the Principal, Andrew, who was in full flow about his dinner party and the chemistry teacher who dismissed art as a waste of time when her phone buzzed. It was Marc. Her first impulse was to ignore it.

"Yes?" She hoped she sounded cold and distant.

"I didn't mean any harm," Marc said, "you've got to believe me."

"You're an idiot." Lola waited for a reply but Marc waited. "You've put Kate and me back by about two years."

"You were moaning, you were shouting," and then in a softer voice, "I was worried about you."

"Couldn't you have been worried with some clothes on?"

Andrew rolled his eyes at her and Lola shook her head. She moved over to the window, putting the glass table with the coffee machine between her and the rest of the staff.

"I don't wear pjs," he said.

"More than I need to know, soon to be brother-in-law."

"Not so soon," Marc sighed. "The wedding's off."

"Oh no." *Don't do this Kate. You know you've got it wrong.* "Just talk to her, Marc. Make it right."

Through the window Lola watched a group of girls toss a ball to each other in the playground below. It flew around and then a skinny girl dropped it and the rest all jeered.

"I guess I just didn't think."

"I thought you were trained to think about consequences, Your Honour, even at night time."

"Not you too," Marc said.

“Kate was busting to get me out of her hair and you provided the perfect excuse to get rid of me. Well, we’re gone. So you work on my sister and make things right between you, okay?”

“Where did you go last night?”

“We slept in the car in a field just a few miles outside your village. Correction, Greta slept and I mostly studied the stars.”

The Principal stood up and moved towards the glass table to fetch another cup of coffee. He lingered as he added milk and then sugar, looking at Lola while she continued talking on the phone but she couldn’t read his expression.

“Where are you going to stay now?” Marc said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure what to do next.”

“Stay with Bo. She’s expecting your call. You’ve got her number, haven’t you?”

“Bo? I don’t know,” said Lola. “She’s not very friendly; I don’t think she likes me.”

“Give her a chance... once you two get to know each other I think you’ll get on just fine. I’ve got to go. Call Bo. And Lola, I’m here if you need me.”

Lola hoped her neck hadn’t turned red. She didn’t want to explain to the teachers looking in her direction that she was living in a car these days. The chemistry teacher had an expression on her face that said *those arty types are just so disorganised*. Didn’t anybody understand her growing sense of isolation? Couldn’t they see that things just happened without her permission?

Bo waved to Lola when she walked across the school car park, carrying a pile of books with their guts ripped out. She was unable to wave back but Lola tipped her head upwards to show she had seen her and the top book, an unabridged dictionary with a carved interior, slithered from her grasp. As Lola bent down to retrieve it the pile slipped and she dropped the lot into a puddle.

“Damn.”

“Doesn’t look as if it matters.” said Bo.

“Fortunately we varnished the carvings this morning. A few splashes will be okay, they’ll just tell a different story.”

“Here, let me help you.” Bo picked up half the books and left the rest for Lola. Together they walked over to Lola’s car and put them into the boot. Bo made no comment when Lola rearranged the back seats into their upright position and tossed Biff’s blanket to one side.

“I’d invite you in to my new home but there’s not much room,” said Lola, pointing to the car, “and there’s no food in the glove box.”

“Yeah, Marc mentioned it,” Bo grinned. “He bought us tickets to the circus for tonight’s show.” Bo pulled out three orange tickets from her pocket. “For Greta, you and me.”

“I think we had a rehearsal last night,” said Lola. “Did Marc mention that?”

“Not really, only that Kate chucked you out. He asked if you could stay with me for a few days.” Bo’s shoulders fell forwards.

“Look, there’s no need,” said Lola. “We can stay with my Dad.”

“Marc told me about Anna and how much you like her. And it’s not safe for you to go home. I’m not used to sharing my space but I’ll cope.”

“Are you sure?” Lola said. “We’ll try and keep out of your hair.”

“Just don’t cook meat. I can’t stand the smell, or the sight of it.”

Lola collected Greta and they followed Bo’s car along the narrow roads and into Wilton. Traffic was busy at this time of day but it was an exaggeration to call it rush hour.

Bo made up the double bed in the spare room. Greta talked to Fang who pecked her arm while she stroked his blue head. “Hola, hola, hola!” The bird cried out in staccato bursts until Greta realised it was best to ignore him.

The small house held few clues. It was neat and tidy. No photos or pictures adorned walls or shelves. Instead there were literally hundreds of books stacked in piles on the floor as there were no bookshelves either. The main focus in the living room was a wide computer screen which gave off a low static hum and a blue light when in power saving mode. The living room had French windows which opened onto a back porch with a swing chair overlooking a garden without flowers but plenty of spiky and tall plants.

When Greta opened the pantry in the kitchen she whistled. Lola came over and together they peered inside. Stacks of glass jars and plastic boxes held different types of beans, pulses and dried peas. Flour was divided into wholemeal, almond, rice, bran, plain and self-raising. Spices had a similar treatment only in smaller containers. Vanilla bean pods in tall jars, saffron threads in a tiny box and garam masala in another with Bo's distinctive, spidery writing on each label. Lola knew that Kate would have been impressed. Greta picked up a can of chick peas and it slithered out of her fingers and fell onto the floor. The rickety clack made Lola jump. When Bo came up to the pantry she closed the door.

"Keep your nose out," she said to Greta. "Monsters live in there and if things get untidy the monsters go mad."

"You like cooking, don't you?" Greta said.

"Sometimes."

"What do you make with almond flour?"

"Bread. I'm going to sit outside for a bit. Help yourself to anything you want."

Bo had her ear plugs in and was listening to something and talking to herself while she sat in a swing chair and rocked back and forth. When Lola recognized snatches of Spanish she suppressed a small laugh – Bo wasn't crazy, just learning another language.

After dinner the three of them drove off in Bo's car to the playing fields near Old Sarum to find the circus. With its huge blue and white striped marquee it wasn't hard to spot. Queues of people snaked across the field and back up to the road. Lola was in no mood for the circus and she guessed, correctly, that neither was Bo. But this was something Marc had done for Greta and Lola understood that it was his way of apologising.

"What was Marc like when you lived with him in his teens?" Lola asked Bo while they inched forward in the queue. They had brought umbrellas with them although the rain hadn't started. Dark clouds banked up behind the hills and in the distance Lola could see

the cathedral spire, the only thing to jut into the brooding sky, much like a Constable painting.

“A terror. He played hooky most days and was on first name terms with the plods.”

“Was it you that turned him around?”

“Nope,” said Bo.

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. Something happened. Within a year he was top of the class and he stayed there ‘til he left school.”

“Do you think he’s a faithful type?”

The woman in front of them in the queue turned around and gave Lola a disarming smile.

“Why?”

“He’s engaged to my sister. I just want them to be happy.”

“There’s no such thing as a type,” said Bo.

“You know what I mean. Has he ever cheated?”

“No,” said Bo. “Not to my knowledge.”

A low rumble rippled across the sky and the first rain drops started to fall.

Umbrellas opened and within a few minutes the field had turned from brilliant green to muddy brown. A sea of multi-coloured umbrellas provided the only shelter. The rain fell, turning from a light shower to a relentless soak.

A man on stilts, one yellow leg and one red, tried to jolly the crowd. He carried a striped umbrella in one hand and juggled three balls in the other. He walked up and down the queue on the squelchy grass and but the noise level grew and the people pushed to get inside the marquee.

Within its tarpaulin walls the place was packed. Steam rose from wet customers who wriggled on the wooden boards used for seats. The place reeked of warm popcorn, and children dug into striped buckets, dropping buttery corn all over the ground. Greta leant forward to get a better view of three motorcycles that roared into the arena. The bikers leapt over each other so that the effect was flying wheels whizzing at break-neck speed in tight circles. Where were the quiet, sedate elephants that lifted up one foot to great applause?

After the bikers' departure an expectant, heavy silence deadened the crowd. A fat clown with over-sized green shoes clanked onto the stage and lifted his index finger to his lips. The silence deepened, six feet under. The clown pointed upwards and then clanked out of the arena. Everyone looked up and saw six men, or were they women, wound up tight in turquoise parachute silk. One of them dropped from the domed ceiling, unfolding the blue cloth like extendable wings as he hurled towards the ground and then stopped short, one metre above. There were oohs and aahs as the other acrobats released themselves and then pulled on ropes and flew upwards into the airy heavens. Thousands of tiny sequins stitched onto their suits glittered in the blue light so that the acrobats shimmered as if under water. Music blared from the speakers with a fast tempo. Next the acrobats swung from trapezes, one to the other, swinging backwards from bent knees and catching each other. Swooping, graceful, hypnotic. Greta's mouth formed an o shape.

Electric yellow flashes lit up the domed ceiling and for a moment Lola wasn't sure if it was stage lighting until it was followed with a deafening boom of thunder. The acrobats brought their act to a close and they cart wheeled on one hand out of the arena. Next up were two women dressed in red, skin-tight suits holding chairs. Using the chairs to balance on they went upside down and used the soles of their feet to juggle flame torches. The fat clown in orange and yellow striped pantaloons clanked back onto the arena and the jugglers flipped the torches towards him one by one so that by the end of his act he was juggling all six flame torches. He grinned a lipsticked quarter moon.

"Mum, I need to go," said Greta.

"What, now? Can't you wait?"

"No."

"Okay." Lola tapped Bo on the arm. "I'm just taking Greta outside."

Greta hopped up and down as they fought their way along the row of knees, found the isle and then ran towards the tarpaulin covered door. Outside the rain fell in sheets. They stood inside the marquee, wondering whether the rain would ease, gave up and then made a dash for the blue cubicles on the side of the hill. When they came out they opened the cubicle door and Greta was just about to run back into the marquee when Lola spotted a man staring at her. She froze.

Mr Axe had dyed his hair black but there was no mistaking his round face, broad shoulders and thin mouth. And then he smiled.

Lola grabbed Greta and shouted “Run hard. Don’t stop until I tell you.”

The two of them ran anti-clockwise around the circular marquee. Cold fear lodged in her gut. Her feet were heavy, sticky in the mud. She saw the actors’ dressing room and they leapt into it. Bikers shouted at them to get out, actors only, but Lola pushed on and found herself lodged between the clown in his striped pantaloons and the women in skin-tight suits. One of the biker’s held Greta by the hand and was about to lead her outside when Lola shouted “stop!”

Mr Axe popped his head into the dressing room. Lola and Greta were about to be kicked outside and he smiled, again. Rain slicked his hair flat against his domed forehead.

Lola and Greta slipped from the biker’s grasp and ran forwards, away from the exit, through a tunnel and onto the spotlit arena. The clown clanked after them, giant green shoes almost running, his red button nose bobbing as his arms waved up and down as he called out to the crowd.

“Gotta coupla jokers here,” he boomed. “Usually I have to beg for you lot to join in but these two couldn’t wait.”

The crowd laughed at Lola’s startled face as the hard white spotlight followed her dashing around the arena. Then a second, rose-tinted spotlight followed Greta as she ran after her mother. When the light followed Greta she stopped and waved. The crowd waved back.

“What’s your name, darlin?”

“Greta.”

“Well, gorgeous Greta, how would you like to ride a horse?”

“Let her go, please, let her go.” Lola said.

Another skinny clown led a bay pony onto the stage that clip clopped towards Greta. Its mane and tail were plaited with gold ribbons threaded into its black hair.

“Up you get, Greta.” The clown slipped a harness around Greta’s waist and attached it to a thin wire. Greta sat on the pony bare back and jiggled about as it trotted around the arena. The clown held a long training whip in one hand and made a few gentle clicking noises to keep the pony moving along. His enormous green shoes tapped the ground with rhythmic thuds.

“How’s that, Greta?” The rose tinted spotlight turned scarlet as it followed her circuit.

“Great.” She bobbed about, grabbed hold of a bunch of the pony’s plaited mane to steady herself.

“Ever ridden a pony before, Greta?”

“Yep,” she said. “Once.”

“Okay, gorgeous, stand up slowly. That’s it, Greta. You can do it. You’re gonna stand up on this pony while it keeps on trotting nice and steady.” The clown put the whip down and started clapping. The audience joined in as Greta brought her feet up onto its withers and then she tried to stand.

Just as she was making progress squatting on the pony, the wire jerked her upwards and she zoomed into the air, flew around the domed ceiling, arms flailing. The crowd went wild, clapping and laughing as one shoe fell off.

Lola stopped searching the audience to find Mr Axe. Instead, her gaze went upwards and she watched as her daughter flew around the silver spangled stars painted onto the dome of the marquee’s ceiling. Lola found Bo in the audience and waved for her to come up onstage too but Bo shook her head. It wasn’t until Lola put the edge of her hand against her wrist and made a sharp, chopping motion that Bo reacted. She leapt over the seats towards the arena. The crowd knew the two women were talking to each other but the music was too loud to hear anything they said.

Eventually, Greta descended to the floor. She curtsied without prompt. The skinny clown unclipped her harness and offered Greta a bunch of flowers. As soon as Greta held the flowers a white rabbit popped out of the bunch and skittered back to the clown. Everyone clapped. The three women were ushered back to their seats.

Bo made a call on her cell and they waited in their seats while the next act roared into focus. About ten minutes later four policemen entered the marquee, each one talking into a radio. Bo stood up and the policemen spotted her. One of them walked over to the group and escorted them out of the marquee. The crowd whispered and ripples of questions circulated around the audience.

Rain continued to drumbeat against the tarpaulin and Lola took shelter beneath one of the cop’s umbrellas.

“Did you see him too, Miss Zhang?” One of the cops said to Bo.

“No. Just Lola and Greta. He chased them into the dressing room.”

“Hello, Mrs Hunter,” said Sergeant Tony Baldwin as he ran over to Lola. “I got here as fast as I could.” He placed a hand on Lola’s arm. “Can you remember what he was wearing?”

“He was wearing blue jeans, a grey anorak and black wellies,” said Lola. “And he’s dyed his hair black. Jet black.”

“You got that, boys?” Sergeant Baldwin said. “How tall is he?”

“Tall. I’d guess about 6 feet 2,” said Lola.

“Two of you go inside and the other two stay outside. He can’t have gone far.”

“Do you need us or can we go home?” said Bo.

“If you wouldn’t mind waiting in one of our cars for a little bit longer,” said another of the cops. “Come on, I’ll take you over there.”

They followed the cop to the marked car and sat inside. He gave the keys to Bo and told her to lock the doors until he came back. It was only then, sitting in the warm fug of the car, that Lola realised she was shaking. Muddy splashes marked Greta’s red leggings and she still had one shoe missing.

“Are you okay?” said Bo.

“I’ll be fine,” Lola said.

Greta wriggled over and sat on her lap. “Did you see me flying, Mum? I nearly stood up on that horse. I was just about to do it and then wham! I was flying!”

“You were amazing,” said Lola.

“Everyone thought you were part of the act, a professional,” said Bo. “It looked as if you rode horses every day.”

