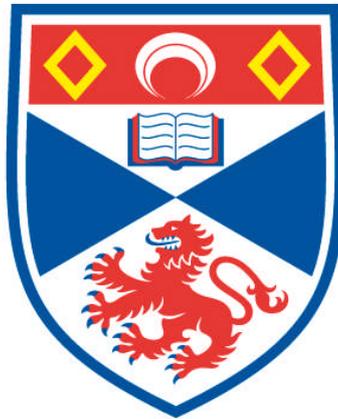


# **CRIME FICTION AND THE PUBLISHING MARKET**

**Julia Wallis Martin**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews**



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**Title of Thesis: Crime Fiction and the Publishing Market**

**Name: Julia Wallis Martin**

**Degree: PhD in Creative Writing**

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis is mainly a substantial part of a crime novel, the title of which is *6, Vermillion Crescent*. In that novel, a girl of 14 is murdered by her foster brother. On his release from prison, the former foster child goes in search of his victim's mother with the intention of murdering her for betraying and abandoning him.

The idea for the novel was sparked by events that occurred over 18 years ago, and coincided with the publication of my first novel. There have been a number of changes within the publishing industry since then, and in the critical piece accompanying the novel extract, I explain the most significant of these changes. The critical piece includes a detailed synopsis of *6, Vermillion Crescent*.

\*

## DECLARATIONS

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to my supervisors, Professor Gill Plain, and John Burnside for their advice, support, and unfailing good humour.

**Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Josie Mannion**

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1988, I attended a publishing meeting at which a senior editor proposed that we commission a book by a high-profile criminal. Some months later, I met Bruce Reynolds, who was credited with having masterminded ‘The Great Train Robbery’.<sup>1</sup> These two meetings sparked the original idea for the novel to which this critical piece relates. It was to be 16 years before I would think about writing it, but in it, I intended to question some of the fantasies we wove around people like Reynolds. However, not only was the novel intended to be submitted for my PhD, it was intended to be submitted to my editor, for by then, I was a published author, and I was under contract to Hodder & Stoughton.

My editor requested an outline of the forthcoming novel, and when she discovered what I intended to write about, she vetoed the idea. I could have insisted on being allowed to write what I wanted to write, but that would have resulted in my publisher refusing to pay an advance. I needed the advance as writing provides my only source of income. Therefore, rather than placing the original premise at the core of the novel, I attempted to incorporate it into a novel that I hoped would meet with my editor’s approval.

There was another reason why I felt it important to ensure that my editor was happy about what I proposed to write, for in 2004, a great many authors (some of whom had published several novels through Hodder & Stoughton), had been dropped, and I did not want

to join their ranks. All had been dropped because their novels were not selling well enough. However, it wasn't so much that new novels by them had ceased to sell – it was more that a great deal had changed within the industry since those authors were first published. A novel that once sold what was considered to be a respectable number of copies (say, two to four thousand copies in hardback, and several thousand copies in paperback) was no longer considered commercially viable. Publishers today are focusing on authors whose novels sell in excess of at least ten thousand copies.

Authors whose novels sell one hundred thousand copies are referred to as 'best-selling authors' by publishers and booksellers alike. Authors who sell less than, say, thirty thousand copies (two thousand of which, on average, are in hardback, and the rest in paperback) are considered to be 'mid-list authors'. In recent years, publishers have found it increasingly difficult to sell books by mid-list authors in sufficient quantities to make publishing them commercially viable. This, as I say, is because a great deal has changed within the industry in recent years. The most significant change has been the loss of The Net Book Agreement,<sup>2</sup> (the 'NBA') for with it went many of the independent bookshops that formerly stocked books by mid-list authors.

Prior to the loss of the NBA, few books were sold by supermarkets. That is no longer the case, and supermarkets rarely sell books by mid-list authors. Rather, they focus on bestselling titles, and they sell them at prices that the more traditional outlets cannot compete with. Add to this the advent of on-line book stores that do not have the overheads of the more traditional outlets (and are therefore in a position to undercut the bookshops that remain), and it is easy to see why many independent bookshops have ceased to trade.

Even the larger bookchains are finding it difficult to compete with supermarket chains and on-line bookstores. As a result they are demanding higher discounts when purchasing books from publishers. This reduces the profit that a publisher can expect to make. Consequently, in recent years, publishers have been forced to review who they publish, and who they continue to publish. As a result, many publishers are no longer prepared to allow a writer to write whatever they want to write, particularly if an advance has been paid for the work. They want to be as certain as they can be that what is being written will not only sell, but that it will sell extremely well.

My editor took the view that my readers would not be interested in the type of novel I was proposing to write, so she asked me to write a novel in which we focused on a female protagonist who embarked on an emotional journey of some sort. This caused a great many difficulties for me, for not only my editor, but my agent, my agent's assistants, and my editor's assistants all read the outline, and a first draft of the novel. They then made notes on what they thought I ought to do in order to make the novel accord with their vision of what it should be, and none of their visions accorded with my own.

In order to appreciate the extent to which my agent and my editor have influenced what I have written, I have described the way in which I went about writing my earlier novels, none of which was commissioned. In doing so, I have been able to compare my former way of working to the way that I have been required to work since I was paid an advance. The novel for which my publishers paid the advance is 6, *Vermillion Crescent*, and this is also the novel to which this Critical Piece relates. For that reason, a large part of that novel forms part of this thesis.

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NOTES

1. On the night of 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1963, the gang that became known as ‘The Great Train Robbers’ stole £2.6 million from the Glasgow to Euston night train. The robbery became known as ‘The Great Train Robbery’.
2. The Net Book Agreement (NBA) came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1900. It was an agreement between publishers and booksellers that set the prices at which books were to be sold to the public.

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## II

### MAKING CRIME PAY

The commercial relationship between publishers and high-profile criminals is a subject that first began to interest me as long ago as 1988. At that time, I was living in Johannesburg, where I was employed as a Commissioning Editor by Hodder & Stoughton (South Africa). The company was going through a rocky period. So rocky, in fact, that the South African offices of both Hodder and Macmillan had come to the conclusion that it was pointless to continue to compete against each other. Affluent whites were fleeing the country as a result of the political situation, and as it was largely only the affluent whites who could afford to buy books for pleasure (if at all), the market was decreasing by the day. Furthermore, both Hodder and Macmillan had formidable competition from Struik (then and now the largest and most successful publishing company in South Africa). Therefore, they joined forces to form an imprint called Southern Books.<sup>1</sup> The general idea was that Macmillan would continue to commission text books, and Hodder would continue to commission general books.

The company was destined to go into liquidation, and the imprint, along with its backlist, would one day be sold. However, prior to the collapse of the Hodder/Macmillan alliance, the editorial and marketing staff met on a regular basis to discuss ideas that had been presented by authors or their agents, and to generate ideas for

works of fiction and non-fiction with a view to commissioning authors to write them.

It was during one of these meetings that a senior member of the editorial team suggested we should try to find out whether any of the prisoners on 'Death Row' in Pretoria Central Prison would be interested in writing a book about their life and crime(s), for it hadn't escaped his notice that the market for books by and about criminals was increasing year on year. The warehouse that was located behind our offices in Wynberg was crammed with such books. However, most had been published by companies in Europe and America and had been imported into South Africa with a view to Southern Books distributing them. Very few of these books had been written by the individual to whom they related. Most were written (in some cases ghost-written) by journalists. *Our Story*,<sup>2</sup> ostensibly the work of two gangsters who operated in the East End of London in early 1960s and came to be known as 'The Kray Twins' was entirely the work of the journalist and television presenter, Fred Dinenage.

Occasionally, the alleged 'autobiography' had been cobbled together by editors employed by publishers who had offered the criminal a contract to 'tell his story'. Often, the editors were working from taped interviews or from very rough drafts of work that had been produced in jail. John McVicar, the Glaswegian Gangster who served a 26 year jail sentence for armed robbery and was once dubbed 'Britain's Most Wanted Man', is a typical case. His potential as a 'bankable celebrity' was spotted by the editor, Goronwy Rees, who believed that if his 'image' and 'story' were handled correctly, his autobiography might become a bestseller. However, Rees was refused access to McVicar, so the hand-written text of his manuscript was smuggled out of prison, and the book that resulted became a huge

success.<sup>3</sup> This book was mentioned by the editor who was proposing we commission something similar, but the marketing team were less than enthusiastic. One of them reminded him that in recent years, the company had imported a number of books by and about people like McVicar, but that whilst they had sold well in Britain, they hadn't achieved the sales that we had hoped for in South Africa.

The editor argued that this was because only a small proportion of South Africa's book-buying public were British. The rest were of German or Afrikaans extraction, and the names of British villains meant very little to those who had never lived in Britain and had no particular knowledge of, or interest in, criminals who operated in the London or Glaswegian underworld. What he was proposing to find was a white South African bank robber, somebody like the darkly handsome, charismatic Robert Foster who, in 1914, committed several murders during robberies on banks and liquor stores in and around Johannesburg, for in spite of the fact that it was almost a century since he died, he and his gang were still household names. The editor believed that this was due in no small part to an excellent book which had been written about the Foster Gang in 1966.<sup>4</sup> Part of the book's appeal was due to the way in which the author had portrayed Johannesburg, for in 1914, the townships that had sprung up in and around it were almost indistinguishable from those that had sprung up in Arizona, right down to the saloon, the jail, the liquor store, and the bank. This was to prove important in the making of the myths that later surrounded the gang. Indeed, The Foster Gang might just as easily have been outlaws in the American 'Wild West'. One of its members was in fact American, and had formerly made a living riding the Rodeo Circuit in the US.

The editor believed that if we were fortunate enough to find a modern-day equivalent to Robert Foster with a view to persuading him to write an account of his crimes, the resulting book might become a bestseller. That said, it didn't matter whether or not he could write, as whatever he produced could be knocked into shape. The important thing was to identify a good marketing prospect – preferably somebody who was on 'Death Row' in Pretoria Central Prison so that we could generate media interest by trying to help him get his sentence commuted to life imprisonment. It was hoped that column inches would be written by journalists who were pro or anti capital punishment, and that members of the public would bombard the newspapers with letters. In short, there was simply no limit to who could not be drawn into the discussion – the church, the government, the media, and the public. It would be the best free advertising we could hope for, and for once (since it was rare to be able to sell books published in South Africa to Europe and America), we might make overseas sales. I tentatively asked what would happen if we failed to get his life sentence commuted and was told, "The morning he is hanged, we go into reprint."

The book was never written, for later that year, Southern Books went into liquidation (it was later bought by the company's former Publishing Manager who became its Managing Director), and within a matter of months, I returned to England. However, before I left South Africa, I did in fact meet a modern day equivalent of Robert Foster, and that man was Bruce Reynolds,<sup>5</sup> who was credited with having master-minded what became known as 'The Great Train Robbery'. (Details of the robbery have been so well documented over the years that I will not repeat them here. Suffice to say that many books about the robbery are still in print. Some were written as long ago as 1965,

and one was written as recently as 2000.)<sup>6</sup> I have to admit that I found Reynolds fascinating, and because I found him fascinating, I asked myself what were the fantasies we wove around such people. Why did they appeal to us? What was the reality? What were the social and moral implications of mythologising them?

These were the issues I wanted to examine in the novel I submitted for my PhD. However, when I embarked on this PhD, I was under contract to Hodder & Stoughton who had published four of my previous novels, none of which was commissioned, and all of which had been written without my being required to discuss what I intended to write with my editor. That changed when I was commissioned, for having paid an advance for the novel, Hodder wanted to be certain that what I was writing was likely to sell. Therefore, my editor made a point of requesting a detailed outline of what I was proposing to write. The outline flagged up my intentions, and my editor vetoed the idea on the grounds that my readership wouldn't be particularly interested in such a novel.

The extent to which some editors attempt to influence what the authors of genre fiction write<sup>7</sup> will probably come as a surprise to people who are yet to be published, but it has ever been thus, for in order to stay in business, publishers need to keep an eye on the market, and they need to ensure that what their authors are writing will appeal to that market. The editors themselves are influenced by the marketing departments, and it is no accident that the Managing Directors of the majority of major publishing houses tend to have risen through the ranks of the marketing, rather than the editorial departments.

Marketing Executives are influenced by what is happening in the market, and over the past few years, the market has changed

dramatically as a result of the loss of The Net Book Agreement. However, in order to explain why the trade (and by trade, I mean publishers and booksellers) hold the loss of the NBA responsible, I should describe the situation that confronted Commissioning Editors in South Africa in 1988, for then (as now) there were relatively few independent bookshops in South Africa. Books were sold through a chain that was similar in many respects, to W H Smith in that it sold gifts, cards, stationery, and books. However, unlike W H Smith, it had no competition to speak of. Therefore, it had a stranglehold on the market. Consequently, before an editor could even consider commissioning a book, he or she had to present the idea for the book to CNA's chief book-buyer. He was a delightful man, but I do not think it would be unfair to say that he had no interest in books whatsoever. Consequently, in order to sell books to him, one first had to show him designs for the jackets of books that had yet to be commissioned, let alone written. If he liked the jacket and/or the sound of the book, he would (loosely) commit to stocking, say, 1500 copies, country wide. On that basis, editors would commission the book in the hope that he wouldn't change his mind by the time it was written.

This was a ludicrous state of affairs, and I used to console myself with the thought that such a situation could never arise in Britain, but that was before the Restrictive Practices Court came to the conclusion that The Net Book Agreement was against the public interest, and in 1997, ruled it illegal. As a result of that ruling, retailers were free to set their own price. Some retailers (the large ones) welcomed this change. Others (the small ones) did not. In fact, independent booksellers predicted (correctly) that the loss of the Net Book Agreement would put many of them out of business ('In May 2006,

six went out of business in just one week’<sup>8</sup>), for ‘...with the behemoths able to secure huge discounts through bulk-buying, bestselling titles are now routinely sold at half their cover price, sometimes less.’<sup>9</sup>

The impact that the loss of The Net Book Agreement would have was foreseen by many people in the industry. Among them were publishers, independent booksellers, and mid-list authors, who argued that books were far too important to be treated as a product like any other. ‘...supermarkets would otherwise sell large quantities of a narrow range of bestsellers (cheaper without the NBA), cutting bookshop profits and forcing them to reduce their range. Fewer titles would be published, small booksellers would be unable to compete in the discounting wars and go under, print runs would shorten and the price of less popular books would rise to compensate for lower profits on bestsellers’.<sup>10</sup>

Among the opposing camp were the publishers Reed, Hodder, and Harper Collins who claimed that ‘the NBA widened the range of books published, of which much is rubbish. Without it, they argued, publishers would be more discriminating, customers would be offered cheaper books and would, therefore, buy more, and literary interest would be stimulated.’<sup>11</sup>

Much as predicted, after the NBA was ruled illegal, supermarkets took full advantage, and buyers for supermarkets are not employed to buy a broad range of books. They are employed to purchase bestsellers. That does not mean that publishers (or, more usually, their sales reps) do not even attempt to sell books which are not likely to become bestsellers to supermarket chains; they do, and they court the buyers by taking them to lunch and showing them potential designs for jackets to books that in some cases, have yet to be written. Therefore, I can only conclude that the conditions under which editors

in South Africa were obliged to market their books in 1988 are now all too evident in Britain, particularly with regard to discounting.<sup>12</sup> Peter Ayrton who, in 1986, set up the independent publishing house Serpent's Tail has this to say: 'Here, ubiquitous discounting and the rise of centralized buying (this is already the case with W H Smith and Tesco; and from this summer Waterstone's) have made for an even more uneven playing field.'<sup>13</sup>

Add to this the proliferation of on-line bookstores who can undercut the more traditional outlets because they do not have their overheads, and it is easy to understand why I, along with many other authors, recently received a letter from Tim Hely Hutchinson (Hodder's former Managing Director, and now c.e.o. of Hachette Livre UK) in which he explained that the Hachette Group was currently at loggerheads with the online bookseller, Amazon. In that letter, Hely Hutchinson explained the nature of the dispute, which is that '...despite advantageous terms, Amazon seems each year to go from one publisher to another making increasing demands in order to achieve richer terms at our expense and sometimes at yours'.

Hachette intends to stand firm against conceding additional terms, and in this they have the backing of a number of publishing companies who do not belong to the group. Powerful agents and authors are also backing the stance that Hachette is taking, because publishers simply cannot continue to sell the books they publish at such high discounts as there is so little profit in them. Small wonder, then, that publishers are no longer simply looking for a novel that will sell a respectable 2000 copies – they are looking for a potential bestseller. Not only that, but they are looking for a package, and by 'package' I mean that publishers are more attracted to a novel if the author is attractive to the media. Some books are published for no other reason than that the

author is already in the public eye (Kate Moss, Sir Alex Ferguson, David Beckham, Tony Blair), and that in itself guarantees healthy, if not astonishing sales. Peter Ayrton again: ‘...publishers spend big money on titles they know will be supported by retailers – books by celebrities, books by successful film stars and TV comedians, books whose success is imported from another branch of the culture’.<sup>14</sup>

Where does this leave the aspiring writer who is neither a model, a footballer, a chef, nor a politician? It leaves them in a far less favourable position than they might have been in 20 years ago, when all that was required of them was that they showed a certain amount of promise.

Publishers were once prepared to nurture young talent. Sales of 2000 copies of a novel by a new author were considered normal. Sales of anything over 4000 copies were greeted with whoops of joy. These days, sales of anything less than 10,000 copies of a novel by a new author are almost guaranteed to see the author dropped. As David Shelley of Little, Brown points out, ‘As time goes on, there are fewer and fewer books selling more than 10,000 copies—but the ones that are selling over 10,000 are selling more. So it's about putting a lot behind a few things rather than publishing more and just seeing what sticks’.<sup>15</sup>

If the author is not a celebrity chef or footballer, publishers try to stack the odds in their favour by choosing authors who have the right image or whose image can be created without stretching the bounds of credibility. For that reason, authors who have ‘a past’ (particularly a ‘criminal past’) are of interest to them because they are almost guaranteed to attract the attention of the media, and media attention often attracts healthy sales. This is an important asset, as it is notoriously difficult to get the press to show even the vaguest interest

in a first time author unless there is something about them or their story that is out of the ordinary. Consequently, publicity departments often try to make the author look and sound more interesting than they actually are. Sometimes the authors try to make *themselves* sound more interesting than they actually are, and this can have repercussions, as Tom Carew (who claimed to have been a member of the SAS) discovered when inquiries by the BBC Two's Newsnight programme established that his real name was Philip Sessarego, and that he tried Selection for 22 SAS in 1973 but failed.

He was allowed to stay on as a non-member in what was called Demonstration Troop - ordinary soldiers who did jobs for the SAS like play the enemy on exercises. Records show Mr Sessarego later tried to join the Territorial Army Reserve Squadron of the SAS and failed that selection at the end of 1975. On Wednesday he was challenged over the allegations. Mr Carew broke off the interview and on his way out punched a BBC camera.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst Mr. Carew's reaction to being found-out was hardly commendable, it is at least understandable, for it is surprising the extent to which sales can suffer if readers discover that a novel described as 'graphically violent and chilling' was actually written by a little old lady who lives in a two bedroomed flat in Bognor Regis. In fact, so many former criminals have managed to find a publisher for their memoir, autobiography or novel whilst still in prison that they are almost too numerous to list. Jimmy Boyle,<sup>17</sup> John McVicar,<sup>18</sup> Reg & Ronnie Kray,<sup>19</sup> and 'Mad' Frankie Frazer<sup>20</sup> to name but a few. More recently, the former armed robber Noel 'Razor' Smith released

three books, one of which – his autobiography – was published by Penguin.<sup>21</sup> His agent is fellow author, Will Self.<sup>22</sup>

It is difficult to imagine Penguin, Will Self, or the media showing such interest in the average, first-time author of a crime novel if he or she leads a conventional life, yet every year, first-time authors who have neither a criminal past nor a television series do in fact find a publisher for no other reason than that they happen to have written a very good novel. Generally speaking (for there will always be exceptions to the rule), those who find a publisher tend to have been signed by an agent who is highly respected, because ‘agents who *aren’t* respected – and there are thousands of them – rarely manage to sell first time novels to publishers’.<sup>23</sup> The ideal agent is one that publishers know and whose judgement they trust. If offered a novel by such an agent, publishers invariably ensure that it is read, if not within 24 hours, then certainly within a week at the outside, because they know that the agent will have offered it to other publishers.

Often, the person who reads it will be an editor. This might blow holes in everything most aspiring authors have read and heard about slush piles and the readers who are employed to wade through them, so I ought to add that publishers do use readers, but that when a sizeable chunk of money may be at stake, they tend to keep the book in-house and the person who reads it will usually be a senior editor. If more than one publishing house wants the novel, it will be auctioned, and this is something that is happening more and more frequently. When it happens, the publisher who succeeds in securing the book usually does so on the basis of a two-book deal, and it’s likely to be to the value of approximately £150,000. That might sound like an awful lot of money, but it doesn’t go very far, because the author has to live on that money for however long it takes them to write two books. It

takes most people at least five years to write two novels, and once the agent's commission has been deducted, and the remainder is taxed, it doesn't look quite so mouth-watering.

Literary fiction doesn't pay half so well as genre fiction, but at least the publishers tend to hang onto their authors. As Peter Ayrton<sup>24</sup> pointed out in an article published in the Summer 2008 issue of *The Author*: 'It's less and less often that editors can get their publishing houses to remain committed to authors in the face of lacklustre sales. Jonathan Cape, the publisher of last year's Booker prize-winner Ann Enright, is an exception that proves the rule – it is remarkable (and wonderful) that they continued to publish her 'grim' books over the years. Finally, their constancy was rewarded'. But that is of no concern to authors of genre fiction who have a two book deal, and are blissfully unaware that they are in danger of failing to make it as a writer before their career has had a chance to develop.<sup>25</sup>

To what do they owe the likelihood of failure? They owe it to the advance. This is because the advance must earn out. If it doesn't, the author will find themselves looking for another publisher, for having backed them once, their first publisher is unlikely to back them again, and will drop them without a moment's hesitation. This will have a devastating impact on a young author's career, not to mention their self confidence, particularly as, at this point, they are also likely to be dropped by their agent as well. (I don't have an axe to grind – I am still under contract to Hodder & Stoughton, and I still have my agent. I'm simply explaining how the industry works and how it is likely to impact on an author if they find themselves in this situation. People can be destroyed by it, and in that regard, the publishing industry is no different to the film or music industry.)<sup>26</sup>

Why would a powerful agent drop the author? For the same reason as the publisher. Agents are in the business to make money. The last thing they need is a stable full of authors who don't earn very much when the world is full of writers who can be touted as 'The next Ian Rankin'. The fact that the writer they are touting may not match up to the claim doesn't stop publishers, marketing people, the media, and the public from wanting to believe it, albeit briefly – briefly being long enough to get the cash in the till – for spin is everything. However, let's assume that an author doesn't lose their agent as well as their publisher, or that if they do, they find another agent, who finds them another publisher. This second publisher is unlikely to pay them anything like the advance they received from the first publisher, for the second publisher will know that the author was dropped the first time around because their books didn't sell half as well as the first publisher thought they might.<sup>27</sup> But as Peter Ayrton points out, 'Fortunately, there are more and more small fiction publishers – Alma, Arcadia, Old Street, Telegram etc. – who are prepared to publish with flair and enthusiasm new books my mid-list authors dropped by the larger houses. And it is salutary to remember (and I often do!) that Serpent's Tail's biggest success to date by a mile is *We Need to Talk About Kevin*<sup>28</sup> (10,000,000 copies sold) by Lionel Shriver, a writer published by four or five large houses whose eight previous titles had all sold poorly'.<sup>29</sup>

The market into which my first novel was launched in 1990 was entirely different. At that time, publishers did not expect to pay a large advance for a work of fiction from a new writer, and it was far easier for a new writer, with or without an agent, to find a publisher than it is today. Publishers who *do* invest substantial sums of money in an author need some indication that the author is going to produce

something they can sell, and this is why most of them demand a substantial outline. This brings us back to the outline of the novel I proposed to submit for my PhD, and which I submitted to Hodder.

As I explained earlier, the outline flagged up my intentions, and my editor vetoed the idea on the grounds that my readership wouldn't be particularly interested in such a novel. We reached a compromise in that I was to be allowed to incorporate some of what I had originally intended to write provided I kept it firmly in the background. When I considered how best to achieve this, I came to the conclusion that if I were to make my central character the mother of a girl of 14 who had been murdered, and if her murder became the subject of a book written by a journalist, I might be able to meet the demands of my publisher whilst retaining some of the original premise.

Between September 2004 and May 2005, I produced several drafts of a 12,000 word outline, each more developed than the last, and eventually, my editor responded as follows:

I think you've answered all my worries about the first outline very simply and inventively, so well done on that. I'm absolutely happy to proceed with this outline as it is. The only point I really wanted to make was that it's really an outline just of the main narrative - and that's probably because that's what it has to be in order to get the information we need down on paper - and of course the book will need underpinning to a substantial degree with subplot, back story etc.

We really need this new novel to be your breakout book, and it is usually the case that breakout novels are bigger in every way

than an author's previous work: more ambitious, larger scale, and longer, because the first two demand the third. And the criticism I get again and again about DANCING... is that it was a book with enormous potential but much too dense; in retrospect I think we should have given you much more space - and possibly time - to let it expand to fill the space it needed. So I don't want to make that mistake with this book, and I do want it to be a big, rich, complex (though not confusing!) work.