“Really? Is she telling the truth, Mum?”

“Yep. You’re a natural born clown.”

Rain continued to fall. A few minutes later Sergeant Baldwin came back and tapped on the window.

“There’s no sign of him. Perhaps he’s driven off.”

“Or hiding somewhere,” said Lola.

“Did you find anything at all?” Bo said.

“We’ve got his footprints in the mud round the back of the marquee,” said Baldwin. “Big bloody feet, never seen anything like it! Must be a size 13 or 14.”

“Wide too?” said Bo.

“Yes, very wide,” Baldwin said.

“They might be the clown’s feet,” said Lola.

“No, we checked. Looks quite different.”

“Greta’s wet through,” said Bo. “I’d like to take them back to my place now, okay?”

“Sure,” said Baldwin. “I’ll follow you home, make sure you’re all right. Wilton, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I’ll just get my car,” said Bo.

“I hear you can fly like a bird,” said Baldwin to Greta. “When you come back to earth you might need this.” He handed her wet shoe through the window.

Bo didn’t talk much on the drive home. She was thinking about the killer. They were no closer to finding a motive but the nutter out there might be about to strike again.

Despite Lola's fear at the circus two evenings ago she felt safe with Bo, here in her house. Bo was calm and organised...even a little bit more friendly although the note she left saying she had gone to Edinburgh and wouldn't be home until about 8pm was perfunctory rather than friendly. Lola remembered her saying that when Pip Porter had disappeared she had left behind a baby boy and how Bo hoped she was going to find his father. She must have already driven off to Southampton airport to catch a flight to Edinburgh. The boy, (Jack or Jake?), was now six years old...the same age that Stevie should have been.

All these missed connections, delays and disappearances, what did it all mean? Lola couldn't imagine why Bo was drawn to such sad things. Solving an intellectual puzzle was one thing but dealing with broken people that suffered on a daily basis must be awful. Lola knew nothing about Bo's past except that she was raised by a foster family after the death of her parents in Taiwan. Next time she could bring herself to talk to Marc she would ask, take an interest. Why wasn't Bo earning a regular salary as an interpreter, or a teacher? No, that didn't sound right for Bo...something more independent and creative but what? Bo's face brought together her contradictory nature. Her firm pointed chin suggested strength yet her arched eyebrows made her look startled, almost vulnerable. One day Lola wanted to capture that face in paint. But since she hadn't opened her paint box for over five years that day didn't seem imminent.

Lola walked over to the board beside the fridge and looked at the photo of Tom and his nephew. Tom was a striking man. He was all angles, lean and long, yet there was something tough about his blue eyes. It was probably just over exposed but in this photo his eyes were like the overhang of a glacier. The child didn't look like him at all; he looked Mediterranean, with tight dark curls and olive skin. What would Stevie look like now? Lola put the photo back on the board and tried to imagine Stevie's face. But she couldn't get past the rounded appearance of a baby. She closed her eyes, willing a leaner face to emerge but all she could see was his button nose enclosed in soft, squashy skin.

Luke Buchanan shared his name with thirteen other men in Britain. It didn't take Bo long to make a short list of four that were a similar age to Pip. She used the electoral roll and made calls to the police in Glasgow and then Edinburgh. Next she called all four Lukes

and asked them if they had been friends with Pip Porter. One of them said yes, immediately. He had no criminal record and worked as a sales manager at a brewery in Edinburgh. Within a few hours since she began tracing Luke's whereabouts she had his address, tax number, phone, email, facebook and twitter details. Bo discussed her discovery with Tom and he agreed that Bo should meet Luke. Matilda paid for her flight.

Bo called Luke again. Luke was astonished that Tom Porter was interested in him but yes, he remembered Pip well and wanted to help.

The flight up to Edinburgh was bumpy. Thermal currents forced the small plane upwards and then it fell only to roar upwards again, jolting up and down like some erratic piece of rock music. By the time Bo descended the steps off the plane her legs wobbled; she was glad she had refused breakfast.

She sped into Edinburgh in a taxi. She was impressed with the dark Georgian architecture and sense of intrigue that permeated the streets set out on different levels. It was midsummer yet people wore coats with good reason. The taxi wove its way around elegant circular terraces, up the main street, over an ornate bridge, past the ivy covered university buildings and pulled up outside a tenement building.

When Bo rang the brass bell to the first floor apartment she began to worry. She knew that Tom and Hilary had not really thought through the ramifications of this meeting. Bo knew that seeking the truth wasn't always the easiest or best way forward.

A tall man with olive skin and shoulder length dark wavy hair answered the door. As soon as Bo saw his hair, she knew it was Jake's father. He looked more Spanish than Scottish, some throwback to the Spanish Armada crashing on the rocks in the Irish Sea.

"You must be Bo Zhang. Come in. I've got the fire going."

Bo tripped over small toys littered along the corridor. In the kitchen wet clothes were hanging up to dry on the wooden Lazy Susan winched up to the ceiling.

"Off you go Hamish. And take Evie with you," said Luke to the two small children staring up at Bo. "Go and play moving zoos and shut the door. Mandy! That PI from down south has arrived. Please keep the children in the playroom."

"Hello," said a young woman with ruddy cheeks. "I'm Mandy, Luke's wife."

"Nice to meet you," said Bo. Mandy shook her hand with a firm grip.

“You’ll be needing these,” said Mandy, sliding a plate of scones towards her. “See that she eats, Luke, she looks pale. And there’s chicken soup on the hob.” Mandy hustled the two children out of the room and sang to them before the door closed in another room.

Luke added another log to the fire beneath the wet clothes and Bo stood beside it, not sure where to put herself, or how to start.

Bo went over the story asking questions to check how much Luke knew. He remembered Pip Porter and knew that she had been missing for five years. The last time he had seen Pip was at the Solstice Festival. She had called him once after that but they had argued and lost contact. When he had heard about her disappearance on the news more than a year after he had last seen her, he assumed she had fallen in with bad company, rather than just started a new life and he didn’t think suicide was an option for someone as optimistic as Pip. He hadn’t got in touch with the police because he had nothing to say, apart from expressing his shock.

“Did you know that Pip left behind a baby boy called Jake?” said Bo.

“No,” Luke’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. He homed in on Bo’s face. “How old was he when she disappeared?”

“Jake was fourteen months old when his mum disappeared,” said Bo.

“Who’s the father?” Luke fidgeted with a scone and some plum jam, moving it around the plate, when Bo didn’t answer immediately.

“We don’t know,” said Bo. “Pip never told her family anything about the father. Last week her twin brother Tom found this photo and it was taken about the time she must have conceived.”

Luke chewed his lip. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

Bo slid the creased photo of Pip and Luke, arm in arm, laughing, across the table. He picked it up and he smiled. Then he turned it over. Pip had written *Lovely Luke Buchanan and me at the Festival*. Luke stood up and turned his back on Bo as he moved over to the window.

She stayed sitting at the table beneath the clean nappies, the towels and umpteen small clothes. Her face half hidden in the shadows cast beneath the damp clothes. She didn’t say anything for a few minutes, eating one of the scones. It was made with potatoes. Not a bad recipe. Then she pulled out her laptop, started it up and put up the photos of

Jake, now aged six. She waited for Luke to turn around and face him and then she gestured to the laptop.

“Take a look. Jake’s a stunner.”

Luke came over and stood beside her. She could see the effort in his face as he tried to control himself.

“My wild hair.” He lifted his hand, almost touching the screen. “And I bet he tans even in winter, doesn’t he?”

“I don’t know him well. But I’ve got to know Tom and his wife Hilary pretty well. You couldn’t ask for a better uncle. He dotes on the boy.”

“He looks kind,” said Luke. “What’s she like?” He pointed to Hilary.

“Hilary finds it hard.”

Luke sat down again. “Are you going to ask me to do a DNA test? I don’t think it’s necessary but I will. I want to be certain.”

“It’s up to you at this stage,” said Bo.

“Is it money they want?”

“Not really. They just want Jake to know his father since he hasn’t...”

“I can’t keep this from Mandy and I know what she’ll say.”

“What will she say?” Bo said.

“The boy should be living with his father.”

“Is that what you want, Luke?” Bo looked around at the pot of soup on the hob. She smelt the damp clothes mixed in with the clean smell of baking soda and she suspected that Mandy was the kind of woman that wouldn’t question things once a decision had been made.

“Why didn’t Pip tell me she was having my baby?” Luke said.

“Did it seem like a serious relationship? Did you two talk about a future together?”

“Everyone was crazy at that festival,” said Luke. “We stayed up all night. We barely slept for three days.”

“Did you see her again afterwards?”

“I wanted to,” said Luke. “But she met this woman and the two of them were going off travelling to Spain. She didn’t want me to come too. We argued and I never spoke to her again.”

“Yes, that was Abby,” said Bo. “Pip and Abby lived in Barcelona for six months.”

“I’ll do the test. And if he’s mine tell Tom that I’d like to meet this little boy. Jake.”

“Jake is very attached to his uncle. I want you to understand that the Family Court wouldn’t see it in Jake’s best interest for him to leave his current home.”

“Okay,” Luke looked her straight in the eye “but what if I’m the father?”

“Then that will complicate everything,” said Bo. “But it’s not up to me or you to decide what happens next. All I’ve been asked to do is find the father and find Pip. Today is the first time in this case I’ve had any sort of progress in five years.”

“When will you be meeting Pip’s brother?”

“Later today,” said Bo. “And that reminds me. Can I take your picture to show him?”

“Must you?” Luke ran a hand through his unkempt hair.

“No but it would help. As you pointed out yourself, you and Jake look similar.” Bo had already opened the camera on her laptop and turned it around and in three seconds it had taken a picture of Luke.

“Done,” said Bo and closed down her computer. She could see that Luke didn’t like the idea of being captured for later scrutiny by a complete stranger. He was shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head, as if he might jolt the image out of the computer.

“Who would have thought...” said Luke in a faraway voice. He stood up and stared up at the washing hanging above them trying to make sense of it all.

Luke offered to drive Bo back to the airport but she insisted on catching another taxi. She didn’t want to make small talk; she wanted to think about Tom and what to say if Luke turned out to be Jake’s father. Even with the Chief’s help, speeding the process up, Bo knew that it would be at least a week before she had the results of the DNA paternity test.

On the drive back she kept noticing small boys out shopping with their fathers. Boys swung plastic bags in one hand and clutched dad’s hand in the other. It was a trivial observation, the most normal thing in the world. Bo knew that there must be plenty of mums too but that afternoon she only spotted the fathers. She tried to remember shopping with her own father and failed. She stared out of the taxi window as cleaners in harnesses scrubbed the black grime off a tall church. Underneath the stonework was paler but still dark.

Just before she boarded the plane back to Southampton she called Tom. She would pick up her car at the small airport and then drive over and meet him in Salisbury. The plane journey was much smoother so she read her novel. Beside her was a girl about the same age as Greta. She kept swinging her legs and hitting the back of the seat in front of her. Her mother ignored the girl's behavior until the man in the seat turned around and yelled "stop kicking my seat, or I'll come round and sort you out." Greta wouldn't behave like that. She was glad she had bought Greta a kitsch token from Edinburgh airport. A rubber sheep blowing a bagpipe and boiled sweets in a thistle shaped tin.

Bo arrived in Salisbury and met Tom in The New Inn which, despite its name, was another medieval white-washed building with curved black beams, full of wonky walls and olde worlde charm. She walked through the small front bar and into the main part of the pub which was an amalgam of four original cottages built for stonemasons at the cathedral across the road. The exposed brick work and low beams were aching to hit tall men's heads so Bo pushed on and just as she had expected found Tom sitting in the patio garden at the back. "Good timing," he said, "I've just ordered a pint of Lemony Cricket. What can I get you?"

"Something to eat," she said. "I've only eaten a scone all day."

"I'll get the menu."

Bo sat down and tried to relax. She could see the Cathedral spire framed between hanging baskets of trailing geraniums and pink fuchsias.

"Here you go," said Tom, handing her the menu. "And here's the wine list."

"House white is fine. And I'll have a Caesar salad without the chicken." Bo couldn't quite bring herself to start the conversation. She toyed with the beer mat, feeling Tom's steely-blue eyes hover over her.

"Well?" Tom raised his eyebrows, "how did it go?"

"Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I've been a fly on your shoulder all day," he said. "I couldn't concentrate at work at all. All right, I'm not ready but I've got to know."

"Luke seems a nice enough bloke. The resemblance between Luke and Jake is uncanny. Here, I took this." Bo had taken out her laptop and opened up a photo of Luke she had taken of him earlier that day. Tom stared at the man's rugged face but Bo couldn't read his expression.

“He’s going to do a paternity DNA test,” said Bo. “He volunteered without pressure from me. If it comes back positive I think he’ll want to have some kind of relationship with Jake. He might even want Jake to live with them.”

“Them?”

“He’s married to Mandy, a real earth mother. She even washes the nappies. Hamish is aged about three and Evie is about one, just crawling.”

“An earth mother.” Tom’s face went slack and he stared off into the middle distance.

“It’s all right Tom,” she said, “as far as Jake is concerned you’re his father and have been all his life. If it comes to it, then all the courts are interested in is what’s in Jake’s best interest.”

“Not so easy, though, is it?”

“No,” said Bo. “But not so hard either.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tom, “I was forgetting that you lived with a foster family and you turned out okay.” He smiled. “No offence.”

“None taken,” said Bo. “It’s not what happens, it’s how we deal with it.” Bo sipped her wine. Tom lifted his blue eyes to hers and didn’t look away after the customary few seconds.

“So many ghosts,” he said. “Did Luke tell you anything new about Pip?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Bo, you know I told you I found that photo in a pocket of Pip’s shorts last week.”

“What of it?”

“I’ve turned her room over about a hundred times. I went through every single item of clothing and never found a thing. I just don’t know how I could have missed those shorts. Bright pink too.”

“These things happen. You think you’ve gone through everything and then realise something has been staring right at you. Something right under your nose.” As she spoke Bo remembered feeling that all paths led back to herself. She still hadn’t examined that thought thoroughly and it continued to niggle, to tease just out of reach.

“Would you think I was crazy if I told you that those shorts weren’t there before?” Tom had finished his beer and looked into the bottom of the glass. The patio garden had

filled up with a rugby team. From the loud comments and back clapping it was clear they had won.

Bo looked up. She didn't answer immediately. She never thought Tom was crazy, fixated perhaps but not crazy.

"What are you saying, Tom? Who could have put them in her bedroom? We both know your mother's a bit eccentric but she wants to know what happened to Pip just as much as you do."

"Yes, of course. I don't know what I'm saying. It's just that I swear those damned shorts weren't there before. I think I'd remember bright pink shorts, that's all.

The waitress brought over Bo's salad and Tom ordered another Lemony Cricket. Tom looked up to the left for a moment, startled. Then he looked over his shoulder and back again at Bo.

"What is it?" said Bo.

"Nothing...I just keep hearing things. God, I sound paranoid, don't I?"