So no pressure then! I know you can do it. And I'm sure this is just the right book to do it with - reaching straight to the crime and thriller readership as it does.<sup>29</sup>

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#### NOTES

- 1 Southern Books is now owned by Struik.
2. Reg & Ron Kray, *Our Story* (Pan Macmillan, 1989).
3. John McVicar, *McVicar, by Himself* (Hutchinson, 1974).
4. Henry John May, *The Foster Gang* (Heinemann, 1966).
5. Further information about Reynolds can be obtained by reading his autobiography: Bruce Reynolds, *The Autobiography of a Thief* (Virgin Books, 2005).
6. Peta Fordham, *The Robbers' Tale: Truth About the Great Train Robbery* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1965) ; Peter Guttridge, *The Great Train Robbery* (The National Archives, 2008).
7. My comments here are specific to the market for genre fiction. Editors rarely attempt to interfere with what writers of literary fiction intend to write. However, with a few notable exceptions, it has to be said that writers of literary fiction are rarely paid an advance for their work, and when they

are, the advance is rarely a six figure sum (which is not to say I don't think they deserve one).

8. Stephen Moss, 'The Best Sellers' *The Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2006.
9. Ibid.
10. Marianne MacDonald, 'Collapse of Net Book Agreement' *The Independent (London)*, 26<sup>th</sup> December, 1994.
11. Ibid.
12. Traditionally, UK publishers sold books at high, mid, and low discount to retailers. The level of discount was determined by volume. Independent booksellers bought relatively few copies per outlet, so they were usually offered a low, or at best, mid discount. Large bookchains bought in greater quantities, so they were offered a high discount. If all books are sold at a high discount, the publisher's profits (and therefore the author's royalties, as authors are paid a royalty on net receipts) is considerably reduced.
13. Peter Ayrton, 'We Need to talk about fiction', *The Author*, Summer 2008.
14. Ibid.
15. Alison Flood, 'Making Crime Pay', *The Bookseller*, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2007.
16. George Eykyn, *Author 'lied about SAS membership'*, BBC online. 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2001.
17. Jimmy Boyle, *A Sense of Freedom* (Pan Macmillan, 1977).
18. John McVicar, *McVicar, by Himself* (Hutchinson, 1974).
19. Reg & Ron Kray, *Our Story* (Pan Macmillan, 1989).
20. James Morton, *Mad Frank and Friends* (Time Warner Paperbacks, 2003).
21. Noel 'Razor' Smith, *A Few Kind Words and a Loaded Gun: The Autobiography of a Career Criminal* (Penguin, 2005).
22. For further information about Will Self, visit his website at [www.will-self.com](http://www.will-self.com)
23. Jane Gregory (Literary Agent) in conversation.
24. Peter Ayrton set up the independent publishing house Serpent's Tail in 1986 with a commitment to publish cutting-edge writing from the UK, USA and in translation. In 1989, Serpent's Tail was awarded the London Sunday Times "Small Publisher of the Year" award.
25. These are conclusions I have come to over the past 20 years.
26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.
28. Lionel Shriver, *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (Serpent's Tail, 2006).
29. Peter Ayrton, 'We Need to talk about fiction', *The Author*, Summer 2008.
30. By email, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2005.

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## II

### THE HORRIBLE, EXHAUSTING STRUGGLE

To quote George Orwell, ‘Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness’.<sup>1</sup> That just about sums up how I feel about every novel I’ve ever written. Not that I’ve written many. To date, I’ve published five. I’m hoping that *6, Vermillion Crescent* will be the sixth, but before I describe the ‘horrible, exhausting struggle’ that writing it has become, it might be useful to describe some of the difficulties I experienced when writing the novels that preceded it.

The first of those novels was *Mary Hibbert*<sup>2</sup> which, at 32,000 words was fairly short, even for a novella. It took me five years to write it to a publishable standard, and it was only ever published in South Africa. However, the reviews were encouraging, even if the royalties were derisory: it earned me precisely £700 for five years work, but as we all know, writers don’t do it for the money.

My second novel, *A Likeness in Stone*,<sup>3</sup> was pleasingly successful, but it *nearly* didn’t happen, largely because the publisher who originally offered me a contract did so on the understanding that I would make some fairly radical changes to it. As a result, I spent three years trying to mould the novel into what the editor wanted it to be. I cannot remember how many drafts I submitted. I only remember feeling almost desperate with frustration when the editor

eventually suggested changes that returned the novel to the form it took in the original draft. I retaliated by letting a few months pass by before submitting what *was* in fact the original draft. The editor was delighted with it, and the typescript was sent to a copy-editor.

At this point, I took great pleasure in telling the editor what I had done in a sort of ‘Do you realise you’ve just made me waste three years of my life rewriting this novel, only to accept the very first draft I wrote’ tone of voice. I don’t know what I expected her to do. Apologise perhaps. Needless to say, it was a huge mistake, and not one I intend to repeat if I can help it. The editor retaliated by contacting my agent and telling her she could not work with me, and that she was rescinding the contract.

I expected my agent to point out that legally, she could not rescind the contract simply because she didn’t like me anymore. Instead, she threatened to drop me on the grounds that I had damaged her professional standing with this particular editor, and I ended up begging her to give me another chance. The incident caused irreparable damage to our relationship, and we parted company shortly after. However (more from desperation than a belief in me or my work), my former agent did at least send *A Likeness in Stone* to Hodder. The rest, as they say, is history in that it was translated into numerous languages, screened as a two-part drama by the BBC, and nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award. This was sufficiently prestigious to warrant my being whisked off to New York at my publisher’s expense and installed in *The Sheraton Hotel* for the weekend. I didn’t win the award, but I *did* manage to drink enough champagne to keep the French economy afloat for a decade.

I spent the next two years writing *The Bird Yard*,<sup>4</sup> a novel in which one of the central characters was a paedophile, and although I

wasn't naïve enough to think that the success of *A Likeness in Stone* meant that all would be plain sailing from now on, neither did I expect a phone call from my new agent telling me to 'bin it'. It transpired that Hodder had decided not to publish any more books that even touched upon the subject of paedophilia on the grounds that their Marketing Department was finding it difficult to sell them.

I cannot describe how I felt when I got this news. I had put at least four years of my life into writing *The Bird Yard*, which started out as a full-length screenplay for which I had received development money from the South African Broadcasting Corporation. (Originally, the story centred on a white, South African paedophile ring who were luring children to an aviary of exotic birds.) Having rewritten the story (which was now set in Manchester rather than Johannesburg), and having put so much work into it, I couldn't bear the thought of it not being published. Therefore, I asked my agent to beg Hodder (I was rapidly discovering an aptitude for begging) to read it before any decision was taken. Fortunately, the manuscript was read, and fortunately, my editor liked it. Consequently, it was published in 1998. It was (and still is) my favourite book, but it was nowhere near as successful as *A Likeness in Stone*. A lot of people picked it up, read the blurb, saw the words 'paedophile serial killer', and put it down again.

I was then asked to write a cops and robbers type story, and came up with *The Long Close Call*.<sup>5</sup> Commercially, it has been my most successful novel, but it is the novel of which I am least proud. It normally takes me a good three years to write a novel, but *The Long Close Call* took me less than a year. This is because I wrote it during what was quite a difficult time for me, and I didn't give much thought to it. In short, I hammered it out. In my view, it shows, but it sold

incredibly well, and I still treasure a review which appeared in *The Times* and in which Marcel Berlins stated that ‘The portrayal of the curiously deep bond – even similarities of moral perceptions – between villains and coppers is conveyed with subtlety but shocking certainty’. (This went some way to soothing the wounds inflicted by a reviewer for *The Telegraph* who described it as ‘three hundred and forty pages of the most tedious novel I have ever read’.)

Notwithstanding the success of *The Long Close Call*, I then moved away from the cops and robbers arena and wrote *Dancing with the Uninvited Guest*.<sup>6</sup> It got good reviews, and it sold very well, but *Ravenglass*, the novel I wrote in its wake, remains unpublished. Irritatingly, I have no-one to blame but myself. It started out as a great idea, and ended up a mish-mash of everybody else’s idea of what it should be about. In short, I allowed myself to be bullied into meddling with it to such a degree that I quite literally ‘lost the plot’.

The premise was simple enough. A young, American couple bought a house in Cornwall. During the process of renovation, they found letters indicating that prior to the Second World War, the house was a children’s home. The orphaned or destitute children who lived there were migrated to Canada as cheap labour. Further investigation unearthed the fact that some of the children who were too physically weak to be migrated were murdered by the woman who ran the home.

That, however, was merely the subplot. The main plot centred upon a Canadian politician who had deserted his wife for a younger woman. The spurned wife retaliated by informing the press that her husband had been migrated from Cornwall to Canada as a boy of 12. He and another young boy had worked on a farm in Ontario, and together, they murdered the farmer they worked for. This kicks off a

police investigation as a result of which we discover what drove these two boys to kill their employer.

I really liked this novel. Sadly, my editor didn't share my view. She was happy enough for me to keep 'the bit about Canada', but what she *really* wanted me to do was build the relationship between the American couple who bought the house in Cornwall. By that, I mean that she wanted me to write a love story against a background of child migrants who had been murdered.

Hodder has published crime fiction for many years, and it has also published women's fiction. However, it has always kept the two lists separate. I was beginning to feel that I was being asked to continue to write the type of dark, psychological thriller that made *A Likeness in Stone* and *The Bird Yard* such a success, whilst making the novel appeal to women who want a good, old-fashioned romance. I found the following comment interesting, largely because it illustrates just how important publishers consider crime fiction, and women's fiction, to be to their bottom line:

Hodder & Stoughton is to apply a new genre-specific approach to marketing fiction paperbacks from next year, in a bid to draw attention to up-and-coming authors. [They] will pick two genres a year, starting with crime and women's fiction in 2008. Each month Hodder will take a women's fiction title and a crime title and apply concentrated marketing and publicity focus to the books in order to get them to as wide a readership as possible.<sup>7</sup>

Hodder isn't alone in wanting to develop these two lists. David Shelley of Little, Brown also recognises the potential for lucrative returns:

[I've] been enjoying getting to grips with the women's fiction end of the Sphere list. "I have quite dark dreams and nightmares from all the crime and thrillers. I tend to react to things with huge suspicion because in thrillers awful things happen at every turn, so it's really nice to be reading some women's fiction." <sup>8</sup>

I am not sure whether my editor is consciously trying to make me write women's fiction with a bit of an edge to it. I only know that I have no interest in doing it. I certainly didn't want to introduce what was essentially a love story into *Ravenglass* because I knew it would ruin the novel. I ought to have refused to re-write it. Instead, I did my best to achieve what had been asked of me because I was worried that if I didn't at least *attempt* to comply, my editor would refuse to publish it. However, I might as well have stood my ground, because the end result was a mess, so it was never published anyway. In that regard, I ought to consider myself fortunate because by the time it had been hacked around, it was a far cry from the novel I had envisaged. One day, I will revisit it. I will strip out all reference to the American couple. I will bring a male property developer into the story instead, and he can uncover the secrets of the past. Then we can all focus on what the novel is actually about, instead of swooning with despair when our American couple have yet another lovers' tiff.

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NOTES

1. George Orwell, 'Why I Write', *Decline of the English Murder* (Penguin, 1965).
2. J. Wallis Martin, *Mary Hibbert* (Premier Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1990).
3. J. Wallis Martin, *A Likeness in Stone* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).
4. J. Wallis Martin, *The Bird Yard* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1998).
5. J. Wallis Martin, *The Long Close Call* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2000).
6. J. Wallis Martin, *Dancing with the Uninvited Guest* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2002).
7. 'Hodder genre focus', *The Bookseller*, 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2007.
8. 'Making Crime Pay', *The Bookseller*, 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2007.

### III

## THE ORIGINAL PREMISE

Having spent almost three years trying and failing to turn what started out as a crime novel into a romance, I set *Ravenglass* aside, and wrote an outline for the novel which I hoped would illustrate the commercial relationship between publishers and high-profile criminals. In August 2004, I delivered the first draft of that outline, and my editor asked for certain changes. Before I explain what those changes are, I will explain the basic storyline, and the way the novel was originally structured:

We open with a scene in which a former Category A Prisoner is being transferred to a rehabilitation unit in preparation for his eventual release into the community. The unit is run by a criminal psychologist, Patrick Gilbolton. Through him, the reader learns that when this former Category A Prisoner was sentenced, he threatened the mother of one of his victims. We then move on to our main character, Anne Slater, who is in her early sixties. We quickly learn three things about her:

- She is the mother of a 14 year old girl who was murdered over 20 years ago.
- She is fostering a 7 year old boy called Ticky.
- She has just received a card from Crozier, the (now retired) police officer who led the investigation into her daughter's murder.

Crozier never misses the anniversary of Becky's death. Every year, he sends a card, and on this occasion, the arrival of that card sends Anne into flashback. We are given a glimpse into what her life was like at the time of her daughter's murder. Anne was married then, and she and her husband, Graham, were fostering a 12 year old boy called Craig.

We then 'cut' to Becky's killer, who has absconded from the unit. (His identity is kept from us until the closing chapters of the novel.) He has managed to trick his way into Anne Slater's former home (6, *Vermillion Crescent*) and is talking to the current owners with a view to finding out where she now lives.

From here on, the story is one of Becky Slater's killer drawing closer and closer to her mother, Anne. By now, the reader is well aware that both Anne and the child she is currently fostering are in danger. What the reader doesn't know is *Why*.

The answer to that question isn't revealed until the end of the novel, by which time we realise that Craig (the boy that Anne was fostering over 20 years ago) was obsessed with two things: the first was to be allowed to carry on living with Anne who was the nearest thing he had ever had to a mother. The other was to be allowed to keep a stray dog (Spicer) that he'd found on the school playing fields at the back of Vermillion Crescent.

There were two obstacles in Craig's way. One was Anne's husband, Graham, and the other was Becky. Graham wouldn't let Craig keep the dog (which was re-homed in a way that traumatised Craig), but that was a minor detail by comparison with his determination to persuade Anne to return Craig to the children's home he came from. Not that Graham had anything against Craig as such.

His desire to be rid of Craig had more to do with the fact that once Craig reached the age of 16, Social Services would no longer pay foster parents to look after him, and as they needed every penny they could get their hands on in order to pay Becky's school fees it didn't make financial sense to keep him. (Becky attended a private school whereas Craig attended the local comprehensive.) Better to let him go now, before they felt they had an even greater moral responsibility to see him through to adulthood.

To Craig, it had seemed very simple: by removing both Becky and Graham, he would be removing the obstacles that were preventing him from living with Anne, and getting his dog back. But of course, it didn't work out like that. Once there was no doubt that Craig murdered Becky, Anne rejected him, and his motivation for wanting to kill her lay in the fact that he felt she had abandoned him.

This, then, was the premise for the novel, much of which was written in flashback, and part of which revealed information via a book that was ghost-written by a journalist, Michael Keane.

Keane made his appearance early on in the novel when he contacted Gilbolton to ask if he would write a foreword to the book which he was ghost-writing on behalf of Becky Slater's killer.

Gilbolton's reservations were evident from the start as can be seen from the following excerpt (which I have included here because it has been deleted from the novel):

The morning post had brought with it a large, padded envelope postmarked London. Gilbolton opened it expecting the book that fell out of it to have come from a colleague, for the fact that someone had sent him a book was nothing unusual. In recent years,

some of his colleagues had turned their intimate knowledge of killers to their financial advantage by writing about them.

Sometimes the book was still at the manuscript stage and Gilbolton was invited to write a foreword. Whether or not he felt disposed to oblige depended largely on whether he respected the author, but it was increasingly the case that he'd never even *heard* of the author. Criminal Psychology wasn't as small a world as it used to be. Universities on both sides of the Atlantic were churning out the next generation at an alarming rate. And it wasn't just criminal Psychologists who felt they had a book in them, but the criminals they treated. If it continued at this rate, the time might come when there were too few criminals to go around. In his lighter moments, Gilbolton imagined the sort of advert that might ensue: *Killed anyone lately? Want to talk to someone who understands? We, at the No Blame, No Shame Institute for the Criminally Insane in association with some of the better known publishing houses are offering generous royalties to promising candidates. So, if you want to be on the receiving end of a contract for a change, dial Freephone 0800 ... ..*

Criminal Psychologists and the people they treated weren't the only people to benefit from the public's seemingly insatiable desire to read about killers. Journalists had long been making use of the way in which the nature of their job brought them into contact with those who killed, and those who were bereaved by them, for although such cases were covered *ad nauseum* by the media, there was a market for it, or rather, there was a market for the details that tended not to make it into the press. They, too, were inclined to send their manuscripts to people such as himself in the hope of eliciting the kind of foreword that might lend credibility to their

work, but the book on his desk had long ago passed the stage at which a such foreword might prove a useful marking tool. *Angels Never Die* had hit the shelves in 1981.

The title was sickly sweet, but it was very much in keeping with the kind of title that tended to crop up in this particular genre, and the journalist who had written it had sent a covering letter in which he introduced himself as Michael Keane. Normally, Gilbolton would have responded by writing a thank you note accompanied by a refusal to do whatever was being asked of him, but the fact that Keane hadn't actually indicated why he had sent him the book prompted Gilbolton to phone him.

Gilbolton featured heavily in the first draft of the novel. So did Keane's book, which I used as a device in order to convey information to the reader. I liked the novel. I was proud of it as it stood. I felt it worked, which is not to say I was under the impression that it didn't need further work, or that I wouldn't be asked to make changes, but I was confident enough to submit it to my editor, who made notes, then returned the novel to me with the request that I re-write it. As the notes were lengthy, I've detailed the main points, which are as follows:

#### Characters to be deleted from the plot

- Get rid of the psychic.
- Get rid of the journalist who wrote the book about the crime.
- Get rid of the book about the crime.
- Change the title. We prefer *Written in the Blood*,<sup>1</sup> or *6, Vermillion Crescent*.

- Get rid of the excerpts from *The Velveteen Rabbit*.<sup>2</sup> Even if we could get the necessary permission, it would be too expensive.

### Structure

Too much flashback. Too confusing. Re-write the entire novel in linear fashion, even if it means dividing it into two parts, Part I to deal with the events of the 1980s, and Part II to deal with the present day.

### Characterisation

- Anne is too old, too gentle, too quiet, and too much of a doormat. The timeframe should be altered so that she is in her mid-fifties when we first meet her, and she must be more feisty. Give her a partner. Her marriage broke down nearly 20 years ago. Surely she would have met someone else by now? Turn her into someone that your female readers will find it easier to relate to.
- Anne is the character that helps build an emotional layer into the story. But Becky, Ticky and Craig could also be utilised here. If we got to know Becky more than we do at the moment, then when she is murdered the reader should hopefully experience despair close to Anne's. Then there's Ticky, whom we feel is thrown away too easily. Would a more satisfying ending be for Ticky to *stay* with Anne? This way, Anne will have moved on and learned something from her ordeal, and Ticky will have the happy ending he deserves.
- You have tried to convince us that Craig is also one of the killer's victims, but most people will twig before the end of the book. To throw the reader off the scent even more, perhaps an idea would

be to lead the reader to believe that Craig has been murdered right at the start of the book so that he is totally out of the frame. What do you think?

- If Craig's character is built up such that we absolutely love him, not only will we be less prepared for the twist where we discover he is the killer, but we should be able to understand his psychology better than we do at the moment.
- Gilbolton is homosexual. What purpose does this serve? Make him heterosexual, and turn him into someone that your female readers will find attractive!<sup>3</sup>
- If you are going to have a profiler or psychologist in the story, you really need to *use* this character to help explain motivations etc to the reader, and also to stun the reader with the character's amazing ability to solve tricky bits of plot. Unfortunately, we found Gilbolton just a bit too slow on the uptake and not brilliant in any way. Of course, the problem could be that the same character has been used both in the back-story and the current plot: Gilbolton helped to catch the killer and put him away, so would the same man really be in a comfortable position to help rehabilitate and repatriate him in society? Would it perhaps work better to have a new and younger psychologist working today at the Arndale Centre, one who practises new methods and is far more willing to give offenders another chance? In fact, if this were to be the case, the new guy could even approach Gilbolton and ask for his advice? Perhaps, rather than Keane having written a book, Gilbolton could have written an academic book about the case. Lots to think about here.

There certainly is a lot to think about here, for whilst I don't dispute that Gilbolton is nowhere near as clever a character as he needs to be if we are to watch him unravelling the truth, he was never intended to be at the centre of the story. He existed for no other purpose than to enable me to move the story on at various stages. My editor has suggested I give him an adversary, then show the reader how cleverly he discovers the identity of the killer.

I have no intention of doing this, for not only would it make the senior police officer who investigated the crime redundant, but it would change the nature of the novel. It would no longer be a story about a woman who fostered a child who murdered her daughter and has every intention of murdering *her* on his release. It would be a story about a criminal psychologist. My editor would then be unhappy because we would no longer have a female protagonist at the centre of the plot. (This sort of thing is largely what happened with *A Likeness in Stone*, which is why I spent three years re-writing it.) Nor do I like the idea of dividing the novel into two parts as novels structured in this way often have a broken-backed feel to them. That is not to say they cannot be commercially successful. Val McDermid's *A Place of Execution*<sup>4</sup> was handled in this way. However, if I were to do this with 6, *Vermillion Crescent*, it would undoubtedly make it easier for the reader to follow the story, for it would be spoon-fed to them in a 'first this happens, then that happens, and now this is happening... do we all remember where we are? Good!'

After some weeks spent thinking about the comments made by my editor, I made the following notes:

- I will remove the psychic from the book as I wasn't sure about this myself. I think it is probably a left-over from *Dancing with the Uninvited Guest*.
- The editor thinks it would be more satisfying for the reader if Ticky were to be allowed to stay with Anne so that he could have the happy ending he deserves. This is the sort of suggestion that belongs to the 'Reader, I married him' school of thought, and is entirely at odds with the dark, ambivalent endings that most readers of crime fiction prefer. Having said that, I am not being asked to change the ending to the novel, but to change this particular aspect of it. I cannot bring myself to do it, for not only do I think it belongs in a different type of novel, but in reality, it wouldn't happen. Anne is too old to adopt, and the best she could hope for is that Ticky's mother would agree to her continuing to foster him until such time as she wanted him back. I will, however, rewrite the final scene involving Ticky, as it needs work.

Turning, for a moment, to the comment 'the reader will twig' that Craig is the killer, I believe the problem here did not lie in my inability to trick the reader. It lay in the fact that my editor and agent knew before they even began to read the novel that Craig was the killer, because before reading the novel, they had read several drafts of the outline. Therefore, it was always going to be that bit more difficult to persuade them that I had carried this off successfully.

This, in fact, is one of the problems associated with presenting an outline of a story to an editor prior to producing the novel. I say it is

one of the problems because there are a number of problems, one of which is that the editor has a preconceived idea of what they are getting. What they actually get is often a very different story to the one that they were expecting, for by the time a novel has been written, the story has developed to the point where it might almost be a different story altogether. It is often the case that characters who looked as though they might play an important part at the outline stage simply haven't worked in the novel, so have changed, or been dispensed with. Above all, the editor develops a mental image of the book, and as the author isn't telepathic, he or she has no idea what that mental image might be. Whatever it is, it is guaranteed to be nothing like the author's mental image, so one or other (and it's usually the author), has to concede ground.

It is for this reason that the higher up the ladder an author manages to climb, the more likely it is that they will refuse to write an outline altogether. Ian Rankin is one of them. On 8<sup>th</sup> January 2008, I emailed him to ask his view, and he responded as follows:

I don't produce outlines, because I no longer need to 'pitch' ideas at publishers in the hope that they will offer a contract. My current contract is for 2 novels (of any length in any genre) and the first inkling my publisher will get of their contents is when they see the finished thing(s).

Paul Johnston, whose first eight novels were published by Hodder & Stoughton, said: 'My general view is that [outlines] are unwarranted intrusions on authorial independence demanded by insecure editors'.<sup>5</sup>

Best-selling author, John Connolly, also prefers not to write an outline to his novels, but for different reasons:<sup>6</sup>

I can't recall I was ever asked to write an outline, as such. I think, after I'd submitted my first book, it was suggested that a couple of paragraphs about the next one might be useful, but I suspect they just wanted to be sure that there WAS a next one, even if it existed only as a series of barely connected thoughts.

Since then, I've never written an outline. Nobody has ever requested one, and I don't use an outline as an aid to the writing of a book. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, I enjoy the process of discovery that comes with the writing of a novel. Usually, when I begin a book, I will have a very vague notion of how it should begin, and some ideas about what may occur in the course of the narrative, even if it's only a couple of incidents. In that sense, then, the process of writing the first draft is similar, in certain ways, to the reader's first experience of the book. (In my defence, I should say that I rewrite constantly, doing double-figure start-to-finish drafts. This may be the downside of working without the safety net of an outline, although it is also due, in large part, to a perfectionist streak.)

Perhaps I'm also afraid that, if I were to plan a book out in advance, I might be reluctant to actually write the novel itself. I might feel as though something of that sense of unfolding and discovery had been taken away from me. If I know everything that is going to happen, or that might happen, would I have any interest in creating the larger narrative? I think that I'm also

concerned at the possibility of a mechanical element entering the novel, as though the wheels and cogs that power it, either consciously or unconsciously, had somehow been exposed.