"No, just stressed."

"What do you think happened to Pip? I can't stop thinking about what you said." Tom turned over his hands in his lap, staring at them as if counting his own fingers to make sure there were still ten.

"When a person disappears there are four scenarios," she said, not for the first time. "The first is that she chose to start another life. That's relevant for those with a criminal record or in debt. Very few mothers leave their children to start another life although it's not unheard of. But from all accounts Pip adored baby Jake so I think we can discount this. The second option is that she committed suicide. Since Pip had already paid for flights to Barcelona and you tell me she was excited about visiting her old friends over there then this seems unlikely. Or she could have had an accident and died. But I think we'd have found her by now if that was the case. Or fourthly she was a victim of a crime." Bo took another mouthful of her salad. "I've thought about all these for Pip and reckon the last one is the only one that makes any sense."

"But what about the sixth finger thing?"

"I don't think it is a coincidence that Pip disappeared five years ago, and that elderly nun was last seen three years ago and now Stella Jacobs has been found murdered and all of them were polydactyls."

“What’s so special about polydactyls?” Tom said.

“Not much to you or me. But who can guess what’s going on in someone’s head? I looked on the web to see if there was some religious connection and it’s mentioned in the bible. Goliath’s son had twelve fingers and toes.”

“Yes, I read that too,” said Tom. “But so what? It’s hardly a motive, is it?”

“I’m looking for connections at this stage, Tom.”

“Well it hasn’t held back tennis star Maria Sharapova, or that actress in the Bond movie, Gemma someone.”

“So you’re in good company.” Bo smiled.

“I read that some people in Africa and Eastern Europe think people with extra fingers or toes are the child of a witch. Do you think there are cults here that believe that kind of rubbish?” Tom was still fiddling with his own hands, his fingers interlaced and his thumbs were doing circles around each other.

“If folk want to get involved in witchcraft they’ll do yucky stuff and find a reason afterwards.”

Just as Bo finished the last mouthful of her salad her phone buzzed. It was her home line.

“Hello?”

“It’s Lola. There’s a cop here waiting to talk to you.”

“Who?”

“Sergeant Rash...shall I tell her to wait?”

“Yep,” said Bo. “I’ll be there in ten. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. We’ve been cooking.”

“Raiding my pantry. Okay, I’m just leaving.”

She stood up while Tom paid at the bar. He thanked Bo only this time he didn’t shake her hand. He hesitated and then he said “Do you remember playing with us when you first arrived in England?”

“Not very well,” said Bo. “I was an only child and it was all too much at first.”

“You were special, even then.” The corners of his mouth went up as he lifted his hand and his index finger connected with his thumb to form a circle, a perfect 0, before he turned and walked out of the pub.

She went over that bit again while she drove home. It sent a tingle of pleasure through her ribs. If only he wasn't a client. But he was. And she was better off alone.

Bo parked beside the cop's car outside her house. She hoped nosy Louise had done some of the spade work on the list of people Sister Manson had helped in the last few years of her life. She had faxed through the list from the Mother Superior to the Chief that morning. But why hadn't the cop just phoned with the information? Louise had never visited her before.

Her kitchen smelt of fresh baking. Greta was sitting on the benchtop beside a cake she had made. Flour was sprinkled all over the bench and Greta was using her finger to scoop out the remains of mashed banana from a bowl. Despite the mess, Bo grinned.

"It's for you," said Greta. "Mum said I wasn't allowed to cut it until you got home."

Lola and the cop were sitting in the living room drinking tea. They both looked relieved when Bo walked in.

"Hello Louise," said Bo. "Have you been working on that list I faxed over this morning?"

"What list? I'm afraid this isn't a social visit," said Louise. "I'm here on official business." She put her cup down and looked Bo straight in the eyes.

"Oh," said Bo, sitting down beside Lola. She wanted to kick her shoes off but something about Louise's tight cheeks stopped her.

"We've had three complaints about your driving in the last two days." The cop brought out her notebook and flipped over the pages until she found the right one.

"Two days ago you almost ran over a pedestrian in Amesbury at 12.14pm by the roundabout. Yesterday you were seen speeding at 9.10am outside Wilton House and then again today you were caught doing ninety in a residential street in Amesbury at 11.17am." Louise almost smiled.

"Really?" said Bo without moving a muscle. "Which residential street in Amesbury?"

"Um, he didn't say."

"He?"

"It was a Mr Short the first and last time. And Mr Cross the other time.

"And you didn't think to ask which street he saw me speeding?"

“It was the second time he’d rung in. He was so angry that I kept the conversation short.”

“What a pity,” Bo said. “You could have traced the call.”

“And why-”

“Because I haven’t been in Amesbury today. I’ve been in Edinburgh and I left my car at Southampton airport at 8.30am.”

“But-” Louise searched the room for something to help her.

“You do know that some bastard sprayed my car with an obscenity on Sunday night, don’t you, Sergeant?”

“Tony Baldwin mentioned it, yes.”

“Well, has it occurred to you that the same bastard might have remembered my number plate? Does Chief Inspector Fox know you’re here? Shall I call him and let him know?” Bo knew, of course, that Rash hadn’t told Fox about her visit but she was irritated with her insouciance.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Sergeant Rash, her face darkening. “I’m sorry for any inconvenience...”

“Just go. And when you get back to work could you get the list of criminals I faxed this morning and find out where they’re living today. It’s important Sergeant Rash. That killer is out there, close by, and I’m afraid that he will try to kill again.”

“Better get moving,” said the cop as she flipped her notebook shut and stood up. They all watched her slope out the door and drive off.

“Now let’s have some of that cake,” said Bo. “I’m starving.”

While Bo worked through her morning yoga practice she thought about missing pieces and her need to find them both personally and professionally. Despite trying to quieten the chatter in her mind, she was drawn back to her compulsion to search, like an iron filing to a magnet. She had been to a counsellor once at the insistence of the army doctor before she was posted to Afghanistan. The lady with dyed blonde hair had listened while she spoke, reluctantly, about the death of her parents. Bo had skirted around how she felt about it, refusing to acknowledge it had made much of an impact. The counsellor hadn't said a single helpful or insightful thing until right at the end when she said "shall we make another appointment to discuss your jigsaw fix?" as if it was a common ailment, like ADHD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

She moved her blue yoga mat closer to the window so that she could concentrate on the spikes of her aloe plant while she held her bridge pose. After two minutes she felt her lower back begin to resist instead of soften so she lay down flat and closed her eyes. Her stomach muscles unknotted. She was holding tension in her body and suspected she knew the reason. Right on cue the door to her cramped living room burst open and Greta peered over her in her candy striped pajamas.

"What are you doing?" Greta said and then before Bo could answer "I like your shorts."

"Yoga. I need silence so please go away."

"Can I do it with you? I won't speak, promise."

"No."

"Why not? I've done it at school. I know what to do so I won't need to pester you. Please Bo, please." Greta was already lying down on the carpet flat out beside her.

Pester was the right word. But Bo hated the fact that Greta chose it to describe herself. She nodded. "All right but no talking." She went straight into an inverted shoulder pose and supported her hips and lower back with her hands. When she next glanced towards Greta she was in the same pose, face serious yet relaxed. Then she lowered her legs over her head until her toes reached the floor and stayed like that for another minute. Greta was her smaller reflection. No matter how difficult the pose, the child followed. Bo could hear her breathing, steady beats in time to her own energy flow. The two of them

went through Bo's usual routine for another twenty minutes and when Bo finished she felt energised, lighter, softer. And warmer towards Greta, damn it.

They both stood up at the same moment and stared at each other. Bo put her hands on her hips and couldn't help smiling when Greta copied her.

"I wish I was you," said Greta.

"No you don't." Bo shook her head.

"Yes I do...you don't seem afraid of anything."

"Not true...I'm afraid of little girls," Bo said with a grin.

Greta lifted up her hands beside her face and spread her fingers in a mock ghostly manner. She rolled her eyes and opened her mouth into a wide O. "Woo-hoo!" She lunged towards Bo and they both laughed.

"See, you didn't even jump," said Greta. "Aren't you afraid of anything?"

Bo paused for a second, her features immobile as she said "Being trapped underground. That's my worst nightmare."

"Has that ever happened to you?"

Bo nodded once and looked away, out of the window and into the garden. She drew her fingers through her hair and her shoulders dropped. "A long time ago when I was just a kid. That's why I like wide open spaces."

"Is that why you live in Wiltshire?"

"Partly...come on, let's get something to eat."

Lola found the two of them eating breakfast on the porch. Greta was in Bo's swing chair with the faded pink velvet cushions and her feet curled up beneath her eating a bowl of muesli.

"We've been doing yoga," Greta announced. "We feel much better now, don't we, Bo?"

"Er...yes, we do."

"You need to pack Greta," said Lola. "You're staying with Dad for the next few days. He'll pick you up from school." The bamboo outside began to quiver in the breeze.

"What if I don't want to go?" Greta stuck her feet out from the swing and pushed off against the table so that she swung back and forth in a way that Bo recognised. Both women looked at the girl and frowned.

"Sorry sweet pea but it's too bad," said Lola.

“I’m sick of being bounced around like a tennis ball.” Greta was swinging hard now. She scowled and the bamboo rustled, whispering dissent.

“Steady there,” said Bo as the chain supporting the chair’s weight creaked. Where was the oil?

“I know but don’t you want to see Dad?”

“Not today. I want to stay here with you and Bo. I want to practice yoga every morning and eat muesli for breakfast.” Greta pursed her lips together as if she might cry or shout any second.

“It’s all right with me,” said Bo, lifting her hands up in surrender.

“Not helpful,” said Lola. “And I don’t want to speak to Hunter right now and change the plan.”

“Why not?” Greta said, throwing the bowl of muesli against the table. Raisins, oats and milk shot across the floor but the bowl didn’t smash. Fang screamed in alarm and then squawked “hola, hola, hola.” Greta jumped up from the chair and ran inside. They heard a door slam behind her. Fang’s words reminded Bo that she hadn’t practiced Spanish for a while now. And more importantly, she hadn’t missed it. *Moving to Spain didn’t seem like such a great idea anymore.*

“What brought that on?” Lola said, picking up the bowl and walking back into the kitchen. “I thought yoga was meant to calm you down.”

“I guess she’s stressed,” said Bo. “But she kept up with my yoga routine pretty well.”

“Why do I feel excluded?” Lola came back onto the porch carrying a wet sponge and began wiping up the mess.

“Well you shouldn’t,” said Bo. “She needs you more than ever. It’s only normal.”

“Normal is a setting on a washing machine,” said Lola and then smiled at the surprised look on Bo’s face.

“Don’t take her to school today. Wag it Lola. Make it a mental health day. Do something special.” Bo looked up at the clear blue sky as she heard the deep pulsing of a helicopter’s rotating blades overhead. “Do something completely different.”

Lola stayed squatting on her haunches as she cleaned up the milk. “Like what?”

“I’ll take you flying, if you like,” Bo said. “In my glider. I keep her at the Old Sarum Airfield in a hangar.”

“You’ve got your own glider?” Lola stood up. “And a pilot’s license?”

“Yep. She’s a fibreglass beauty with a 25-metre wingspan and a double red stripe on the side. Wanna meet her?”

“Wow, I’d love to.”

The two women looked at each other and grinned.

Lola walked out onto the porch and looked up into the sky. A few marbled cirrus streaks moved in a ridge up above. Maybe recent events, her past, the present, would all look different from up there. Everything could change, even if only for an hour or so.

“When did you get it?” Lola said.

“After I came back from Afghanistan I needed cheering up. A friend upgraded to a glider with a 40-metre wingspan and sold me his old one.”

“Can you fly planes too?”

“Yep but gliding is different. It’s more of an art. It’s special.” Bo’s eyes lifted to the sky as she spoke. “Quiet like you’ve never heard it. Just you and the big old sky.”

“I’ve often wished I was a bird,” said Lola, “just so that I could fly.”

“Well you should learn. I could teach you. I’ve seen crop circles in summer and all eight white horses carved into the chalk hills. Last summer I made a book of aerial photos,” said Bo, grinning, aware she was talking too fast. “Go and tell Greta while I check the local weather reports and then we’ll go.” She started up her laptop and smiled when she hit the familiar weather site. “It’s a perfect morning for flying, light winds and great visibility.”

Bo heard Greta’s feet running through the house as Greta hurtled back in and threw her arms around Bo. She looked flushed. “Did you really tell Mum to wag school today? Are you really going to take us flying?”

“Yep,” said Bo, trying to extricate herself from Greta so she could breathe. “I thought it would do you good. Would you like to learn to fly?”

“No,” Greta stared at her and wiped away her tears. “I don’t know how.”

“I’ll show you. It’s easy, you’ll see.”

In her early days Bo had been towed up into the air with a steel winch cable. She had trained to deal with cable breaks forcing her into a stall and how to loop out of them. But nowadays she used an aerotow, when another pilot gave her a tug and she could choose the best moment when to release the rope.

The glider was old; it was scratched and didn't have the latest gadgets. She had souped up the wheels a bit and installed a new radio but the best thing about it was that it was hers, all hers. She didn't think her parents would be too thrilled with the choices she had made with her inheritance but too bad.

She only had two seats so she took Greta first and strapped her in tight. Bo knew the local geography well, knew where to hunt for temperature gradients to help her climb.

When Bo had released the rope from the light aircraft that had towed them up into the sky and disappeared from sight she turned to Greta's small face pressed against the window.

"It's so quiet," Greta said. "No engines, no sound at all. I feel as if I'm floating."

"Can you see the pig farm?"

"Those specks?" Greta pointed to the pigs several fields away. "They're tiny."

Greta stretched upwards, making herself as tall as possible as she watched the shadow of the glider hover over the fields far below.

"How do we stay up?"

"Heat rises so we're just spiraling up on the currents," said Bo, checking the dials on the dashboard.

"Are you sure we won't fall out of the sky?"

"Quite sure."

The glider banked to the left, Bo found a current off a hill climb and soared upwards as it turned back towards the airstrip at Old Sarum. Fields of linseed dotted the countryside so that it looked as if they were flying over pools of rippling water, pale lavender blue.

"Having fun?"

Greta nodded, unable to speak. Bo didn't believe in God but in that moment she decided an upward current that made her heart soar and swoop was the next best thing.

They circled a few times and then Bo landed with a few bumps and helped Greta climb down out of the glider. She found Jon, her old instructor, and asked him to look after Greta while she took Lolo up. She explained to Jon that he mustn't let her out of his sight and he nodded before she had finished. She could trust Jon without having to explain all the background.

As Bo and Lola were walking back towards the glider, Lola reached out and touched Bo's arm. She stood still and looked pale.

“I don’t want to go...just doesn’t seem right flying without an engine,” Lola shifted her feet.

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” said Bo. “You’ll enjoy it once you’re up there.”

“I like flying...it’s just the glider...not enough control for my liking.”