That is, in my view, one of the other downsides of a meticulously plotted book, or it may be that I am simply aware of those authors who construct their narratives in that way, and it influences the manner in which I judge their work. Working without an outline seems to me to permit a more organic approach to the writing of the book, even if it can result in what some might perceive as narrative flaws: namely, a sense that events are linked by causality, or a certain occasional loss of momentum that might not be permitted in a more meticulously plotted book. Yet, for me, that is more reflective of life as it is lived and understood: our existences are not perfectly plotted; our quests for meaning and understanding are not linear; and we lose our way a lot. Unfortunately, though, only writers get to rewrite lives . . .

Crime novelist, Jessica Mann, manages successfully to create whole communities, conveying their personalities in a clean, crisp prose. When asked by Lisanne Radice<sup>7</sup> whether she worked carefully at her plots, and whether she had an early synopsis or knew from the beginning how and where clues were to be planted, she replied that ‘she would love to have a structure, but that every time she thought about writing a new book, she thought that this time she would manage one; she would do what other, real, authors did and have a chapter plan, a plot plan, a character list, and she would know what was going to happen, and then she would be able to sit down every

day and write her five or ten pages and it would be no problem. But she simply couldn't do it: she never knew what was going to happen to whom, how, when, where and why. She didn't even know the characters. She often started with two people and a situation, would get terribly excited and write a chapter, a sort of scene setting chapter, and think 'brilliant' this time she knew what was going to happen. She would then wake up the next morning and have no idea how things were going to develop, so she would have to force her way on. The mystery as far as she was concerned, was that by the end of the book the whole thing appeared to be neatly and tightly plotted'.<sup>8</sup>

Laura Wilson once worked in a similar way to Jessica Mann, but in recent years, has revised her way of working:

My views on submitting outlines have changed considerably since I started writing fiction. At first, I was very reluctant to do them, because I always had the beginning and the ending clearly in my mind, and I viewed the process of linking the two as something organic. However, after a really appalling experience with my sixth novel, I decided that, in future, I would have a complete and detailed synopsis, and this was very much encouraged by my publisher, largely because it was the beginning of a series.

Initially, I was worried that this method would mean a loss of spontaneity, but in fact I found it very liberating, because it focussed my mind on what I was doing and gave a clarity and sharpness which stopped me expending a great deal of time, effort and imagination only to end up in a cul-de-sac.

However, I should point out that the success or failure of such a method largely depends on the degree of editorial control to which the writer is subjected. So far, I have been very fortunate in this respect, having been given sensitive and intelligent guidance by both my agent and my editor. However, if this hadn't been the case, and the treatment had been imperious and/or ham-fisted, I can see that it would have been frustrating and off-putting.<sup>9</sup>

What Laura is describing is a document that screenwriters would refer to as a 'Treatment', which can be remarkably helpful once the basic premise for a novel has been decided upon. Most writers will produce what they call a treatment, or a blueprint, or a chapter flow of the novel, because that will help them to stay on track, but it isn't an outline of the type that I am describing.

What I am describing is essentially a selling document. It sells the idea to the publisher, and serves two purposes. The first is that it encourages the publisher to pay an advance. (This would be known as development money in the tv/film world.) The second purpose it serves enables the publisher to give information to the marketing department and to plan their publishing lists and schedules. For instance, it would be a bit of a disaster if more than a couple of authors in any one publishing house brought out novel that had a similar premise, especially if the novels were scheduled to be published within a few weeks or months of one another. Titles can also be problematic. At about the time that I brought out *The Bird Yard*, Paul Johnston brought out *The Bone Yard*, and Mo Hayder brought out *Birdman*. And so it goes on.

Enough of outlines. Different authors hold different views, and their views are determined by personal experience. I would rather not write an outline for reasons I have already given. However, I didn't have much option, for as I explained earlier, Hodder would have refused to give me an advance. Producing an outline that satisfied them resolved one major difficulty for me in that it provided me with enough money to live on while I wrote the novel, but it left me with the problem of producing a novel that would satisfy my editor's expectations.

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#### NOTES

1. The working title was 'The Dunham Ripper'.
2. Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Heinemann, 1922)
3. Hodder don't have a veto on crime novels in which the characters are homosexual. On the contrary, they would be the first to agree that there is a large market for books in which the central character is homosexual. Jake Arnott's highly successful *The Long Firm* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2002) has been hugely successful. However, Hodder believe that books in which the main character happens to be homosexual won't appeal to my readership, and that is that.
4. Val McDermid, *A Place of Execution* (Harper Collins, 1999)
5. By email. 8<sup>th</sup> January 2008. (Paul Johnston is the author of 9 crime novels. Further information can be obtained from his website: [www.paul-johnston.co.uk](http://www.paul-johnston.co.uk))
6. By email. 8<sup>th</sup> January 2008. (John Connelly is the bestselling author of 11 crime novels. Further information can be obtained from his website: [www.johnconnollybooks.com](http://www.johnconnollybooks.com))
7. Lianne Radice, now retired, was formerly a partner in Gregory & Radice, now Gregory & Company, the agency that represents me.

8. Lianne Radice, *The Way to Write Crime Fiction* (Penguin, 1989)
9. By email. 8<sup>th</sup> January 2008. (Laura Wilson is the author of 8 novels, and currently reviews crime fiction for *The Observer*. Further information can be obtained from her website: [www.laura-wilson.co.uk](http://www.laura-wilson.co.uk)).

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## IV

### 6, VERMILLION CRESCENT

By July 2007, I had spent six months working on the rewrite. I had brought the timeframe forward and restructured it so that the events that once took place in 1980 now took place in 1994. The events that occurred in the past unfolded in Part I, and the events that occurred in the present unfolded in Part II.

I opened with the discovery of a body that the reader would assume was Craig's in the hope that this would resolve the issue my editor had with regard to whether or not the reader would 'twig' that he was the killer. This served as a good hook, but it presented three problems. The first lay in making the reader understand that they were reading about something that had happened three weeks after Becky's death, and fifteen years prior to the events that were taking place in the first two pages of Chapter One.

The second problem was that by revealing the events surrounding the discovery of what we took to be Craig's body, I was left with a terrible gap in the part of the novel in which the body ought to have been found. I could have filled that gap by taking Crozier to the scene, but it wouldn't have had as much impact as letting the reader discover the body where and when it ought to have been discovered, which was two thirds of the way into the novel.

The third, and more serious problem was that I no longer liked the novel. I felt it was flat. It was ordinary. It lacked texture. It was

no longer complex. It spoon-fed information to the reader. Worst of all, no matter how I tried, I could not make Anne likeable, largely because I never intended her to be somebody we should like.

For all these reasons, I decided to abandon the second draft, and write a third, one in Anne spoke to us in the first person. I hoped that by doing so, we might get to know and like her more. This made my relationship with Anne more intimate, but it still didn't make me like her, and it still didn't resolve the issues I had with the structure of the novel. It was still flat. It still lacked texture. It was nowhere near as 'satisfyingly complex' as I suspected my editor would want it to be. So I abandoned that as well.

Before I go on to explain how I structured the fourth draft, I would like to say a few words about Anne's character, because it will go some way towards explaining why I cannot make her likeable.

At first blush, she appears to be the sort of person we *ought* to feel sympathy for, and *ought* to admire. After all, her daughter has been murdered, she lives on her own in circumstances that border on poverty, yet she is fostering a little boy whose own mother clearly can't, or won't, look after him properly. She is divorced from her husband who appears to have done something appalling (we don't know what, but we have our suspicions), yet despite this, Anne is caring for his mother, to whom she feels she owes a duty of care.

If this is not enough to convince us that the woman is a saint, Detective Inspector Crozier gives us cause to believe that we should care about her. But we don't. At least, I don't. I find her every bit as irritating as my editor did, but rather than make her more likeable, I decided to accentuate the characteristics that make us want to throttle her.

My editor described Anne as ‘a bit of a doormat’, but she is far from that. She’s actually quite manipulative. Right from the start, she inveigled her way into Graham’s life by making herself indispensable to his mother. She set out to marry him long before he had even asked her on a date. In fact, he never got as far as asking her on a date because Anne engineered the scenario which resulted in him taking her home one night. She lured him into a sexual relationship by wearing the little pink skirt that features throughout the novel, and trapped him into marriage by falling pregnant. Her behaviour was nothing short of outrageous. As for her fostering children, women who foster are often regarded as ‘good’, in that the act of caring for somebody else’s child is seen to be a good thing to do. But Anne did it for no other reason than that it satisfied her maternal instincts. She *liked* fostering children. And as it was quite obvious that Graham had no intention of ever having sex with her again if he could help it, fostering was the only way she could continue to satisfy her maternal desires.

As we discover when Craig is released from prison, there were consequences. ‘People like you, you ruin children’s lives. You show them a glimpse of Paradise, and then you take it away’. Hence the threat that Craig made from the dock on the day he was sentenced. ‘When I get out, I’ll find you, and I’ll kill you’.

If we can’t like Anne, who can we like? Good questions, because this novel is a bit short on sympathetic characters. Graham hasn’t behaved terribly well, but he isn’t a monster. If anything, he’s just a bit weak. Maureen is in late middle-age when we meet her and we see very little of her in the early part of the novel. By the time we get to know her, she is in the early stages of dementia. She is chair

bound, if not bed bound, has ulcerated legs, and has to use a commode.

Of the other characters we meet, Kath is the author of her own misfortune in that she has remained in a violent relationship that has already resulted in her son being taken into care. Her partner, Phil, is violent and abusive.

In short, there is only one character we can really be expected to like, and that is Crozier. He is a good, solid, sensible copper who loves his wife and kids and comes across as compassionate and intelligent. Fortunately, we see plenty of him, because once I altered the timeframe, I was able to bring him back in the present day (albeit that he is on the brink of retirement).

It is interesting that Crozier is the only really likeable character in *6, Vermillion Crescent* because the police detective, Parker, was also the only likeable character in *The Bird Yard*. I didn't do this consciously. It just happened. There is another similarity between the two novels in that the children who are central to them do not come out of the situation undamaged.

When I think about it now, I realise that the children who were central to the plot of *Ravenglass* were also terribly damaged (if not dead). In *The Long Close Call*, the Detective central to the plot spends the entire novel trying not to think about a childhood event so appalling, he has never recovered. And in all these novels, there is a dog. I have no idea why, because I don't own a dog, have never owned a dog, and have no wish to. But there they are, and they are sufficiently important for me to fight any editor to the death if they suggest we remove them. But back to these damaged children:

In *6, Vermillion Crescent*, Craig becomes so disturbed he kills. In *The Bird Yard*, we are left with the understanding that Brogan had

been abused by Roly, and is likely to repeat that pattern of abuse when he becomes an adult. In *The Bird Yard*, we cannot like Roly because he is a paedophile and a killer, nor can we empathise with Dougie who, like Roly, abuses children. We can't like Brogan's father because he is violent, and neglects Brogan. We can't even like Mr. Moranti, the rather Dickensian character who abused Roly as a child, and is now providing potential victims to Roly. So it is left to the character of the Detective to provide a moral compass and make our world safe and secure.

Returning to 6, *Vermillion Crescent*, Crozier is the only character we can really be expected to like, but I have to admit to feeling a certain amount of sympathy for Craig. The advert which Anne and Graham placed in *The Manchester Evening News* when trying to find a home for the stray dog which he so desperately wanted to keep read as follows: WANTED: LOVING HOME, FOR FRIENDLY YOUNG DOG. HOUSETRAINED. GOOD WITH CHILDREN. We are told that it put Anne in mind of the adverts that were sometimes placed by Social Services. EVER THOUGHT OF FOSTERING? ELLEN IS A NERVOUS, BUT FRIENDLY GIRL WHO LONGS TO BE WITH A FAMILY BY CHRISTMAS.

At one point in the novel, Crozier flags up the fact that a man is no more likely to wake up of a morning with the intention of raping and murdering a girl of 14 than he is likely to stroll into Barclays waving a sawn off shot gun. By showing the reader what Craig has had to endure, I have tried to explain his motivation for murdering Becky. In so doing, I hope to have created a certain amount of sympathy for him. We can also understand why he murdered Kenny Riggall, for once we know that Kenny killed Craig's dog for no other reason than that he was afraid it would attract people to their hiding place, our sympathies are more with Craig than with Kenny who, after

all, we don't know. We've never met him. He is just 'a body' to us. However, it was never going to be possible for the reader to empathise with Craig completely, and had I allowed him to murder Margery as well as Gerald, we would have had no sympathy for him whatsoever. (Gerald and Margery were the elderly couple who bought the house from the Slaters in the wake of Becky's death.)

Margery was kind to Craig. She didn't deserve to die. Gerald, on the other hand, wasn't a particularly likeable character. Not only was he arrogant, and a bully, but he, too, had blood on his hands. He was, after all, ex-army. He collected knives. He clearly took pleasure in handling them. We get the impression that Gerald might have enjoyed killing people.