“All right, I’ll ask Jon if I can take his plane out instead, okay?”

“Yep, that would be much better,” said Lola, nodding.

Jon wasn’t teaching until the afternoon and said ‘no problem’ when Bo asked if she could take Lola out for a short flight over Stonehenge.

“Before we head towards Amesbury,” said Bo, “there’s something I wanna show you.”

She turned the Cessna towards the Iron-Age hill fort of Old Sarum and flew over a field of oil seed rape. The field was still yellow with blue flowers dotted throughout.

“Take a look down there,” said Bo, pointing to her right. “It’s the first crop circle of the season. Last year there were over seventy in Wiltshire but this year we’ve only seen forty so far.”

“Must be the recession,” said Lola, smiling, as she looked down at the large circle with its intricate design containing slices and arcs.

“Elegant, isn’t it? Bo said.

“Weird, mysterious, strange. Just the way landscape art should be,” said Lola.

“What do you think it means?”

“That on down there is meant to be based on Euler’s Identity, the most beautiful formula in mathematics,” said Bo. “And it’s on a ley line.”

“A what?”

“It starts with a tumulus then connects Stonehenge and cuts the banks of Old Sarum, runs through Salisbury Cathedral and the hill forts of Clearbury Rings and then Frankenburg Camp in Hampshire.”

“Oh, those. I thought ley lines and earth energy paths were proved to be nonsense,” said Lola, staring down at the careful design in the field below.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Bo. “All I can say for certain is that after I did my army radio training I came up here and flew along that ley line and my radio picked up signals loudest when I flew right above that ley. Let’s follow it now as we head towards Stonehenge, okay?”

As they flew towards the military airspace of Boscombe Down Bo pointed out where archeologists had recently excavated a small Roman cemetery dating back to around 300 AD near the site of a Roman village. A school now stood in its place. The archeologists discovered graves oriented east-west, a common occurrence among Christian burials. Another cemetery had been discovered for pagans as coins were buried with the skeletons to pay the ferryman to take them to the next world. In those days Christians and pagans lived side by side in the Roman village and were buried in either of the two cemeteries, according to their religion. Had they fought over their differences?

As she relayed this to Lola she flew lower over the wiry grass and tree tops. From this vantage point she could see for miles in every direction, the air crisp and clear. Salisbury Plain was wild and remote, with prairie-like arable land and scattered woodland blocks of beech. Bo told Lola that the copses were planted as tree cover for army manoeuvres. Yet it was thanks to the army that the Plains were one of the least changed areas of land in all of Britain. Bronze and Iron Age tumuli were still intact, wooden henges and long barrows dotted the landscape.

The tail end of a hurricane that had swept in from Mexico a couple of weeks before had knocked down lots of large copper beeches and oak trees, the tops snapped off like children's toys. Exposed holes in the forest shone through bare and brown.

"Looks quite different from the last time I flew here," Bo said. "That hurricane must have been fierce. Look at how many trees have come down. Now I can see right down to the forest floor."

"When did you last fly around here?"

"Oh, let's see, must be two or three years ago. I usually just take the glider out and hang around Old Sarum."

Something red glinted amongst a sea of green, a sharp beam of sunlight reflected off a mirrored surface. Bo swooped in closer, aware that she was flying inside the border of restricted airspace owned by the RAF. In amongst the dense forest she thought she could see a square of red, like a flag only bigger. It was only for a second when they were right overhead and the light bounced off a wing mirror with the roof peeled back to reveal the steering wheel and rusty bones of a small car.

"Can you see that?" Bo said, her heart racing as she pointed into the overgrown forest.

“Looks like an abandoned car,” said Lola.

“Did you see the make? What model was it?”

“It was small with its roof missing,” said Lola. “Branches and bushes were growing through the roof. I think it was a Mini.”

“Keep looking. Keep talking,” said Bo in a rush. “Tell me anything you see that will help me come back and find this spot.”

“Oh my God... this has got something to do with Mr Axe, hasn't it?” Lola grabbed the side window as if it might fall off and she tried to steady her breathing.

“I think so,” said Bo. “If it's what I think it is then I've been searching for that car for over five years. We did a thorough search right at the beginning around here but we haven't been back in years.”

“Let's find out.” Lola said, peering down into the forest.

“That's army land,” said Bo, “out of bounds to civvies and nobody's going to run shooting practice too close to such a busy road. Get the map out of the glove pocket,” she said, stern and back in control. “Find a pencil, it's in there somewhere and hand me that map. Now hold the stick, keep it steady, and don't do anything sudden.”

Bo let go of the control stick and reached for the map. She studied it for a few seconds and then placed a large cross where she identified seeing the car. Then she handed the map back to Lola, took hold of the stick and flew back to the airfield. Neither of them spoke.

After they landed Bo phoned The Chief and gave Morten the grid reference for where she thought the car was hidden. She suggested he get permission from the Warrant Officer first to pass through the barrier to drive into Larkhill Camp and then walk from a spot nearest the forest. They agreed to meet in an hour by the service station at Archer's Gate. Bo dropped Lola and Greta in Salisbury at the cinema.

Bo's blood throbbed in her neck. She wanted to call Tom and tell him but she knew it was too soon. It might turn out to be yet another red herring. She had lost count of how many red cars she had seen that had turned out to be nothing except just that. Her fingers drummed against the steering wheel as she began a silent prayer to a God she didn't believe in. She thought about Pip Porter, tried to resurrect her face from memory. She had cornflower blue eyes, penetrating like Tom's, full lips and narrow shoulders. She visualised

the number plate DBG359, a number etched into her brain, and felt she could see it rise up in front of her, willing it into existence.

She pulled into the service station at Archer's Gate and spotted the Chief Inspector leaning against his marked car smoking a cigarette. Morten was in uniform and had his hair combed. Even his boots were polished. He had that superior but shrewd look on his face as he scanned the other motorists filling up with petrol.

"Morning sir," she said with an ironic smile. "Wanted to assert your authority today?"

"Thought it would help," he said, brushing a hand over his wide chest and even larger stomach. "I don't want any gip about going over army land."

"Have you been in there before?"

"Yes but we've never searched that area beyond the barrier before. No reason to." Morten was staring out over her head and seemed distracted. She looked over to see what he was looking at but there was no one or nothing unusual to catch her eye.

"What's wrong?" Bo said.

"That list you faxed over from the convent with names of criminals Sister Manson helped rehabilitate. Have you looked at it yet?"

"I just faxed it over to Sergeant Louise Busybody without reading it first...why?"

He shot her a searching look. "Probably nothing but look at it when we get back. Right then, let's go and find that car you thought you'd spotted. This better be good because I've had to miss Will's soccer match," the Chief sighed, then added "again."

A small tremor ran down her back as if she had made a mistake, done something wrong or just overlooked something obvious. It wasn't like Morten to withhold information, not that he had done that exactly but he was usually so blunt, more of a call a spade a shovel type of man. He didn't give a damn about her feelings, or anyone else's come to that. Bo recalled how she had conducted the interview with the Mother Superior and nothing disastrous came to mind. She cast him a sideways glance. He was avoiding eye contact. It made the tremor run the other way up her back and nestled somewhere behind her ears. He didn't want to engage with her about it anymore. That much was obvious. But why?

They drove off together in the marked car. When they reached the entrance to Larkhill Camp the soldier posted at the barrier stopped to see the Inspector's ID and waved them on without asking where they were going, or who they wanted to talk to.

"Idiot," said Morten.

"Probably recognised you," said Bo. "You're hard to miss round here."

He ignored her and drove on in silence. Trees thinned out and she could see about fifty sand-coloured armoured vehicles lined up, all destined for Kabul. A platoon of soldiers was running along the side of the road, all in full combat gear with packs on their backs. The sergeant at the back waved at them and Morten waved back but kept driving. Then he pulled over to one side, studied Bo's map where she had drawn an X and turned off the ignition.

"Better walk from here," he said. "The forest is thickest over there so let's head into it."

"It wasn't that far from the main road," Bo said.

She was still in her flying gear, shorts and a t-shirt, inappropriate clothing to hike through overgrown scrub but she wasn't about to mention it. He turned around then, as if he had read her thoughts.

"You haven't exactly dressed for the occasion," he said, raising his eyebrows, letting his eyes rest on her thighs.

"Sorry, Sir, I forgot my bag...over excited."

"All right, all right." Morten tut tutted and carried on walking.

Their progress was slow, picking a route through gorse, oleaster and firethorn bushes. Within minutes she had scratches all down her legs but Morten wasn't stopping, or turning back to check on her progress as he blundered through the trees.

"Are you sure it was a car and not some old rusted tank left to rot?"

"No," said Bo. "It was smaller than that. And bright red. Lola Hunter saw it too."

"And what was Lola Hunter doing in your plane?"

"She's been staying with me. She...I..."

He turned back and stared at her. "First rule of surveillance. Don't play with your clients."

"She's not my client and anyway she's not under suspicion of anything except bad judgment with men."

“Jesus, just look at yourself.” He pointed to her legs. Thin streams of blood ran down from numerous scratches that criss-crossed her legs. “Come here. Come on, I won’t bite.” He turned around with his back to her and spread out his arms beckoning her towards him. Bo stepped closer and then hesitated.

“I’m fine,” she said, hands on her hips.

He laughed. “Sure,” he said. “Just jump up. I won’t tell. Promise.”

She looked behind her and then jumped. He tucked his arms under her skinny legs and strode off. “Light as a feather,” he muttered under his breath. And then a bit later “women.”

Bo felt like a kid having a piggy back ride but it was all wrong. They were looking for Pip’s car and next they’d be searching for her body, she just knew it. Images of Stella Jacobs with her hand chopped off surfaced in her mind and Bo shut her eyes then opened them again onto the dense forest all around her. She smelt Morten’s strange smell, musk mixed with damp earth, and tried to focus on his wide shoulder blades.

They continued in silence, picking their way through the scrub and fallen branches. Bo felt a knot tighten in her stomach before she even saw it. Up ahead half a car was buried beneath bushes and trees.

The number plates were missing and the back of the car had been torched a long time ago. Bits of burnt rubber and twisted metal curled at the edges of the backseats.

“Stop,” Morten said. “We need to be prepared for the fact that we might be about to find a body inside.”

Bo felt a wave of nausea rise up her gullet. She hoped she wouldn’t vomit.

Morten stepped closer to the car and pulled on a pair of latex gloves and made a rudimentary search. When he bent down on his hands and knees and stuck his head beneath the front seat a magpie shot out and flapped into his face. It kek kek in alarm as it tried to correct its flight pattern and flew into the trees.

“Heck!” Morten drew back. “That got me.”

“One for sorrow,” said Bo “two for joy.”

They didn’t find a body. Instead Morten found a rotting map of Salisbury Plain and its villages, two bloated nappies, sweet wrappers and a sodden copy of Soduko Travel Games in the side door.

Underneath the remains of the charred backseats he pulled out a roll of duct tape and a length of rope. “Uh-oh,” he said and frowned.

Next Bo tried to open the glove box. It was rusted shut but she kept pulling at it until the hinge snapped off and the door flap came away in her hand.

“May I?” Bo said.

“Be my guest.” Morten tossed her another pair of latex gloves.

She reached inside as if a spider might bite her and pulled out a turquoise imitation snakeskin purse which she shook upside down. Nothing fell out. She dropped it into a small zip lock bag.

“I guess you might want to hold that until the team gets here,” said Morten. He bent down and pulled out a small teddy bear stuffed under the front wheel.

Bo nodded, lifted the bag up to her lips and then kissed the purse through the plastic. How many times had she heard Tom describe that purse? Something damp and mouldy never smelt so good.

Bo tried to keep her voice calm and level when she spoke to Tom and asked him again about Pip's purse. He described the dimpled, snakeskin material.

"What colour was it?" Bo said.

"Bright blue, turquoise. She had a matching handbag the same colour."

When Bo didn't say anything for a few seconds Tom said "You've found it, haven't you? I'm coming over." She heard him getting up from his chair and pacing. "Where are you?"

"I'm sitting on a log beside Pip's car. The Chief wants to talk to you in his office and show you a few things we've found this afternoon. Can you get away from work?"

"Yes, of course." Tom's voice was flat. "You haven't found her body yet, have you?" He let out a long breath.

Bo was glad she was delivering the news to Tom and not Morten. This was the kind of question that would land Tom in trouble, the kind of question that Morten would feel compelled to explore and it would only lead to pain. Tom's pain was something he channelled; she could pick it up down phone lines and across tables. Like a heat-seeking missile it found its way directly to her heart.

"Don't assume the worst," Bo said. "The cops will be all over the area searching for her body but it doesn't mean they'll find her."

"You don't get it, do you? That would be the worst," he said. "I just want to find her body now. I want this to be over." She did get it, of course, but let it go, not wanting to upset him further. She felt his sorrow and frustration like a stone anchor sitting on her chest.

"Bo...I didn't mean to snap. It's just that everything's happening too fast and...Hilary has left me, we're finished...I can't believe that it's today you've found Pip's car."

"No need to explain," Bo couldn't help sucking in breath. "Perhaps Hilary will come back."

"No...it's been a long time coming. It's over."

Clouds gathered overhead and blocked out the heat from the sun. Sitting in her shorts and t-shirt she felt cold and began to shiver. The weather reports had got it wrong, again. Storm clouds gathered above them. A light steady rain began to drip between the

trees and within minutes the blood from Bo's scratches mixed with rainwater dribbled down her legs.

The euphoric high she had felt when she found Pip's car had dissolved and left her with a dull ache somewhere behind her ribs. She stayed sitting on the log, crossing and uncrossing her legs, dabbing away at the blood with Morten's handkerchief and picked out a few thorns embedded in her thighs.

The Chief was giving directions into his mobile and grunted a few times as if the effort of describing the area really was too much trouble. He turned to face her and watched her swab her legs while he continued talking. He nodded, pausing, perhaps waiting for the sergeant at the end of the line to finish writing down his directions. He walked over towards Bo and lifted the phone away from his mouth, holding it behind his back.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What for?"

"I know Tom means a lot to you." And then he turned back and went on with his directions so that she had no opportunity to deny it.

Bo looked down at her scarred legs and felt a lump lodge somewhere in her throat. She stood up and tried to swallow. If the cops found Pip, unearthed her from somewhere nearby, then there would be no reason for her to keep meeting Tom. Not that she fooled herself into thinking they could ever be more than just friends. Case closed even if the motive was never fully understood. She wanted an end point for Tom, knew it was the only thing that would help him move forward and yet she dreaded it. And what did that say about her? She didn't want to think about it, not now. The sky darkened and a bolt of lightning flashed above her. About thirty seconds later the clouds parted and dumped an enormous amount of rain right on top of them.

Two hours later she was lying in a hot bath listening to some music. She had a plate of chocolate biscuits beside her and a cup of tea. Fang flew in to check on her but wasn't impressed with the rising steam so he flew out again and complained with a loud screech. Then she heard her front door open. Lola was calling out to her.

"I'm in the bath. I'll be out soon."

"Did you find the car? Was it Pip's?"

"Yep."

“Knew it!”

And then Bo closed her eyes and slipped her head under the water. She washed away her blood, like some rite of passage. As she came up for air she was glad that Lola was waiting for her. Glad that she had somebody to share her discovery, someone that cared about the implications almost as much as she did. She lay in the water and tried to look for connections between Pip Porter, Sister Manson and Stella Jacobs. Was it just that they shared the same odd but minor disability? She couldn't imagine that these three women had ever met. Assuming Mr Axe had chosen them, then their disappearances weren't the random events the police had indicated. They must have been plotted, anticipated and carried out with chilling attention to detail. She was tired and lacked the energy to follow this thought to its logical conclusion. Was Mr Axe planning another killing? Bo drew her knees up to her chin. She needed a real drink.

When she was dressed and had applied plasters to the deepest cuts, she came out onto the porch. The rain had stopped and in its place a soft light dappled the bamboo in her garden. The hills in the distance, on the other side of the river, were lit with a warm sepia glow with the setting sun. Lola was waiting for her with a chilled bottle of white wine and two glasses. She poured Bo a glass and listened while Bo told her what had happened. Lola didn't seem surprised.

Then Lola told her that when the movie finished Greta announced she was ready to stay with her dad. She texted Hunter and he drove over to the cinema. He arrived with Mia, Beth's daughter, and rested his hand on her shoulder while they stood outside the cinema. Something about the scene made Lola's stomach turn over and for a moment she didn't want to let Greta go. Neither Hunter nor Lola had spoken a word to each other. *Coward.*

“So it's just me for the next few days,” Lola said.

“I'll miss Greta but at least I can practice yoga in peace,” said Bo. They both sipped their wine in silence until Lola said “shall I turn on the news?”

“...will not halt the pound from its downward trend. Now we return to our breaking news item, new clue to old disappearance. Wiltshire Police today made significant progress in the case of Amesbury missing woman Pip Porter who was last seen on 17 July 2005. In a sinister new twist the shell of her burnt out red Mini Cooper was found in woods near Larkhill Army Camp and forensic experts have taken away the car for further examination.

Chief Inspector Morten Fox declined to comment when asked if Miss Porter's body could be buried nearby.

The presenter tossed her shiny blonde hair away from her face and smiled as if she might have been talking about the discovery of a lost puppy. *“And now to other news. The organisers of the Stonehenge Solstice Festival are gearing up for their big day tomorrow. Over thirty thousand druids, pagans and revellers from across the country are expected to attend to watch the...”*

Bo stood up and turned off the TV. “I think I’ll go.”

“Why? Lola laughed, surprised at the idea. “Do you like Morris Dancers?”

“No. With any luck Sergeant Busybody will arrest them!” Bo took another sip of her wine. “Seriously, I might learn something.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure. That’s why I’m going.”

“Well, be careful. That creep might show up. Things happen when we least expect them.”

“That’s true,” said Bo. “In fact I’ve spent the last hour wondering why I ever wanted to be a private investigator,” she ran her fingers through her streaked hair. “Finding Pip’s car today, burnt out and hidden, it just doesn’t seem fair. And that poor girl Stella, married less than a year... These are our lives, fragile and precarious, but they’re all we have.”

“Shouldn’t you remember the good that you do? Look at the bigger picture. You’re helping people find their missing links, or facing up to the truth so that they can decide how to proceed. None of it’s fair, we both know that, but somebody needs to do it. Somebody decent and good.”

Lola turned to face Bo and reached out to touch her arm. For a moment Bo stood there unable to respond and then she nodded.

“I feel safe here with you,” said Lola. “Just promise me that you’ll protect me and catch that creep.”

Bo lifted her chin and smiled. “I’ll do my best.”

The two women stood side by side chopping vegetables in the kitchen. Music played through Bo’s iPod speakers and the two of them chatted about the safe subject of food. After eating bowls of pasta outside on the porch, Bo fetched a sketch pad and some

soft charcoal pencils she had bought earlier. She had been waiting for the right moment and felt this was as good as any. Bo handed them to Lola and suggested she sketch something, heard she had talent. Lola was shaking her head, about to resist but something made her stop.

“I haven’t sketched or painted in ages...years...not since...”

Bo waited for her to finish the sentence but when Lola continued to leave it hanging, Bo said “Just give it a go.”

“All right...will you be my model?”

Bo was good at sitting still so she nodded. She lay on the sofa with a novel while Lola drew. First of all Bo could hear her making a series of tsk tsk noises but after a while she quietened down and when Bo glanced up she could see the concentration on Lola’s face. Bo went back to her book and then fell asleep. When she woke up, there was a blanket over her and a lamp was switched on in the corner of the room. Lola had put her picture on the side table. She had smudged certain lines to create shadow and depth and left others sharp and well-defined. Bo smiled, she had been captured well. Was Lola asleep? She wanted to talk to her.

As she moved across the room to turn off the lamp, the fax fluttered on top of the printer. She went over and picked it up, staring at Sister Manson’s long list of clients. Near the end she came to a name that made her gasp. Saul Greenwood. One of her foster brothers. She had no idea that he had even been in prison. How long had it been since she last saw Saul? Fifteen or sixteen years, she guessed. Bo went over the list again, reading out each name aloud in case it jolted her memory. It was only Saul’s name that seemed to be written in fluorescent yellow.

Bo sat on the sofa wondering what to do. She didn’t want to phone her foster mother, Maria, and start asking questions about her son. She thought about the other children she had overlapped with at the Greenwoods and knew she had to talk to Marc. He picked up on the first ring.

“Thank God,” he said.

“Marc? Are you all right?”

“Oh, I was hoping you’d be Kate,” he sighed, disappointed. “She hasn’t spoken to me for days.”

“Aren’t you at home?”

“No...I’m staying at The Red Lion. What’s up?”

“Saul Greenwood,” Bo chewed her lip. “When did you last see him?”

“Saul? God, I haven’t heard his name in years,” Bo heard his voice rise. “Not since I was about thirteen. Why?”

“Can you come over?”

“Er...is Lola still there?”

“Yes, she’s asleep in the spare room.”

“Okay, don’t wake her and I’ll come over now.”

Bo poured herself another glass of wine and paced up and down the room. She could see Saul digging in the back garden, throwing soil over his shoulder as he planted out vegetables. He had been an avid gardener as a child, always kept himself busy, away from the rest of the foster kids that took over his home, his family. He was Maria and Jacob’s only biological child. And the only ‘good’ kid, no trouble at all, according to Maria. Bo heard Marc’s car arrive and park. He pushed open the front door. He was unshaven and looked as if he must have slept in his clothes.

“God, Marc, you look awful.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s the-”

“I’ve lost her,” he said. “She won’t even talk to me. Won’t answer my emails, texts or calls.” He wrung his hands together and then lunged at Bo, hugging her too tightly.

“So you’ve had plenty of time to think,” said Bo, untying herself from his arms and moving backwards “Do you know what you want?”

“I think so...but I can’t have her either.”

“Either?” Bo glanced over Marc’s shoulder to the closed door.

“Lola needs her sister more than she needs me,” Marc slumped into the sofa. “If only I hadn’t...” He waved his hand into the air and then let it drop.

“How long have you...”

“Does it matter? I’ve lost both of them.” He folded his fingers together and watched himself tap his thumbs together. “Maybe with time...” Marc looked up at Bo and tugged at his ear.

“I don’t think so, Marc. It would never work. Keep trying to talk to Kate, that’s my two pence worth.”

He shook his head and added “so, what’s up with Saul?”

Bo went over what she had discovered. Saul had left home when he was sixteen and never came back. They both remembered him playing a few times with the younger twins next door, showing them how to plant string beans. He had a bow and arrow set and used to try and hit rabbits. But so did a lot of other kids in the neighbourhood.

“Did you know he went to prison?”

“Nope,” said Marc, “I’ll find out why and let you know. “But just because he lived next door to Pip when they were kids doesn’t mean he abducted her years later.”

“Did Saul have a fascination with hands or feet when he was a kid? Can you remember?”

“No idea,” said Marc. “He was angry with his parents for taking us all in but I never thought he was much trouble. Bit strange maybe but weren’t we all? Kept out of my way most of the time.”

“Same,” said Bo. “But I better call the Chief...he’s already noted Saul’s name and it must have rung alarm bells.”

Bo dialed Morten’s cell phone and fidgeted from one foot to the next.

“Evening, Miss Zhang,” said Morten, annunciating his vowels with cool superiority. “I’ve been expecting your call.”

“Have you talked to Saul Greenwood yet?”

“Matter of fact he’s next door. Said he doesn’t want to talk to you, even though he wasn’t surprised to hear your choice of profession. Said you were always a nosy weirdo, even as a kid.”

“Well?” Bo tried to quell her annoyance. “Shall I come in?”

“No need. Saul was inside when Miss Porter and Sister Manson disappeared. But he admits he had a crush on Pip for years and he knew all about her sixth finger. Guess you were right...we just need to find out which fruitcake he’s been blabbing to. As for Stella, well Saul appears to have an unhealthy interest in Stella so we’re working on that.”

“Who did he share cells with?” Bo said. “Are their names on that list? Guess you’ve thought of all that, though...”

“Yep,” said Morten. “I’m going through that now. Although if Mr Axe is really crazy there’s a high chance he’ll have no previous criminal record. They often come out of

nowhere. Look, I'll get back to you tomorrow. Oh, one other thing, we got the results of that paternity test for Luke Buchanan.”

“And?”

“Positive. At least Jake Porter has got a father.”

“Technically correct but not emotionally. Okay, thanks. I'll tell Tom,” said Bo. “Morten, do you think it would be a good idea if I went to the Solstice Festival tomorrow morning? Mr Axe seems to like public spectacles. I have this feeling that he's going to be there.”

“We've got loads of police going up there and several plain clothes too so it's not essential. If you think he's going to show up, make sure you get back-up before you try anything. The most important thing is to keep Lola Hunter away. Good night Bo.” He clicked off.

When she slipped her phone back into her pocket and turned around Marc was no longer sitting on the sofa. He had opened the door to the spare room and stood rooted in the doorway. She tiptoed up behind him and looked over his shoulder. Lola's auburn hair rippled across the pillow. One pale shoulder was visible above the sheet, and beneath it the curve of her sleeping body. Bo reached out and pulled the door closed. She gave Marc a gentle push in the small of his back.

“Time to go,” she whispered, “now.”

Marc nodded and stepped away from the door. As he climbed into his car a tawny fox stood in front of the bamboo, its eyes caught in the headlights. Marc drove away without saying goodbye. A new moon lit up one side of his face.

The conversation with Morten had given Bo a burst of energy mixed with a twinge of fear. She went out onto the porch and sat in her chair. A gentle breeze blew across her face. All the victims were women. The perpetrator was another weak man, a damaged and damaging misogynist. Was he really a lunatic, a madman? What had happened to this man? Then she thought about Marc staring at Lola while she slept. A surge of protectiveness towards Lola, almost tenderness, swept through her. Lola's beauty seemed to work against her. When Bo thought about Mr Axe inching closer towards Lola her fear deepened into a full blown dread that churned around her belly. She had to find this man.

As Bo drove along the country roads in the darkness at 4am, past the towering elms and copper beech trees, she thought about the sort of people that wanted to witness the solstice. They were probably just a bunch of well-meaning hippies plus the usual punters taking advantage of the situation. She parked in front of the Co-Op supermarket and caught a bus to Stonehenge with some Hari Krishna devotees with shaved heads wearing orange robes. They seemed to be in a happy mood, singing along to various songs and clapping their hands together then raising them upwards to the roof of the bus. *I'm surrounded by the happy-clappies.* Bo frowned.

Once off the bus Bo mingled in with the thousands of people that surrounded the bluestones. She was in the depths of Salisbury Plain, the largest unbroken expanse of chalk grassland in North West Europe. As the grey curtains parted and the sky began to brighten on the longest day of the year a group of Morris Dancers jiggled around the stones. The bells around their ankles chimed and tinkled as they danced. They went round and round, stepping with high knees and pointed feet. Some of them wore black masks with pheasant feathers sticking up above their heads but they were no trouble. The druids in white robes with straw hats had already taken the best spots and as the sun rose over the summit of the heel stone in the north-east the crowd cheered. They performed a few rituals and bowed down to the Sun God, fertility and the power of nature. Bo couldn't hear what they were saying and wasn't sure she wanted to either.

She nudged her way through the crowd until she reached an enormous statue of The Ancestor, a bulky man on his knees with his arms raised up to the sky. Banners with images of the constellations surrounded the statue's feet. She felt someone dig her in the ribs and turned around to see Sergeant Rash smiling.

"Good morning Miss Zhang," said Louise, tucking a strand of her dirty-blonde hair back into its bun.

"It is, isn't it? Bo said. "Any trouble so far?"

"No major problems, just the usual arrests – nine drunk and disorderly, two minor thefts, four for assault, sixteen for possession of drugs and three for possession with intent to supply drugs."

Typical Louise, efficient to a T. "Is the Chief here?"

“Not ours, but the Chief Druid is... King Arthur Pendragon is somewhere about,” Louise said with a wry smile. “What are you doing here?”

“I just had this feeling that...that lunatic with an axe might be here, somewhere in this crowd.”

Louise looked around her, then over towards the crowd and shrugged. “Feeling? Not much to go on. Anyway, I doubt it,” she said. “He wouldn’t be that stupid. Sergeant Baldwin has waved me over so I’d better go.” Bo watched her merge back into the thicket of people, her hips swinging as if she really was enjoying herself. As if she had every right to welcome the dawn as much as everyone else. Even the way she walked made Bo feel irritated.

Bo hadn’t seen anything worrying but she didn’t feel ready to leave. She felt uneasy without knowing why. She pushed her way through the people and listened to snippets of conversation. Most of them sounded cheerful and hungry more than dissatisfied. Where was he hiding? Where was that bastard right now? She thought about Lola. Knew she would be waking up soon and felt bad she hadn’t left a note reminding her that she had gone to the solstice. Not that she needed to explain her every move to Lola but surely a note of reassurance about her whereabouts was what friends did. And Lola wasn’t just someone she had been asked to protect, wasn’t just some red-head from Amesbury. Was this just one more friendship she was willing to squander? Wasn’t it time to start respecting them. Even Greta knew that much.

On impulse Bo pulled out her cell phone and called Lola. She wanted to remind her where she was, wanted to say there were fresh eggs in the fridge and please help yourself. But the phone just rang and rang and then went to voicemail. It was only just after six so perhaps Lola was asleep, which wouldn’t be surprising after recent events.

It began as a slow burn, a bit of a tingle in her chest but it grew with rapid speed to a full blown iron weight that sat on her chest and sucked up all the oxygen in her lungs. Her heart raced and she felt dizzy.