In the fifth draft, I dispensed with the prologue in which we saw Craig's body being discovered, and opened with the scene in which we saw Craig returning to Vermillion Crescent with the intention of discovering Anne Slater's current whereabouts.

The scene is one of the most important in the novel. It conveys a great deal of information. It tells the reader that the house was once owned by Anne and Graham Slater, and that not only their daughter, Becky, but their foster son was murdered.

Gerald and Margery don't recognise Craig as the killer. Why should they? He was 12 when he was jailed, and he is now 29. He bears little resemblance to any photos that might have appeared of him in the press at the time of the trial.

That said, Gerald is suspicious of him, but only because he believes he was staring at the house because he intended to rob it. Margery isn't suspicious of him at all. She is only too glad to have somebody to talk to.

We then move on to Chapter One, in which Anne Slater receives the card from Crozier and flashes back to what happened on the day of her daughter's murder.

The novel now had everything that was required of the opening chapter of a crime novel in that we knew who our main character was, we were given immediate access to her daughter's murder, and we were introduced to the copper who was investigating that murder. In fact, by the end of that chapter, we knew a great deal, including that Anne's marriage had broken up and that there was something about Graham that was being kept from us.

This worked well, but as was the case when I opened the novel with the discovery of Craig's body, it left me with a gaping hole in that part of the novel which should have contained the chapter relating to Craig returning to Vermillion Crescent. I also felt there was a risk that some readers might have been disappointed when it transpired that the person they were going to follow throughout the novel wasn't 'the killer', but the mother of one of his victims. I might have been able to mitigate this by introducing the chapters in which we saw more of 'the killer' earlier on in the novel, but it wasn't possible to do it without overcomplicating the structure.

For that, reason, I abandoned this draft, and wrote a draft that was closer to the original.

This had shades of *A Likeness in Stone* in that I had now rewritten the novel four times, only to end up pretty much where I started, though I had of course deleted various characters and concepts and refined it along the way.

In this, the sixth draft, I open with the prologue that appeared in the first draft of the novel. We then go straight to Chapter 1 in which we meet Anne Slater, who has just received a card from Crozier. This

causes Anne to flash back to what happened on the day that her daughter was murdered.

This gives the reader a reason to stick with Anne through a couple of chapters which lay the foundations for what happens in the climax and denouement but which, by their very nature, are a bit slow because we witness her getting the child she is currently fostering (Ticky) off to school.

During that process, she meets her new next-door-neighbour, Kath, whose partner (we learn) is violent both to her, and to her 7 year old son, Ryan. As a result, Ryan has been taken into care.

A word about Anne's husband, Graham. In previous drafts, the information relating to what he did on the day of Becky's murder was conveyed to the reader via Anne reading about it in the book that was written by Keane. My editor never liked the idea of Keane and his book, and it was obvious to me that she wasn't going to publish it with him in it. Therefore, I deleted him altogether.

In addition to the above, I made the following changes:

- The psychic is gone.
- Gilbolton's role in the novel has been reduced. He only appears in three short scenes, and only then in order to move the story along by providing information essential to Crozier.
- The journalist who wrote the book about Craig's crime is gone.
- The book about Craig's crime is gone.
- I have deleted the excerpts from *The Velveteen Rabbit*, but have retained the fact that Anne read this novel to both Craig, and Ticky.

- The title has been changed. It is now called *6, Vermillion Crescent*.
- The structure has been simplified.

I have now reached a stage at which I feel I can submit another draft of the novel to my publisher. First, I must submit it to my agent, who will pass it to her assistant to be read.

The assistant will not be the same assistant who read the first draft, as that assistant has now left the company to be replaced by someone who worked as a script editor on *East Enders*. This fact alone would be enough to make a lot of authors feel nervous about submitting their work, but it doesn't particularly worry me that this particular editor's background is in television. There has long been a tradition of editors hopping from publishing houses, to literary agencies, to television, and back again. I've done it myself. During the period when the Hodder/Macmillan alliance folded in South Africa and I returned to the UK, I worked for the South African Broadcasting Corporation as a Script Editor. It was largely as a result of the contacts I made there that I got development money for a screenplay called *Roly's Yard* which focused on a black child on the outskirts of a township who was drawn to a house lived in by a white South African paedophile. The paedophile had turned his house and garden into an aviary. The Afrikaans police officer who was investigating the disappearance of a number of children in the area was trying to prevent the black child from becoming the killer's next victim. The film was never made, but I shifted the location from Johannesburg to Manchester and used the basic premise for a novel that became *The Bird Yard*.

Be that as it may, I have no idea what my agent's new assistant will make of *6, Vermillion Crescent*. I can only wait and see. The same applies to my editor at Hodder. She may like what I've done with the novel. On the other hand, she may not. If she likes it, it will be published. If she doesn't, I will have to set it aside, and write another.

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## V

## SUMMARY

I wrote my first four novels for Hodder without my agent or editor suggesting what the story ought to be, or how it should develop. Hodder weren't paying me very much money, so they left me alone. This changed after they paid a sizeable advance for two novels.

*Ravenglass* and *6, Vermillion Crescent* were written under the constant and watchful eyes of my agent, my agent's assistants, my editor, and my editor's assistants. I found it very difficult to write under these conditions. All I can do is hope that I have managed to write a novel that meets with their expectations. *6, Vermillion Crescent* is a far cry from the novel I set out to write, but that is not to say I am unhappy with it. It is possible my editor will ask for further changes. It is equally possible that she will simply reject it. This is the risk that every novelist takes when they embark on the 'horrible, exhausting struggle' that Orwell describes the experience of writing a novel to be, and to quote Orwell further: 'One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand'.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTES

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1. George Orwell, 'Why I Write', *Decline of the English Murder* (Penguin, 1965).

## APPENDICES

I thought it might be of interest if I were to include a Chapter Flow to the draft I have submitted. The scenes that occur in flashback have been highlighted in bold type, and give an idea of how I have moved between timeframes.

PROLOGUE      JULY 2009

Killer transferred to Arndale.

1.      NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Anne receives card from Crozier. **FLASHES BACK to day of Becky's death.**
  
2.      NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Detective Inspector Crozier is at home. He **FLASHES BACK to being called to the scene of Becky Slater's murder. Anne has been taken next door to a neighbour (Mrs. Jessop). Crozier goes next door to talk to Anne.**
  
3.      NOVEMBER 1992 – MONDAY AFTERNOON  
Anne still at Mrs. Jessop's. Crozier questions her and discovers what the family was doing from the moment they got up that morning, to the moment Anne came home and found Becky dead.
  
4.      NOVEMBER 1992 – MONDAY EARLY EVENING  
Crozier now takes Anne to her mother-in-law's house to wait for Graham to be located. En route, they pass the house in which Becky's best friend, Natalie lives (more of Natalie later) and continues to question her. He discovers that the skirt belonged to Anne and that Becky once borrowed it when she went to a party at which all the girls had to go as an icon from the 1960s.
  
5.      NOVEMBER 1992 – MONDAY EARLY EVENING  
Crozier goes to Graham's place of work. Graham arrives. The news of Becky's death is broken to him. Graham does a runner.
  
6.      NOVEMBER 1992 – MONDAY EARLY EVENING  
Crozier, Hoskins and Bennet return to 6, Vermillion Crescent where they

stand on the embankment and consider what they know so far.

7. NOVEMBER 1992 – MONDAY EARLY EVENING  
Crozier, Hoskins and Bennet go home. Reader gets insight into their homelife/relationships/kids. Chapter ends with Bennet's son, Alex revealing that he is in deep trouble over something. The reader won't find out what this is until the end of the book.
  
8. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Crozier back in the present and playing with a Spirograph. **FLASHES BACK** to November 1992 when he revealed the results of the post mortem and broke the news to Anne that although Becky wasn't raped, she did in fact have sex with someone before she died. Anne won't accept it. However, sedatives are taking the edge off her emotions, which is probably just as well because Graham's car has been found abandoned at Dunham Massey. Dogs track his scent to the lake within the grounds of the estate. It is assumed that he has committed suicide.  
  
Crozier phones the Head of the Arndale Unit (Gilbolton), who assures him Becky's killer is no longer a threat. **BREAK** Cut to Gilbolton. What Crozier doesn't realise is that Becky's killer has already been allowed out of the unit unescorted. Gilbolton only hopes he returns that evening.
  
9. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Becky Slater's killer returns to 6VC, which is now owned by an elderly couple (Gerald and Margery).
  
10. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Anne puts card from Crozier in a drawer in her bedside table and gets the child she is currently fostering (Ticky) up, and ready for school.
  
11. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Anne meets her new neighbour, Kath, who is in her early 20s and in a violent relationship. Her son, Ryan, is in care. He lives with his grandmother.
  
12. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Having dropped Ticky and Ryan off at school, Anne goes to Maureen's. She changes the dressings on Maureen's ulcerated legs, and promises to bring Ticky over after school. She washes her hands in the bathroom, and pokes her head into Graham's old bedroom. This is the room where she spent most of her time in the weeks and months after Becky's death. She **FLASHES BACK** to Crozier telling her that Craig is asking for her. She agrees to go and see him.
  
13. NOVEMBER 1992  
Anne on her way to Silver Street. En route, she buys a toy for Craig (a model motorbike). **DOUBLE FLASHBACK** as she reveals that Craig had a dog called Spicer. Graham wouldn't have it in the house. It was re-

homed by some people called Renshaw. Craig was devastated.

14. NOVEMBER 1992 – BECKY HAS BEEN DEAD TWO WEEKS  
Anne sees Craig at Silver Street. Chapter ends with Craig smashing the present when Anne explains that she can't take him home with her.
15. NOVEMBER 1992 – BECKY HAS BEEN DEAD TWO WEEKS  
Crozier was waiting for Anne outside in the car. Anne is clearly upset by the argument with Craig. Crozier asks whether there is any chance at all of Craig being allowed to live with her and Maureen. Anne replies that there isn't, and she also tells Crozier that even if Becky hadn't been murdered, chances were, Craig would have ended up back at Silver Street anyway. Crozier asks why. Anne now reveals that Craig's biological father turned up on the doorstep one night, causing trouble. This was the final straw for Graham who wanted Craig moved on.
16. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
We are back with Crozier who has just slammed the phone down on Gilbolton. He leaves for the station, and **FLASHES BACK** to a call that came in from a member of the public (Sally Mundy). This call resulted in him interviewing Craig's PE Teacher (Whittle) about a football kit that Sally Mundy's son had taken home by mistake. The kit belonged to Craig. There is some significance to this, but we don't yet know what it is.
17. NOVEMBER 1992 – BECKY HAS BEEN DEAD TWO WEEKS  
Crozier interviews Craig. He asks him how the kit came to be wet when the whole class had PE in the gym on the day that Becky was murdered. When confronted, Craig admits that he went home that lunchtime, still in his kit. He claims that Graham was in the house when he got there, and that Becky was threatening to tell her mother that he was abusing her. Crozier now determined to find Graham.
18. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY AFTERNOON PRESENT DAY  
Anne picks Ticky up from school. Kath keeps her distance. Anne takes Ticky to Maureen's, then takes him home. **BREAK** Kath's violent partner, Phil, turns up on the doorstep to accuse her of having alerted Social Services to the fact that he'd knocked Kath around. Anne stands up to him.
19. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
Crozier is now at the station. **FLASHES BACK** to word coming in that Graham is living in a house near Altrincham under the name 'Graham Salter'. One of the neighbours informed the police. **BREAK** Crozier goes to the house and discovers that he's living with a woman called Dawn. He takes Graham to station for questioning.
20. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
Anne gets Ticky to bed. They hear Kath and Phil arguing. Ticky asks Anne if he can sleep in her bed. Anne now **FLASHES BACK** to Crozier telling her Graham has been found. He also tells her Graham was found at the house of a woman called Dawn. He expects this to come as a shock to

Anne, but it clearly doesn't, and he asks her whether she knew. Anne now recalls how she went to Bristol to let Graham know she was pregnant. He was living in a house let to students. Dawn was one of the other students he shared the house with. It was Dawn who let her into the house. Anne didn't realise she and Graham were as good as living together. When she broke the news that she was pregnant, Graham behaved like a trapped animal. She tells Crozier that he was forced to marry her by his parents. The Slaters, like Anne's own family, were Catholic, and although it was the late 1970s, there was no question of him not doing 'the right thing' by her. Out of flashback, and END OF FRIDAY NIGHT FOR ANNE.

21. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY EVENING PRESENT DAY

Crozier has now left the station. (He can remember a time when it took fifteen minutes to drive home from the station at Deansgate to the house he and Jean have lived in for over 20 years. Now it takes him forty minutes – longer during rush hour. During the drive, he FLASHES BACK to some of the things Graham told him when he got him to the station, and we now get an insight into what motivated Graham to attempt to fake his own death. He explains that he was trapped into marrying Anne. He was going to leave when Becky went to university. Becky's death would have made it impossible for him to leave, and he couldn't face it. He decided to make people think he was dead. Graham is aware that he is suspected of having murdered Becky and he produces an alibi. He claims to have dropped in on a work colleague to congratulate him on the birth of a baby.

22. NOVEMBER 1992 – BECKY HAS BEEN DEAD THREE WEEKS

Crozier still in flashback. He goes to see Charlie Reynolds. His wife, Frankie, confirms that Graham with them all morning on the day of Becky's death. Crozier can see no reason why she would say this if it wasn't true. Consequently, he comes to the conclusion that Craig must be lying.

23. NOVEMBER 1992 – BECKY HAS BEEN DEAD THREE WEEKS

Crozier returns to Silver Street and confronts Craig with the lie. Craig now claims that the person in the house was his biological father (Liam Brannah). "He told me if I said anything, he'd kill me." Out of flashback, and END OF FRIDAY NIGHT FOR CROZIER.

24. November 2009 – FRIDAY EVENING, PRESENT DAY

Gilbolton is reflecting on the fact that Becky Slater's killer hasn't returned to the unit. He considers contacting Crozier to tell him, but decides against it for the moment. His instinct is to keep the whole thing quiet for as long as possible. END OF FRIDAY NIGHT FOR GILBOLTON

25. NOVEMBER 2009 – FRIDAY EVENING PRESENT DAY

Killer putting milk bottles out at 6, Vermillion Crescent. Tomorrow is the anniversary of Becky's death, and he's willing to bet Anne will go to Becky's grave. END OF FRIDAY NIGHT FOR BECKY SLATER'S KILLER.

26. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
It is now Saturday morning. Ticky goes off with his mother. Anne goes to Becky's grave. She lays some flowers. She **FLASHES BACK** to what happened after the police realised Graham couldn't have murdered Becky. They were back to square one, and Crozier reminded her that when he was driving her back from Silver Street, she told him that Craig's father turned up on the doorstep demanding to speak to Craig. Anne tells him Becky came down stairs in the clothes she intended to wear for the party.
27. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY MORNING PRESENT DAY  
Crozier is off duty this weekend. He and Jean are preparing to go out so that an estate agent can do a viewing. **CROZIER FLASHES BACK** to Anne telling him about what happened on the night that Brannah turned up on the doorstep. Significantly, Anne had told him that while Brannah was at the door Becky appeared on the landing dressed in the clothes she intended to wear for the party. Crozier still thinks the skirt was significant and that Becky's killer saw her wear it at some point. He now believes that Brannah returned to the house, and that when he did so, he made her wear it for him. Crozier pulls his record and learns that he was released some months ago. He was living in a hostel less than a half hour walk from Vermillion Crescent. Sheena faxes the address to Crozier who contacts Brannah's Parole Officer. Brannah has missed two appointments. As a matter of fact, he hasn't been seen since the night of Becky's murder. **BREAK** Sheena informs Crozier that Craig has gone missing. Crozier hopes Brannah hasn't managed to get his hands on him and that Craig has simply run away. Knowing how fond he is of Spicer (the dog that Anne and Graham re-homed), Crozier thinks it likely he might try to steal him back. With that in mind, he goes to see the Renshaws to warn them that Craig might turn up at their place. He discovers that Spicer has also gone missing, and that gives him hope that Craig is okay.
28. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY AFTERNOON PRESENT DAY  
Becky Slater's killer follows Anne home from the cemetery. He knocks on the door to Kath and Phil's. Phil answers the door, and is stabbed. His killer is now in the house. He cooks himself a meal, deals with Phil's body, takes a shower, shaves his head, dresses in Phil's clothes, and hears a car arrive. Ticky gets out of it and runs up the path to Anne's (next door).
29. NOVEMBER 1992  
**FLASHBACK** John Loftus discovers the body of a boy in the mill at Dunham Massey. The names tags on his clothes read 'Craig Brannah'.
30. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY AFTERNOON PRESENT DAY  
Anne has returned home from the cemetery. She has no idea that she was followed from the cemetery. Ticky returns. Anne **FLASHES BACK** to Crozier breaking the news that a body has been found at the Mill in Dunham Massey. First indications are that it's Craig's. The body of a dog has also been found. It had been buried some hours earlier, but had been

exhumed. Crozier has seen it. It's Spicer. Anne wants Spicer buried at 6, Vermillion Crescent (thus explaining how Gerald and Margery came to find the bones).

31. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY AFTERNOON PRESENT DAY  
The match is over. Crozier and Jean go home. The viewing has been done. Someone has offered the asking price for the house. Jean is delighted and Crozier tries to appear equally delighted for her sake. **CROZIER FLASHES BACK** to a call coming in from the mother of one of the girls at school. Natalie Muscati claimed to have spoken to Becky on the phone, etc. Crozier goes to see Natalie. **BREAK** he interviews Alex, who says that *he* was at the house, and Becky wore the skirt for him. Crozier is thrown by this piece of information. It throws doubt on the theory that it was the skirt that attracted Brannah to Becky. He certainly didn't force her to wear it for him. She just happened to be wearing it anyway. **BREAK** Crozier interviews Bennet's son, Alex, who admits that Becky wore the skirt for him. Alex has an alibi (he was back at school by the time Becky was murdered), so that leaves Brannah.
  
32. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY AFTERNOON PRESENT DAY  
Ticky behaves badly after returning from spending the day with his mother. Anne sorts him out. He wants to play in the garden before bed. It's still light enough, so Anne allows him out for a while.
  
33. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY AFTERNOON PRESENT DAY  
The events that unfold in this chapter are seen through the eyes of Becky Slater's killer who is still in the house next door. He speaks to Ticky over the garden fence, gains his trust, and abducts him.
  
34. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
Crozier is at home. He gets a call from a colleague to say that there's been an incident at 6, Vermillion Crescent. The colleague doesn't have any more details than that, but he knows that Crozier worked on the Becky Slater case and therefore knows that he would have wanted to be informed. Could be coincidence, but unlikely. Crozier shouts to Jean and tells her. Grabs his coat, and en-route, he calls Gilbolton who now tells him what he should have told him 24 hours ago – that Becky's killer was allowed out of the unit unescorted the previous day. He hasn't returned.
  
35. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
Anne has reported Ticky missing. The police are searching for him locally. His mother, and his caseworker, have been informed. The identity of Becky's killer is now revealed to the reader. He confronts Anne in the house, and Anne says, "Hello Craig."
  
36. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY EARLY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
Crozier is now at 6, Vermillion Crescent. Gerald is dead. Margery is alive. This won't be Crozier's investigation. He's retiring in a matter of weeks. Already, the senior officer who will be handling this is on the scene, so Crozier, who knows Anne's address, drives straight over there.

As he does so, he **FLASHES BACK** to the scene in which Craig's father was located. It wasn't difficult to find him. He was back in custody, which was where he was the day that Becky was murdered. (He'd broken the terms of his parole.) Therefore, he couldn't have murdered Becky, and he couldn't have murdered Craig, either. **BREAK** Crozier goes to the Dunham Massey Estate, which is being searched by SOCOs. They focus their attention on the area where Spicer's body was found. **AS** a result, a boy is discovered living rough in the old stone barn. He's half starved, and in a bad way. He tells one of the SOCOs that his name is Kenny Riggall and that he shared a room with Craig at Silver Street. The SOCO has a word with Crozier, who decides to speak to Kenny, but of course, the boy isn't Kenny, it's Craig, who had dressed Kenny's body in the clothes that bore the name tags. 'Craig Brannah'.

37. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY EARLY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
 Craig has now confronted Anne who is so afraid, she can barely function. But she asks him why he murdered Becky, and why he tried to pin the blame on Graham. This is something nobody has ever been able to understand because Craig didn't reveal his motivation when he was a child. Craig now replies that he thought that if he killed Becky, and if Graham got the blame, that would get rid of the obstacles that stood in the way of him from continuing to live with Anne. Also, he hoped that with Graham gone, he might get Spicer back. We are reminded that Craig made a threat from the dock: *When I get out, I'll find you, and I'll kill you.* But in fact, his motivation for finding her has changed over the years. He wants her to know what it was like to be in his position as a child. *People like you, you ruin children's lives... you give them a taste of Paradise, and then you take it away (etc.).* He no longer wants to kill her. He wants her to kill him, and he forces her to do so by wrapping her hands around the knife that he was threatening her with. He now commits suicide with Anne still holding that knife.
38. NOVEMBER 2009 - SATURDAY EARLY EVENING PRESENT DAY  
 Crozier arrives at Anne's having just left Vermillion Crescent where Gerald is dead, and Margery is in shock. Anne's next door neighbour, Kath, arrives at the same time as Crozier. She lets herself into the house as Anne comes staggering out of her own home covered in blood. Crozier hears Kath screaming. He enters the house next door to Anne's expecting the worst. It's a scene of carnage. Phil is dead. Ticky is hiding in one of the bedrooms. Crozier picks him up and carries him out. He sets him down on the pavement as his mother arrives with his caseworker. Despite everything Anne has done for him, Ticky runs to his mother rather than to her.
39. Epilogue. Months have passed. Anne is fostering another child. Maureen is just that little bit more disabled. Life goes on, but not without Maureen observing that Anne is a glutton for punishment.

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**6, VERMILLION CRESCENT**

**by**

**J. Wallis Martin**

## PROLOGUE

This part of Salford would once have been a prestigious place to live. Now, the Edwardian houses had been broken up into flats. The trees that had flanked the avenues were gone, and cars were parked on what were once front lawns. Yet despite that the area had come down in the world, when residents discovered that an entire row of houses was to be demolished to make way for a detention centre at which former prisoners would be prepared for eventual release into the community, they formed a protest group. Leaflets inviting residents to attend a meeting to put their views to Manchester City Council were distributed, only to flutter with dog-eared futility as *The Arndale Unit* was built.

It was scheduled for completion in March 2006. It was a further three months before it officially opened and the prisoners who were first to be transferred began to arrive six weeks later. Some of them had enjoyed the distinction of being in the public eye as a result of their crimes. Among them was someone who murdered a girl of 14, and a foster child, and the day he was transferred, the Officers escorting him brought him from Wakefield.

When one of them spoke into an intercom set into a wall at the main entrance, a mechanical voice instructed him to *p.l.e.a.s.e. p.u.s.h. t.h.e. d.o.o.r.* in the way that the voice that comes over the tannoy at a tube station might say *p.l.e.a.s.e. m.i.n.d. t.h.e. s.t.e.p.*

The door opened easily, and he was led into a reception area. Another officer asked to see the paperwork relating to him. It was produced. Then he was handed over.

He was told to wait in an area that was divided from the rest of reception by bullet-proof glass. Behind it were a couple of desks, and an array of security monitors. There was also a computer. A woman sat in front of it hammering away at a keyboard. She was grossly overweight, and the material of her navy suit was shiny where the skirt had dragged on the fabric of the chair. She looked about fifty, but people might have said the same of him.

He could see his own reflection in the glass. What he saw didn't please him. It wasn't in keeping with the image he had of himself. Prison had put years on him. He hadn't kept in shape. And it wasn't just the lighting that deepened the lines on his face.

Heightwise, he felt comfortable. He was over six feet tall, but the jeans he was wearing had creases ironed into them, and the mock-leather jacket was plastic. It crackled when he moved and the sleeves, like the jeans, were just that bit too short.

He was made to wait for over twenty minutes. That irritated him. The message conveyed by the act of keeping somebody waiting implied that whoever was doing the waiting wasn't important, so by the time two warders appeared to escort him through the building, he was tense.

The warders were casually dressed. Their sweatshirts were grey, and so were their joggers, but they carried themselves like Prison Officers. He suspected the dress code wasn't their choice. They would have preferred to have been in uniform. They didn't make any attempt at conversation. "You," said one. "Come with us."

He complied by following them without comment through the complex, and was brought to a halt in front of the door to an office. One of his escorts spoke into an intercom to let the Head of the Unit know they were there.

“Come,” said Gilbolton.

The door swung wide to reveal a room in which the window was set too high to allow a view. Triple glazing kept the sound of the outside world where it belonged, and air con kept the temperature to an even 60 degrees. It was lightly furnished – just two chairs and a table, a bank of filing cabinets lining one wall.

Gilbolton wore a grey tweed jacket and corduroy trousers. He also wore a tie, but at some point in the day, he’d loosened it slightly. His hair must once have been a sandy. Now it was grey, but his beard was shot through with streaks of rust. He stood up to reveal that he was slightly built, and of less than average height. “I’m Patrick Gilbolton,” he said. “I’ll be responsible for your progress while you’re here.” He indicated one of two chairs and added, “Take a seat.”

As he sat, Gilbolton added, “Today must have been your first glimpse of the outside world in a long time.”