But what if Lola wasn’t asleep and she really was in danger... Bo had left her alone when she was meant to be protecting her. Christ! What was she doing here, in the middle of a field full of wackos, when her real job was to stay by Lola’s side?

She had never had a panic attack before, if that's what it was. Not even when a Taliban sniper had shot a mate right in front of her at Bagram Airbase and bits of his chest had exploded over her face.

Bo heard an insistent buzzing in her ears as she pushed through the crowd, boarded the bus and sat down at the front. Her hands were still shaking and she gripped her fingernails into the palms of her hands. Nobody bothered her as she leant against the side window and stared out at the Plains. Amber fields rolled away into the distance, haystacks rolled up like lumps of butter stretching away as far as she could see. It was a cloudless morning, with just a light blush in the east. By the time she climbed off the bus and walked back to her car she felt all right, just baffled. Driving back towards Wilton she was glad that nobody she knew had seen what just happened. She was already down-playing the problem, telling herself she should have eaten something before she left the house. Low blood-sugar levels or something like that.

Bo was about to insert her key into her front door but it was already open. She pushed it forwards and the door creaked. A shard of wood was hanging near the lock, trembling. The hairs along the edge of her arms rose. Reaching into her bag she pulled out a canister of pepper spray as she stepped through the doorframe. Fang's cage was knocked to the ground and the door was ajar. There was no sign of the bird. His bowl of feed lay scattered across the floor.

"Lola," she yelled out, barging into the spare room.

The room was empty; the sheet pulled down the bed and twisted to one side as it trailed along the floor. Her clothes were still lying on the chair, where Bo had seen them the previous night, standing behind Marc as the two of them looked at Lola's sleeping form. Running around the house she flung open her own bedroom door. It was untouched; at least there were no visible signs of disturbance. She rushed around the house and the only thing that appeared to be missing was the red bedspread. And Lola.

'Feeling...not much to go on, is it?' Louise's words stung in the back of her head. And yet had she picked up on Lola's panic while she was busy manifesting her own fear at the solstice? Surely not.

But Bo wasn't about feelings. They rarely came into her decision making process. She grabbed a chair, switched on her computer and played back the video loop from the cameras she had trained on her house. There were four cameras covering every angle.

She watched the grainy loop play on her computer. Nothing for ages except for a cat that sidled up the front steps and licked its paws then wandered off again into the semi-darkness. Then at 5.16am a black Honda drove up and screeched to a halt in front of her house. A thick-set man with broad shoulders climbed out of the car, went to the back and popped the boot. The number plate was DSP 371. He was wearing brown leather gloves and carried a crowbar that glinted in his hand. An ice-cold lump settled in her throat. Her hands were damp with sweat.

The man jumped up the front steps, pushed the crowbar into the door frame and forced it open. Less than a minute later he came out the same way carrying Lola wrapped up in the red bedspread. She was screaming, her copper hair flapping in his face. He slapped her hard across the mouth. Lola's fingers reached up to scratch his cheeks and then she bit him on the neck but he carried on until he threw her into the boot. He slammed the lid shut and drove off in a hurry. Her abduction took less than two minutes.

Bo was shaking with rage after she witnessed Mr Axe dump Lola into the car. How could Bo have been so selfish, so stupid to leave Lola alone? She might as well have abducted Lola herself. She banged her fist against the table and spat *"Fuck you. I'm going to get you, and when I do, I'm going to kill you."* Her fingers darted over the keyboard as she attempted to trace the number plate. She knew her way around the DVLA records and it didn't take her long to trace the owner of the Honda.

Mr Robert Blackburn, 17 Gauntlet Road, Amesbury, Wiltshire. Two speeding fines and one hundred and thirty seven unpaid parking fines. The street was familiar... Bo chewed her lip as she reread it. And then it came to her. Stella Jacobs had lived just a few doors further up the same road.

Bo pushed back the chair, raced into her car and sped off. She tried to call Morten while she drove but his phone was switched off, for God's sake. She left Mr Blackburn's address on his cell and a request for back-up. Next she tried Sergeant Tony Baldwin and he answered on the third ring. She told him where she was going and why. He agreed to meet her there as soon as possible. As she sped towards Amesbury a falcon wrestled with a rabbit in the middle of the road. She swerved to the left to avoid it, the car teetered then she yanked the wheel to the right but over compensated as the tyres screeched across the road. She slammed into a fence at the side of the road and it smashed on impact. Bo backed

away as bits of wood splattered across the road and then she tried hard to go easy and keep her foot light on the accelerator.

The black Honda was nowhere in sight and number 17 didn't have a garage. Bo parked outside the house and waited for a few moments. She didn't have a gun, just pepper spray and she wasn't sure that would be enough. *Do a risk assessment, weigh up my options.* She knew she should at least wait for Sergeant Baldwin before entering the house but she thought about Lola and didn't want to waste time. She climbed out of the car and pressed her ear to the window in the front room. Nothing. She scuttled round into the overgrown back garden and found a window open in the bathroom and hoisted herself up onto the ledge then jumped down with a small thud inside. Still nothing. About twenty seconds later Bo tiptoed into the corridor and pushed open all the doors along each side. There was no sign that Mr Blackburn shared his house with anyone else, and certainly no wife. Was it the same person that had sprayed her car?

Bo found his bedroom, and pulled open the drawers in a large oak chest. Just grey underwear, shirts, a few jumpers and other old clothes. Next she searched the cupboard. She pushed past the shirts hanging up and found hats and gloves. Damn it, there must be something hidden somewhere to incriminate the creep.

There was nothing under the bed except fluff balls and old slippers. Bo tossed a small rug to one side. Underneath it the floorboards were cut in much smaller pieces. It looked well rubbed, polished even. She pressed her fingers along the edges and felt something release as one of the floor boards lifted upwards into her hands. Just as she was about to pull it open she heard a car's engine slow down as it parked right outside. She hoped it was Sergeant Tony Baldwin but she darted over to the window to make sure it wasn't Robert Blackburn. When she saw the reassuring sight of a police car she let out a long breath. She couldn't see if the driver was Tony or Morten. Police training kept her pinned behind the curtains waiting a moment longer. An unfamiliar man wearing a brown-checked shirt stepped out of the car.

An icy chill began to fill her lungs. *Not now*, she said, *not now*, swallowing oxygen too fast. Bo reckoned she had about thirty seconds at best. She went back to the floorboards and yanked them apart and picked out a metal box underneath. It was locked. No sign of the key. She took the box and ran into the bathroom, leapt onto the ledge and out

of the window just as she heard a key turn in the lock. Crouching in the long grass she heard a tap run as if somebody was filling a kettle.

“I know you’re in here somewhere,” a deep voice she didn’t recognise. “And I hate waiting so come out now before I get angry.”

Bo pressed herself flat into the damp earth, her nose right next to the soil, breathing hard. Where was Robert Blackburn’s own car and was Lola still in the boot?

The sound of water being sloshed around was louder now. More footsteps back along the corridor as windows were closed in the bathroom and bedroom. Bo stood up and pressed her back flat against the wall beneath the bathroom, hoping that if Mr Axe looked out of the closed window he wouldn’t be able to see directly beneath it. She wanted to creep around to the front of the house and check that the police car was really Baldwin’s. If she could just reach that car she could radio in for help.

Seconds later flames leapt up behind her and made her eyes sting and her throat rasp. The sound of burning timber roared in her ears and she covered her face, backing further away into the garden. It must have been petrol not water she heard being sloshed around the house. She leapt back from the side of the house into the grass, watching the ball of fire boil and tear into the soft furnishings. Acrid smoke billowed out in waves. Bo staggered around to the front of the house straight into the arms of Mr Axe. He took the metal box from her hands and yanked her by the hair, pulling one arm up behind her back. Bo screamed.

“Get in,” he said, pushing her towards the cop’s car. He was taller than she had expected with immense shoulders. And slits for eyes.

Bo struggled and kicked him hard in the knee. He yelled out.

“Bitch!” he said. “Now you’ve asked for it.”

She dodged his fist as it came towards her but then he spun round and caught her other arm where he pinned them both behind her back and pushed her to the ground. He had one foot on her back and then bent down and put her wrists in handcuffs. He picked her up and threw her into the back seat of the car.

“Where’s Lola?”

“You’ll see.”

He backed away from his burning house and put his foot down hard on the accelerator as he sped through the twisty streets. A radio message came in, a red alert for all

police to look out for a hijacked police car. Mr Axe switched off the radio and spat into the well of the car.

“It’s over,” said Bo. “Turn yourself in now or you’re looking at bars for the rest of your life.”

“Shut up! Another word and I’ll shoot you now. Understand?” When Bo didn’t say anything, Mr Axe pulled out a Glock 17 semi-automatic from the glove box, twisted round and pointed it at Bo’s chest, then turned back to the steering wheel and put the gun on his lap. He fiddled with the controls until he found the siren then turned it on so that traffic moved out of his way as he roared along the road.

They drove beneath the white chalk Kiwi dug onto the side of Beacon Hill during the First World War. Once out of Bulford village he sped off along the Tidworth Road. Traffic thinned and then stopped. Apart from some sheep grazing on the hills they were alone. He switched off the siren. They were both silent as they drove through vast stretches of tussock sedge dotted with numerous Neolithic round barrows; the domain of the dead.

Bo thrashed about in the back of the police car as she tried to wriggle her slender wrists out of the handcuffs but they were impossible to remove. She fumbled in her back pocket and managed to grab her cell phone. Robert Blackburn yanked the wheel to the right as he turned off onto a dirt track, somewhere between Bulford and Tidworth. The phone slipped from Bo's grasp and disappeared down the back of the seat. *Damn!* The car bumped along until Blackburn found an entrance into a thicket of trees, drove through it and then did his best to hide the car behind wide trunks and leafy branches so that it couldn't be seen from the main road.

He switched off the engine and came around the side door. "Get out. Any sound from you and I'll shoot." He pushed the Glock towards her stomach. "Got it?"

Bo nodded. She looked all around her and couldn't see a building anywhere, just silvery brown tussock, a few isolated copses of mixed conifer and beech and yet another tumuli or barrow. If the showdown was going to be here at least there weren't any tall buildings that might collapse on top of her. If they stayed out in the open Bo could breathe properly. *Try to make a plan.* She could cope with most things except being trapped underground and then it all came back. Yelling for her parents through the fog of cement dust, the ceiling in jagged chunks on the floor all around her, the walls trembling, the warmth so moist and alive it made her skin crawl. She took three deep breaths and continued walking.

Beacon Hill reared above them on the eastern side but to the west the terrain stretched almost flat as far as she could see. The air was cool and almost still. Everything around her looked normal apart from Mr Axe trailing her with his Glock pushed into her back.

They walked out of the trees through the tussock. A hare shot out from behind a clump of wiry grass and Blackburn cursed. Another hundred metres further on he stopped in front of a grass-covered barrow surrounded by quarry ditches.

He shoved her so that she staggered forwards and fell against a small timber door. It was about half a metre high, set into the side of the mound. And padlocked. From the outside it looked like all the other tumuli she had driven past without ever giving much thought to. There were two large pieces of wood set vertically into the ground on either side of the door. On top there was a third large piece of timber acting as a lintel resting

across the top. A low stone wall embedded into the earth sloped and curved upwards on both sides of the door.

Bo stared at the door. *What the hell lies inside?* An icy chill crept along the back of her neck. Blackburn undid the padlock and then pushed the door open revealing a chamber within. A damp, peaty smell hit her nostrils.

“In you go,” he pointed into the darkness.

Bo felt her belly clench and turn over. She wasn't about to tell him she was afraid of enclosed dark spaces, that her fear bordered on claustrophobia, especially with Mr Axe for company. She stood rooted to the ground. *Not now. Calm down.* She took a long, deep breath from the bottom of her diaphragm and shut her eyes for a few seconds.

“Hurry up!” He said, kicking her.

“No...I can't.” Bo opened her eyes. He was watching her carefully.

“All right, have it your own way.” Blackburn lifted the gun and took aim at her chest. “I'll have to shoot you here and throw your body into it.”

“Stop!” Bo yelled.

“I'm in here, Bo.” Lola's voice sounded hoarse. “Help me!”

Bo took a few faltering steps towards Lola's voice within the barrow and then she took another long, steady yogic-breath from her belly. It wasn't too late. Lola was still alive. A shot of adrenalin pumped through her chest and she clenched her fingers into her palms as she took another tiny step forward. *You can do this.*

“Hurry up, bitch.”

“I need my hands to feel my way forward in the darkness,” she said. “Uncuff me.”

He found the key in his pocket and then undid the handcuffs, pushing her inside. He still had the gun aimed at her kidneys. She took a few faltering steps into the gloom and found herself in an earthy pit, about six metres long. Lola was sitting on the ground in one corner, her knees drawn up to her chest. She was wearing an old checked shirt and long khaki army trousers rolled up at the bottom. The red bedspread was draped around her shoulders. Her feet were bare.

Lola was sitting as far away as she could manage from four disarticulated skeletons laid out on their backs in the opposite corner. The longest skeleton had its pelvis shattered and had been reassembled like a jigsaw, taped together with grey duct tape. It had one hand missing. The second skeleton had both feet missing. The remaining two had no

extremities at all. The skulls had been turned over, mandibles and eye sockets facing into the earth. Beside the rearranged skeletons lay the bones of several small animals. Bo had no idea what; perhaps they were rabbits, foxes, or even dogs.

Bo reached out and hugged Lola just as the door banged shut leaving them in semi-darkness. The only light source came from around the edge of the door. They heard a key turn in the padlock outside. Once Bo's eyes adjusted she could make out shapes.

"Did he hurt you?" Bo said, still holding Lola's arm.

"He hit me twice right at the beginning but since then nothing. He hasn't said much but he's given me his clothes. I don't know what he wants." Lola was trembling and tightened her grip on Bo's arm. "I'm afraid of the dark."

"Just focus on the door...look at the light all around it. There must be a bit of a gap." Bo reached out for her hand and squeezed it.

"I always thought that if I treated people well, if I did the right thing, that good things would happen to me," said Lola.

"Hmm, I don't think that's how it works. I mean bad things still happen to good people, don't they?"

"At least Greta isn't here," said Lola. "I got that bit right."

"Yes, she's safe," said Bo.

"And it's not as if I've got six fingers or toes," said Lola.

"But he has...sort of. Did you notice the extra fingernail on his pinky? Just like Anne Boleyn."

"No... I was preoccupied," said Lola. "Did he hit you too?"

"Yes." Bo and looked away.

She didn't mention his burning house. Robert Blackburn must realise the net was tightening around him...burn the evidence, get rid of everything, including the living and the dead. Nor did she speculate out loud on what might have happened to Sergeant Tony Baldwin. Why hadn't Robert Blackburn just shot them both already? What was he planning? She guessed that he must have gone back to fetch petrol from somewhere. He must be more interested in the killing and the funerary rites, than what he might do with two captive women. *Don't go there.*

“Listen, we’re going to be found,” said Bo, trying to lift up her voice. “My iPhone is in the patrol car and it has a GPS on it. Morten will pick it up sooner or later. We’ll be all right.”

“But what if...?” Lola gripped her arm again and began to pant. “What if... That’s Pip over there, isn’t it?”

“Stop it! Just breathe deeply,” said Bo, letting out a low breath. When she felt her breathing steady Bo went onto her hands and knees and crawled towards the light seeping in around the edge of the door frame. She banged her fists against the door but it didn’t budge, just creaked and whined. Bo smashed her fists into it again but all that happened was particles of soil released from the walls, splattered over Lola and she screamed. Bo searched her pockets even though she knew that Blackburn had already taken away her canister of pepper spray when he first caught her outside his house. *I wish I hadn’t dropped my phone in the back of the car.* Morten must have heard her message for help by now, surely.

Bo crawled back towards Lola. Had Robert Blackburn built this barrow himself, hoping it would blend in with a landscape already marked with other tumuli? She doubted it. More likely he was a barrow-digger, making the most of an already excavated Neolithic barrow built some two or three thousand years BC. Bo shuddered. Could there be another chamber, or another exit on the other side? She took another deep breath and stretched out her fingers to feel the cold earthy walls along each side, searching for indentations and possible openings. Nothing except earth, the odd bit of timber, a few stones, or were they bones? Bo jumped backwards when she realised she was handling the dead.

“Will you pray with me?” Lola said.

“No,” said Bo. “I don’t believe in God.”

“Nor do I.”

Lola reached out her hand and grasped Bo’s giving it a quick squeeze. They sat beside each other. Bo thought about Tom. She wanted to tell him that Luke Buchanan was Jake’s father. She hoped he would receive it as good news. Had Pip ever known just how much Tom felt connected to her? And if she knew, had she taken it for granted?

“If anything...if I don’t...tell Greta I love her,” said Lola.

“Tell her yourself,” said Bo, hugging her knees close to her chest. In a softer tone she added “just focus on that door and the chink of light all around it.”

Then nothing, neither of them spoke. A short time later Bo heard footsteps approach and someone unlock the padlock. Blackburn left the door open as he came into the pit carrying an axe in one hand and a worn backpack over his shoulder. A plastic bottle stuck out at the top. She guessed it wasn't filled with water. The man was panting, as if he had been running.

"Hello ladies," he said, breathing hard. "It took me ages to get my things...I won't leave you again, promise." He sounded upbeat, excited.

"What's in that backpack?" Bo said.

"Tools of the trade," he said, smiling.

"You don't have to..." said Bo. "It's not too late. At least let Lola go. She's a mother."

"Then I'm doing her kid a favour." Blackburn scowled.

"So, Robert," Bo crouched forward, "did your mother have six fingers, or was it six toes?" It was just a hunch but pictures took shape in her mind.

"How did you know?" He glanced at the skeletons lying at the back of the pit.

"She made you suffer," Bo said. "Didn't she?" She could even smell the tang of fear rising from the little boy, cowering beneath his mother as she beat him.

"Shut up, bitch!" He leapt towards Bo and she jumped backwards, her shoulders pressed against the earthy wall.

"Let us go and you could... disappear." Bo said.

"Disappear?" He raised his voice at such an absurd idea. "But my work is here." He waved his arms around the chamber. "And I loved my work until you two messed it up. Tidy up, that's what I need to do. Tidy up and plan ahead."

Blackburn spat onto the ground as he took off his backpack and laid it on the ground in front of them. He gripped the axe and turned it in his hands; it glinted in a beam of sunlight, gleamed like an ironic smile hanging in the air. Blackburn tapped the back of the blade against the ground, rounded his lips and blew out, knowing Bo and Lola were watching his every move. He tried to stand up but the roof was too shallow.

"But it wasn't because of your double fingernail, was it?" Bo said.

"Shut up, bitch. You don't understand." Blackburn parted his legs to get better balance. He was leaning over, bent almost double.

“Tell me,” said Bo. “Why all this?” She gestured towards the skeletons at the back of the chamber. “Why go to so much trouble?”

His eyes narrowed and then he spat at her. “You think you’re so clever,” he snarled. “You know nothing!”

“Put me straight,” said Bo. Blackburn nodded, almost swelling with pride.

“This is much bigger than just me,” he said. “It’s been going on for centuries. Hands and feet were essential for the transitional ceremonies.” He lifted his chin as he spoke, his eyes widening with awe.

“You need to keep up with the times, Robert. Things have moved on. Any ceremonies you perform are just bogus crap,” said Bo, stepping closer, keeping her voice even. “Iron Age people didn’t murder women just to perform some sick ceremony or get back at their mothers. Life is always more interesting than death.”

“Wrong,” he tipped his head back and laughed. “Oh, so wrong! Death is the greatest journey there is. Even the Druids know that much. You know nothing!” Mr Axe moved forwards to grab Bo’s arm but she leapt sideways. “But you’ll learn. You can watch what happens to her, that red devil.”

Lola sprang up as if stung. She tried to rush past Blackburn and run outside but he whipped around and caught her by the ankle, so that she smashed into the floor. Her nose was bleeding, running down her lips and neck. She shrieked in pain.

Bo lifted her red boot with the silver toecaps in a high arc and swung it towards his chest. She followed it with a quick uppercut beneath his chin and a rabbit punch to the back of his head. Blackburn lost his balance and dropped the axe. Lola grabbed its wooden handle and scuttled off to one side, clutching it to her chest. Bo kept striking him with more kicks and landed one in his crotch. He bent over, wheezing and gasping.

Just as Bo turned around Blackburn grabbed hold of her leg and yanked her to the ground. She twisted around and tried to kick his temple. She missed and for a second Bo cowered. He looked at her in surprise and then he smiled as he lunged towards her. Lola rushed forwards and swung the axe high in the air above him. He flung out his other hand, trying to catch Lola’s arm but the axe was already coming down and connected with the bone in his left leg, just above the ankle. He screamed out as he tried to tug the axe out of his leg but Bo leapt onto his back, pushing him forwards so that his face hit the earth and forced his arms behind his back.

“Get the handcuffs out of his pocket,” Bo said to Lola. “Now.”

Lola scabbled around in his trouser pockets until she pulled out the handcuffs and tossed them to Bo. She fastened them around the creep’s wrists.

“What about his leg?” said Lola, looking at the blood pooling on the floor. “Should we pull out the axe?”

Bo shook her head. She crouched beside Mr Axe as she pulled out the bottle from his backpack. “What’s in the bottle?”

He didn’t answer so she kicked him in the other leg. “Water.”

“Drink it then,” she said, unscrewing the bottle top and sniffing it.

“No...not thirsty.” He turned his face away.

Bo’s eyes blazed. She held the bottle in her hands and she hesitated. She wanted to douse him and throw a match but she took another breath and thought about Pip Porter, Vanessa Manson, Stella Jacobs and she stopped. They deserved to be remembered. Bo wanted Robert Blackman to think about them and the choices he had made. For him to understand how it feels to be a prisoner, year in, year out. *It stops here, right now.* She screwed the lid back onto the bottle and put it back in the backpack.

She reached for Lola’s hand leading her towards the exit, out of the chamber and into the sunshine. Bo slammed the door shut and padlocked it. Lola lay down in the grass, her legs curled up tight by her chest. Bo sucked in the fresh air so quickly that she felt dizzy so she leaned against the door and stared up at the clouds scudding past a pale sliver of moon way up above. Light winds blew over the tussock and it seemed to ripple, to undulate like amber water. She stayed sitting there until Chief Inspector Morten Fox and Sergeant Louise Rash came running towards them, arms flapping.

Autumn had arrived early; the flare of Wessex leaves burnt crimson and yellow. A robin pecked at a worm in Lola's garden. Sunlight dappled the hazel trees at the edge of her fence.

Lola's phone rang.

"A date has been set for Robert Blackburn's trial," said Bo. "December 11th. Thought you'd want to know."

"Good."

"He's confessed to the murder of five women but insists he knows nothing about the disappearance of his mother."

"So she wasn't in the barrow with the others?" Lola watched the robin wrestle with the worm.

"Apparently not," Bo sighed. "If only he hadn't burnt his house down Morten and I might have found out what happened to her."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"He's also being charged with grievous bodily harm on a police officer when he fractured Tony Baldwin's jaw and stole his patrol car."

"Is Tony all right now?" Lola watched a few edgy clouds jitter across the sky.

"He's a tough nut...he'll be okay. How about you?"

"I'm good," Lola said with a nod. "Much stronger this week."

"Yep, you sound it. Might see you later." Bo clicked off.

Lola put the phone back and stayed in bed as she watched the robin. The deep welts across her shoulders had gone and her broken nose had set straight. Although there were no visible marks left following her ordeal, loud noises still made her jump. Her pale skin drawn tight across her cheekbones held a tracery of delicate blue veins mapping her anxiety.

But this time she had taken charge and made a plan for the next six months. She had asked the principal from her school if she could take a sabbatical. No teaching until the second term in January. He agreed at once. Then she booked the Fisherton Mill gallery for an exhibition of her paintings – *work to a deadline. Prove I can do it*. But today she wasn't worrying about painting.

She sat up and brushed her glossy hair, braiding it into two long plaits then looked at herself in the mirror. A much younger self looked back. *Where did I go wrong?* She asked herself, not for the first time. Sometimes she wished she had never met Hunter. She would rewrite the day when they first spoke and rub him out of the story. Another man would have walked into The Silver Plough and sat down beside her. He would have had magnificent eyes and hands. Glanced at him and caught him looking. Then smiled back. And so it would begin. A different kind of passion but the heat would have fanned. But then the thought of Greta snuck up on her. How could she wish that Greta wasn't Greta but Harriet, or Eloise, or Godknowswho? Lola held the edge of the mirror and searched for Stevie in the shadows. She couldn't wish Stevie had never happened either. He was the flame in her heart. Even if he only flickered for just over a year, his memory still burned.

The plaits were wrong, made her look like a teen. She undid her plaits and brushed her hair out, letting it flow over her shoulders and down her back. Her familiar self peered back and nodded. *It's time*, she whispered to her reflection. No point in prevaricating any longer. She hit Call on Hunter's name.

"There's something I need to discuss with you," she said, matter-of-fact, cold. She put down the hair brush. Coils of bronze flared in the bristles.

"What now?" Hunter's voice was equally remote.

"Can we meet at lunch time?"

"Must we? I mean what's the point?"

"This isn't about us having sex after we buried Biff and you going straight back to Beth."

She heard him suck in his cheek. "...See what I mean?"

"Which bit isn't right?" Lola chewed her lip and stared out of the window. The magnolia leaves had turned brown at the edges and curled inwards.

"Not now...no, I don't need this." Emphatic, final.

"Look, I'll promise not to mention your seduction." Lola said, trying to sound neutral. "It's important...to me. Just half an hour, okay?"

"Why don't you come out with it right now?"

Lola could hear the irritation in his voice so she said softly "I need to say this face to face. Please Hunter."

"All right."

“Haunch of Venison. 1pm.” She clicked off.

She opened her wardrobe and pulled out her best dress. Sage with hazel flecks to match her eyes.

Lola made toast for her and Greta, searched around for jam and found blueberry honey instead. Just as she was about to take Greta over to a play date at Ellie’s house Lola heard a knock on her front door. She wasn’t expecting anybody.

When she opened the door Marc and Kate were standing there, grinning. Kate was wearing a long blue skirt with intricate whorls of embroidery and a white shirt, buttoned up to the neck. She looked even more sensible than usual. Kate gave her a perfunctory kiss as she walked into the house and then smiled at the mess in Lola’s bedroom.

“Hello,” Lola said. “I’d offer you both coffee but I’m going out in a minute.”

“No problem, we’re not staying.” Marc said, standing close behind her. He reached out and touched the small of Lola’s back. “Nice dress.”

“My daughter just told me to tidy up in here,” Lola said, kicking clothes into the wardrobe. “But it’s her clothes all over my room.” She arched her spine, wary, like a cat about to leap.

Marc picked up Greta and gave her a hug. “C’mon, let’s go on the tramp,” said Marc. “Bet you I can jump higher than you!” Greta took hold of Marc’s hand and they both ran into the garden. Lola could hear Greta giggling when Marc landed and bumped Greta off her feet so that she sprawled over the tramp.

Kate came into the kitchen and placed a bowl of strawberries on the bench. “We went to the Pick ‘n Mix farm yesterday and got too many so these are for you.”

“Thanks,” Lola said, watching Marc and Greta fool about on the tramp. “How are you?”

“Good,” said Kate. Sunlight caught one side of her face and her skin looked luminous. “We’re both good,” and she smiled, a bloom on her cheeks. Kate patted her stomach.

“What?”

“Yes,” said Kate. “There’s two of us... he’s due next March.”

“Oh, well...that’s...congratulations!” Lola felt a knot tighten in her throat. *Wrong again.* “Is Marc pleased?”

“He’s thrilled. Can’t you tell?”

“He didn’t mention it,” said Lola, “but then you’ve only just arrived and we don’t...you know...talk to each other really. Even at your wedding he barely said a word to me the whole day.”

“No, I can imagine,” said Kate. She was rubbing her lips together, smudging her lipstick. She put her head on one side and looked at the table, the dips and ridges in the flagstone floor, the cast-iron birds used for hanging keys and swallowed.

“This is for you,” said Kate, opening her bag and pulling out a package lying on the table wrapped up in blue tissue paper.

“What is it?”

“Open it,” said Kate, lowering her pale eyelids.

Lola tore off the paper and held a blue hardback copy of *Hound of the Baskervilles*. The title and author’s name were written in gold leaf. It felt heavy and smooth in her hands. She opened the front cover. Kate had written inside “Here’s to a new chapter. Love from Kate and Marc.”

Lola sniffed the book and held it to her chest. “Thank you, Kate.”

“There’s something else,” Kate paused. Searched the room again, at the uneven floor and then came back to Lola’s face. She lowered her voice. “This isn’t easy...but... I forgive you,” Kate stared at Lola and then smiled, nodded, interlaced her fingers.

“Me?” Lola said. “What for?”

“Trying to seduce my husband.” Neutral, calm. Kate stared out of the window. She might have been talking about the weather.

Lola followed her gaze. Greta did a forward flip on the tramp. Be careful, she wanted to say. She heard their laughter float across the grass. The hills in the distance were scrubbed a deep bronze.

Lola put the book down on the table. “Kate...are you all right?” She went up to her. Her sister’s eyes widened. She reached out to touch her arm as Kate repeated the phrase. “Yes...yes, I forgive you.”

“Cut it out, Kate. Just cut it out.” Lola wanted to hug her but was afraid she might slap her.

“I saw his heart beat,” said Kate. “Like a light bulb flicking on and off.”

“How many weeks?”

“Sixteen.”

“Oh, I didn’t hear you come in,” Lola said, stepping backwards when Marc faced her. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Doesn’t she look fantastic?” Marc smiled at Kate and she lowered her head.

“I’ll go and tell Greta she’s going to have a cousin to boss around.” Kate went into the garden and sat on the edge of the tramp, both feet planted on the ground. Lola could see Greta crouching down on all fours on the black jumping mat beside her.

Marc stared at Lola. The morning light seeped from the sky, lit up shadows beneath his dark eyes. He didn’t move just continued staring.

“What have you been saying to her?” Lola put her hands on her hips, stepped backwards towards the oven.

“Nothing.”

“What have you said to her about...about us?” Lola banged into the oven.

“Is there an us, Lola?” Marc watched her. “I thought you couldn’t stand it if I even spoke to you.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“She said she forgave *me* for trying to seduce *you*. We both know that’s rubbish so what have you been saying?”

“I told you. Nothing,” he took a step towards her. “I haven’t said a word about that night and she hasn’t asked. I know you’re angry with me and I’d like to talk about it but you just won’t let me.” He glanced out of the window.

“Are you two all right?” Lola said.

“Yes. We’re fine.” Marc shifted his eyes from the window back to Lola’s face. “What about you?”

“Just focus on Kate and leave me alone.” Lola straightened her spine and squared off, facing him. She took a step towards him and tried to keep her voice level. “Just leave me alone, Marc.”

He lifted his hands into the air in a gesture of surrender.

“I think you should go now,” she said. “And Marc, look after her.”

Marc went into the garden and whispered something to Kate. She glanced back towards Lola and stood up, moving slowly back into the kitchen. When Lola shut the door behind them she leant against the wall. She fingered her amber necklace; a rosary of regret.

Lola drove Greta to Ellie’s house in Countess Road. She agreed with Ellie’s mother to pick Greta up later that evening. Then she sped off into Salisbury to meet Hunter at the

infamous pub on Minster Street. She didn't have anywhere she needed to be that Saturday afternoon so she wouldn't be under pressure to hurry when she spoke to Hunter. *I have to know. I'm not leaving until I know it all.*

When she reached the old pub opposite the Poultry Cross and pushed open the lopsided door the barman recognised her. He looked her up and down and gave a low whistle at Lola in her green dress. He gestured with his hand up the stairs.

"Your man's up there waitin for you darlin," he said, in his west-country drawl. "Fool that he is."

"Fool?" Lola looked puzzled.

"If you were mine, I'd never let you go." He winked, grinning. "Don't tell me that mess he made last time was just an accident? Don't know luck when it stands up and bites him on the bum, does he?" He patted the pewter bar top.

"Oh, you're right...he is a fool." They both laughed and she continued up the stairs.

"Same as last time?" He called out to her back. "Nice glass of Pinot from New Zealand and two ploughman's platters?"

"Yes please."

"Right you are then. I'll bring 'em up."

When she walked towards Hunter's small table in the corner of the oak-panelled room she felt his eyes travel the length of her body. It gave her courage. She hesitated then sat at the empty and much larger table, by the window.

"More light," she said and gestured for him to join her, sitting across the mahogany table so that there was no chance their knees might bump into each other, or his hand stray. Hunter was wearing a new white shirt that showed off his tan. So he had made an effort too.

"What are you drinking?" he said, picking up his glass of Courage Best and moving over to join her at the larger table. He sat down opposite and took a swig of his beer.

"Oh, I've already ordered...same as last time."

"Why the dress?" He was trying not to stare and failed.

"I didn't think I could come naked."

He put down the glass and smiled, despite himself.

"You look fabulous," he said without irony.

Lola moved back a bit in her seat. She stared out the window, her fingers bunching the soft green material in her hand under the table. A sparrow darted up and landed on the window sill. It cocked its head to one side trying to gauge if it was safe to stay.

“What do you want?” Hunter was searching her face.

“It’s time,” she said, letting out a long breath. “I want to know exactly what happened when you left Stevie in the bath.”

“I’ve already told-”

“No you haven’t.”

“Drop it, Lola.” He pushed back his chair, scraping the floor, and started to get up. “I shouldn’t have come-”

“Wait,” she reached out to touch his hand. “It’s Stevie I’m talking about. Do this for him if not for me.”

“I loved my son, you know that.” He hesitated. “I still love him.”

“I know, Hunter.” She left her hand over his. “Keep going.”

Hunter sat back down and pulled the chair closer to the table. He looked lost for a moment and then he stared off into the distance out of the window.

She studied his dark blue eyes, watched his pupils dilate. “Let’s start with me asking if it was okay to go for a run,” she said. “It was twilight and a bit windy.”

“And I said, sure.” Hunter looked down at the table. The sparrow started to peck a breadcrumb. “I said, shall I give Stevie a bath?” And you said, good idea, and off you went. Greta was playing in the garden. I filled the bath, put his toys in and...and then I put Stevie in too.”

A man leans over a white bath and fills it with warm water. He checks the temperature with his hand and then he lifts an infant boy into it. Father and son play with a yellow octopus, its straggly legs tickling the boy’s chest. Squeals of laughter erupt from the child. The man fetches the rubber shark with iron-grey teeth and pretends to chase the octopus beneath the boy’s chubby legs. The little boy’s fists beat up and down in the water as he tries to catch the shark, misses, and splashes the man’s shirt.

“Go on.”

“And then the phone rang.” Hunter drummed his fingers on the table, still avoiding her eyes. He raked his black hair.

“Why didn’t you ignore it?”

“I did at first. It rang off after a bit. Then it rang again.”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know...I didn’t answer it.” Hunter looked up at her and sighed. The sun dipped behind a cloud.

“Yes you did. It was Beth, wasn’t it?”

“No.”

“How do you know if you didn’t answer it?”

“I thought it must be important...ringing twice in quick succession.”

The barman came up and handed Lola a glass of pinot. “Everythin all right darlin?”

Lola was still staring at Hunter’s face and didn’t really hear what the barman said. He hesitated by the table for a moment and then backed off. “All right...call if you need me, call if you don’t.” The barman chortled at his own joke.

“Christ!” said Hunter. “We’re trying to talk, mate.”

“Easy ol boy,” and the barman retreated, hands in the air.

“You thought it must be important,” said Lola, trying to keep the anger out of her voice. “So you did answer it. Didn’t you?”

“Yes. All right.” He swiped the sparrow off the table. “I answered the bloody phone.”

He let out a long breath and balled one fist into his other hand.

The man frowns. He rinses the shampoo from his hand in the bath. He dries if off with a towel and glances down at the boy. The phone keeps ringing. He puts the octopus into the boy’s small hands, wipes his brow and stands.

“It was Beth.”

He folded one leg over the other and stared out the window. A few leaves drifted downwards. Lola was leaning forward, her chin jutting upwards. She was breathing quickly.

“She was crying,” said Hunter. “More like sobbing.”

Lola turned away. She raised her hand to her mouth and pressed her fingers hard against her lips. The leaves seemed blown about with no sense of direction. No pull of gravity.

“You ignored Stevie,” said Lola. “Just forgot all about him when he needed you most.” She wanted to strike him, to throw the wine all over his brown cheating face.

“No-” He banged his fist on the table.

“I’ve known you lied to me for five long years. Do you think I haven’t tried to imagine what really happened?”

“I called Greta upstairs. I wanted her to sit with Stevie but she was just too absorbed in whatever she was doing in the garden...Beth was sobbing and I couldn’t really make out what was the matter.”

“For God’s sake Hunter, why didn’t you pull the plug? Lift Stevie out and take him with you to answer the bloody phone? Why didn’t you just tell Beth that you would call her back soon, that you had to deal with Stevie first as he was in the bath?”

“I wish I had...God knows, do you think there isn’t a day that’s gone by when I wish I had?” He looked up at her and she could see the pain in his eyes. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and studied his beer glass before taking another gulp.

“Why didn’t she call you on your cell?”

“She tried. I’d switched it off before a meeting and forgot to turn it back on.”

“So what was wrong with Beth? What was so urgent that made you forget all about your own son?”

“Don’t.”

“You deserve it.” Arctic, even to herself.

“She was pregnant...no, Lola it wasn’t mine,” he shook his head several times.

“We hadn’t slept together then. I know you won’t believe me but it’s true.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.” Lola heard church bells strike one and looked out the window. The birds in the trees flew off, startled.

Another young couple came into the same room and sat at the small corner table. The man held a bottle of champagne, popped the cork, filled two flute glasses and then chinked them together. The woman was wearing a flowery dress; giant tulips swirled around her.

“She said yes!” said the young man to Lola and Hunter. “Who would have thought one small word could mean so much?”

“Congratulations,” said Lola, without enthusiasm, “we’re divorced.”

The couple frowned, missed a beat, then got up and took their drinks with them. Hunter tried to reach across and take her hand but she swiped it away, out of reach.

The bird on the sill had hopped back inside the room and pecked at the edge of the table.

“How long did it take before you remembered your own baby in the bath?” Lola almost spat.

“Beth was ringing from our office. I was only gone a minute. Two at the most.”

Twilight turns to dusk. Hunter flicks on the light in the hall. He walks down the corridor, glances back towards the bathroom a couple of times.

He picks up the phone.

“It’s me.” Beth takes a sharp intake of breath. She is crying hard.

“What’s wrong?” In the background he hears splashes from the bathroom and Stevie making little whooping noises.

“I’m pregnant.” Beth sobs into the phone. “I can’t stand it. I don’t want it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. It’s been three weeks since Ted left me. It’s not...it’s not...”

Hunter cradles the phone into his ear as he talks, listens, talks. He slams his other hand against the white wall. How could Ted be such a lousy husband? Easily, from all that Beth has told him. And then Hunter realises he can’t hear any noise from the bathroom.

No giggles or splashing sounds.

He clicks off and runs towards the bathroom.

“Stevie had slipped over; froth was coming out of his mouth. I tried to give him CPR and water bubbled up out of his mouth but it was too late.” Hunter looked up at Lola and his eyes looked smaller. “The ambulance came not long after your return...and I panicked. I told them you had gone to fetch Greta from the garden to put her in the bath as well. That I had been taking an urgent business call and didn’t realise you had popped downstairs to fetch Greta...” Hunter lifted his hand and shooed the bird away.

Lola didn’t say anything for a few moments. She knew the rest. She remembered coming home after her run and having a quick shower. As she stood in the bathroom she felt heaviness soak through the silence in the house. She had called out to Hunter, then Greta, then Stevie, but nobody answered her. *Something’s happened....* The flashes of electric blue exploded on and off from an ambulance and the siren wailed louder as it

approached. The ambulance driver called the police. Hunter answered their questions. She hadn't wanted to contradict her husband to those strangers in uniform, couldn't imagine why he was lying, her brain was in a fog trying to comprehend the loss of her baby. She barely spoke to anyone. Hunter had done all the talking while she stood there, stunned, holding Stevie in a thick white towel rocking him back and forth, willing him to open his mouth and speak. More questions the next day, and the day after that. Hunter begged her not to change the story. It was an accident, after all.

"What happened to Beth's baby?" Lola said.

"She miscarried two weeks later."

"And then you consoled her." Lola stopped bunching her dress, watched it drop and slide over her leg. "Is that what you've told each other for the last five years?"

Lola stared at Hunter, at the creases around his eyes, his clenched jaw and hoped there wasn't anything else left to discover. All her anger had expired. She looked out at the window and watched thin clouds putter across an almost empty, colourless sky. She hoped remorse and shame were tattooed into his heart and that he smelt Stevie's milky breath every time he opened the fridge door.

"I'm going to sell my house," she said, pushing back her chair, scraping it across the wooden floor boards. "I'm going to start again, somewhere else; somewhere you've never been into."

Lola looked at her untouched wine glass, hesitated then slapped it down so that it spilt across the table in an ugly pattern and then she turned her back on Hunter and strode out of the room. She met the barman on the narrow stairs carrying two ploughman's platters.

"It was me," she said.

"What was, darlin'?" He stopped and stared at her as she hurried past.

"I was the fool."

Lola carried on down the stairs and pushed open the heavy oak door. Outside the clouds parted for a second and she looked straight up into the sun.

Back on the street she leant against the window of a jewelry shop. She closed her eyes and when she opened them again a few seconds later she felt a flicker of release, of liberation, even a shimmer of hope. Even the shoppers were smiling. As she walked back to

her car her phone rang. Bo asked her if she wanted to come over for coffee, she had some good news to tell her. Just hearing Bo's confident voice made Lola feel stronger.

Bo cleared away the flour, sugar and butter then wiped down the bench top. She found a hand-painted Moroccan plate to show off the cupcakes dusted with icing sugar. Bo and Jake made a fine culinary team. She measured the ingredients and he licked out the bowls. She washed up and he made handprints with the icing sugar on the bench and then up the walls. Jake was outside on the porch now, rocking in the swing chair talking to Fang. Bo took off her apron and hung it up in the corner cupboard. She was wearing a blue diaphanous tunic that swirled around her hips over silver leggings.

The song on the radio came to an abrupt stop and the presenter said in a cheerful-sounding voice: *"Britain's youngest female double murderer has been given a life sentence for killing her father and a woman in separate incidents when she was just a 15-year old schoolgirl. Leanne Trent, now 16, of Clapgate Lane, Ipswich was told she must serve at least 14 years behind bars as she was sentenced at the Old Bailey today. A judge said Trent had been brought up with no real understanding of what is right and what-"*

Bo heard Lola's car tyres crunch on the gravel as she parked. She switched off the radio before she opened the front door to greet her. Lola smoothed down her hair as she walked towards her. The low neckline on her dress revealed her pale, freckled skin but she looked a bit flushed as if a new emotion was blooming inside her. Bo hoped she hadn't been listening to the same radio station. The cloudless sky above was a vivid blue.

Lola kissed Bo on the cheek. "Look at you!" Lola said, touching Bo's tunic. "Going out?"

"A party...later," Bo said. "You don't look too bad yourself."

"I thought you didn't do parties," Lola said, sniffing the air.

"I don't but today I've made an exception. Wanna come?" Bo sashayed into the kitchen, turned around and grinned. "Try one." She pushed the plate of cupcakes towards Lola. She picked one up and bit into it. The icing sugar covered Lola's top lip in a moustache.

"You've just sold your second painting," Bo said. "I popped in to the gallery to buy a gift and the owner told me that your acrylic abstract sold within a day."

"Really?" Lola raised her eyebrows as she wiped off the moustache.

“Yep. So you better get busy preparing for your exhibition.”

“Don’t pressure me, will you?” Lola said, laughing.

“You do just fine with pressure,” said Bo, picking up a cupcake. “Follow me. There are some friends here that I want you to meet.”

Lola walked onto the porch. A man smiled with eyes the blue-steel of a Wessex winter’s day. He was holding the hand of a small boy with wild black hair. The boy was sucking the liquorice stick from a tube of lemon sherbet. Yellow powder had splattered across his t-shirt like a Rorschach inkblot. A phoenix with wings spread, ready to fly. In his other hand the man held a single white rose and offered it to Lola.