There wasn’t a lot you could see from the back of an armour plated van, but he said nothing to disabuse Gilbolton of the notion that his journey from Manchester Prison to the Arndale had been something akin to a Magical Mystery Tour.

“You’ll have noticed some changes.”

He hadn’t noticed anything beyond the warders who were sitting either side of him. Conversation was kept to a minimum, even between themselves. “A few,” he replied.

“And now you’re here,” said Gilbolton. “How do you feel about that?”

How did he *think* he felt? The Arndale represented the only chance he was ever likely to get to walk out of prison. “Nervous, Mr. Gilbolton.”

“What are you nervous about?”

“You assess me, right?”

“It’s a little more complex than that,” said Gilbolton, and he went on to explain that most of the people he would meet at the Arndale had served their sentence in a psychiatric hospital. The rest had served their sentence in an ordinary prison, but wherever they’d served their sentence, they all had one thing in common – they’d been transferred to the Arndale so that they could be prepared for release.

It was a gradual process. Initially, the inmates were allowed to walk round the local streets under escort. Provided all went well, they were allowed to leave the Unit for increasing amounts of time. If that was achieved without incident, they were allowed to go home for short periods – always assuming they had a home to go to, which most of them didn’t. During the early stages, they were escorted. Again, if all went well, they were allowed to leave the Unit without an escort, and finally, they were allowed to take up residence in a town or city.

“As Head of the Unit, I take the flack if you re-offend.”

He understood all that. “I won’t give any trouble, Mr. Gilbolton.”

“Let’s hope you don’t, because if I recommend that you be returned to prison, the likelihood of you ever being released will be non-existent.”

What was he supposed to say to that? He knew the score.

Gilbolton continued, “The day you were convicted, you threatened to kill the mother of one of your victims.”

“I meant it when I said it... but that was fifteen years ago. A man can change a lot in 15 years.”

“I hope so,” said Gilbolton, “because if you give me the slightest reason to suspect that you intend to carry out that threat, you’ll find yourself back at Wakefield. Do I make myself clear?”

It wasn’t the first time someone had tried to stare him down. If he’d wanted to, he could have held Gilbolton’s gaze without blinking for as long as it took. But for no other reason than that it was in his interests, he submitted by turning away.

It satisfied Gilbolton. “Let’s get you down to the block.”

The escorts flanked him as Gilbolton led the way, talking at him over his shoulder as he went. “The Arndale is a 60 bed Unit. Some of the blocks are occupied by people on medication.”

They were the psychotics, he thought, people whose criminal tendencies could be controlled by drugs.

“Others are occupied by people who don’t need medication, but whose crimes were of an extremely violent nature.”

And these were the Jimmy Boyles, the McVicars of the world – men whose actions were shaped more by nurture than nature.

An edge to his voice, Gilbolton added, “Some are occupied by people whose crimes were sexually motivated,” and straight away, he didn’t need to ask which ward he was being taken to, not that it made it any easier to stomach.

Moments later, a door snicked open to reveal a communal area. There were several men in there, some of them grouped round a table, playing cards, others playing snooker. None of them acknowledged him. He was of no more interest to them than they were to him. Gilbolton ran through their names. He made no effort to let them

register. He wanted to blot them out. These people were rapists and paedophiles. *They were filth.*

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## 1

The tiny link-detached was a bit of a comedown for Anne, but once they knew what had happened at 6, Vermillion Crescent, nobody wanted to buy her former home. Plenty of people had wanted to look at it though. The agent found it difficult to distinguish genuine buyers from the curious. In the end, it was sold at a knock down price. Anne would rather have seen it knocked down altogether, and in its place, a garden of remembrance.

She stood at a sink in which dishes from the night before were soaking, and studied her hands. The nails were bitten down, and over the years, the delicate fingers had thickened. These were the hands of a woman who had aged before her time, and it wasn't just her hands. The changes went deeper than that. Sometimes, she reached out to her reflection and touched the glass. *Is that you, Anne Slater?*

Once – and this was the strangest thing – the woman in the mirror walked away. Anne didn't move. She stared at the space that only a moment ago had been taken up by the anxious looking creature. And then she, too, walked away.

The slap of the letterbox pulled her away from the sink. She walked from the kitchen directly into a small mean hall, and stood with her back to the stairs to retrieve what was quite obviously a card. It was the same every year. The same shambolic writing, the second letter of every word larger than the first, and written in biro. *To Anne, from Alan Crozier — hoping this finds you well at this difficult time.*

Strange that he signed his surname every time. It wasn't as though she was likely to forget him. So far as she was aware, he was still with Greater Manchester Police, though she assumed that at some point over the past 15 years, he must have been promoted.

The day she met him, Crozier was a Detective Inspector. The house she was living in then was slightly more upmarket than the house she was living in now, but even so, it wasn't exactly grand. Its arched brick porch and its blue front door was typical of a 1930s semi, and the view of a small back garden was blocked by a prefabricated garage. It was almost identical to the houses that flanked it, right down to the doormat with its a half moon of rust coloured bristles, the WELCOME worn to a smudge by the traffic of family life. The hall was long and narrow. The carpet was patterned, the colours muted so that mud and crumbs wouldn't show. It extended into one of two downstairs rooms, the sofa and an armchair arranged so that the family could watch television together.

In the kitchen that led off it, Anne was turning bacon under the grill. Some people couldn't face a full cooked breakfast first thing and Graham was one of them, but she didn't like to send the kids to school on an empty stomach. Graham just settled for coffee, but it had to be an Espresso, properly made. He didn't object to making it himself, but the kitchen was too small for the pair of them to be skirting around one another at that time of morning. More often than not, she'd end up doing it while Graham sat a Formica topped table that needed replacing.

It wasn't just the table that needed replacing. She was forever trying to persuade Graham that a new kitchen would add value to the property. He wasn't keen. There wasn't the money to do it. There

wasn't even the money to give it a facelift, so to speak, so what was the point in her bringing catalogues home?

She knew all this, but it didn't hurt to dream. And in that dream, she and Graham were laughing like the people you sometimes saw in adverts, as though having a brand new kitchen could change your life. She was a good stone lighter. Her hair was longer and blonder, and she was wearing a tight little dress. But Graham was no different in the dream. His hair still touched his shoulders, and he still wore the suit that she liked from Marks & Spencers. He'd be watching her making the coffee, just as he was watching her now, but in the dream, the coffee was just an excuse for him to look at her in a way that made her feel he *wanted* her, whereas here, in this kitchen, on this cold November morning, the only reason he watched her was to check that she made it the way he liked it.

As she put it in front of him, she asked if he'd be back that evening.

"Depends on what time I finish."

"Where are you off to today then?"

"Newcastle."

He sounded depressed, but Mondays had that effect on him. On Mondays, the week stretched ahead in a way that made it seem as though the weekend hadn't happened, and there was no point telling him it was the same for everyone. Besides, it wasn't. Some people enjoyed their job. They couldn't wait for Mondays. Graham was the opposite. The paperwork he could cope with. The customers he could tolerate. It was the driving that got to him – the distances he travelled. Come the end of the week, he felt as though he'd driven round the world.

Craig came into the kitchen. At five foot three, he was almost as tall as she was, and the uniform that had been too big when she'd bought it

over the summer was already a size too small. With his dark brown hair and his blue grey eyes, he could have passed for Graham's, and it pleased him when people remarked on how like his dad he looked. He never corrected them. It wasn't that he was ashamed of being fostered. It was just that he liked it when people assumed he was family.

He sat at the table as Anne took put a couple of rashers on his plate along with an egg and a slice of fried bread. She glanced at the clock as she served it to him and noted the time. Becky should have been down by now, so she gave her hands a wipe, then went to the foot of the stairs and gave her a shout.

“Becky love, are you up?”

No answer from Becky, but a few minutes later, she came down. She had the same high cheekbones, the same slender frame as Graham, but the colour of her hair she got from Anne. Over the years, it had lost the sun-bleached look of childhood but it had darkened to a pleasing toffee blonde. She hadn't brushed it yet, and she hadn't showered either, so Anne wasn't pleased. At this time of morning, she should have been dressed, but she was still in her pyjamas. “You're going to be late for school.”

“I'm not going...”

“What do you mean... not going?”

“I don't feel well.”

“Not well in what way?”

Becky wouldn't tell her. “I'm just not well... that's all.”

Graham did his best to get it out of her. “Come on Becky. You can't just say you're not well. What's wrong?”

“Nothing...”

“Good... you can go to school then.”

Becky stormed out of the kitchen. Anne was about to go after her, but Graham beat her to it. “You see to Craig,” he said. “I’ll see to Becky.”

Craig got on with his breakfast as Anne made him a couple of sandwiches to take to school. She added some biscuits, a packet of crisps and an apple, and as she clicked the lid down on the Tupperware box that contained them, she said, “Don’t forget your football kit. You’ve games today, remember..”

“Already in my rucksack.”

“Good lad.”

She made him wear a waterproof coat with a hood. He hated that coat, and normally would have done anything to get out of having to wear it, but one look at the weather persuaded him to make an exception this morning. Rain had been forecast, and rain had arrived. It hammered against the windows fit to break them.

“Kiss,” said Anne, and he kissed her.

He went out the back, and she locked the door behind him, then put the key on a hook and went up to Becky’s bedroom. The walls were a delicate mix of yellow and cream. The duvet on her bed matched the pale cream curtains. Becky had wrapped herself in it, as if to protect herself from them.

“Come on Becky, you can tell your dad...”

“I’m *tired*, that’s all.”

“We’re all bloody tired,” said Graham. “What if I didn’t go to work because I was feeling tired? Where would we be?”

“Where are we anyway?” said Becky, and she glanced around the room as if it disgusted her. It probably did. Most of her friends were girls whose parents were a lot better off than they were. Maybe some of them were giving her a hard time? Boys had fights, and then it was

done and dusted, but girls could make one another's lives a misery. And she *did* look tired.

Anne said, "I don't suppose it would matter if she took the day off for once."

The last thing Graham needed was for her to side with Becky. "This is the third time in a month, and I'm not having it."

"You can't expect her to go if she's not up to it Graham."

Becky flashed her a pathetic little smile, but Graham replied, "She's got exams coming up. How's she supposed to pass them if you keep letting her lag off bloody school?"

"There's more to life than exams," said Anne, and Graham gave up then. He didn't have time to argue. So he left the house, but not without a final word of warning: "When I get home young lady, you and I are going to have a little talk."

Anne stayed with Becky for a moment. "There's nothing wrong at school, is there?"

"No," said Becky.

"You'd tell me if there was?"

"Mum..." said Becky. "Can we leave it?"

Anne supposed she'd have to. Like Graham, she had a job to go to so arguing with Becky wasn't an option.

Her bedroom window looked out onto the patch of lawn spliced through by a narrow, concrete strip. In summer, there might have been flowers in the border. Now, the borders were bare other than for shrubs that had lost their leaves. A hedge at the bottom of the garden divided the property from the railway embankment and school playing fields that extended to roughly ten acres. They belonged Wilfred Pickering, and not for the first time, it struck her as a stupid name for

a school. Some local manufacturer had founded it, but that was a hundred years ago, and nobody could remember who he was.

She watched Craig squeeze through the hedge then scramble up the embankment that lay on the other side of it. Seconds later, he was scrambling down and cutting across the playing fields to school. It made a mess of his clothes at times, and she wished he wouldn't do it, but that morning, she was more concerned about Becky than with the thought of Craig getting his trouser bottoms wet.

"You're going to be late for work," said Becky, and Anne took the hint. She left Becky to it, then showered and dressed in a skirt and blouse and flat-heeled shoes. Women who spent the greater part of the day on their feet soon learned not to make the mistake of heels. No make-up to speak of. Just a dab of lipstick. Then she looked in on Becky again. She was sitting up in bed, the duvet wrapped around her.

"Want me to get you an aspirin?"

"I know where they are if I need them."

"Keep yourself warm," said Anne. "There's soup in the cupboard, and biscuits in the..."

"Mum," said Becky. "I'll be fine."

\* \* \*

She caught the bus. It dropped her off at Kendals, which couldn't have been handier given that she worked there, but the doors didn't open 'till 9, so she went through an entrance reserved for staff. She hung her coat in a cloakroom, then used a lift to the top floor. At this time of morning, there were rarely customers in the bedding department. It gave her time to ensure that the stock was displayed as it should be, and then it was business as usual.

She liked her job, but she could have done without it. Given the choice, she would have preferred to have stayed at home if she could.

Graham wouldn't wear it. *We need the money...* Most of his wages came by way of commission and there hadn't been much of that. Not of late.

At break, she had a word with one of her supervisors. She didn't want to lie, so she didn't say Becky was ill, because she didn't think she was. So she just said Becky hadn't gone to school and she was wondering if she could have the afternoon off.

Kendals was good with the staff. Women who had children at home could usually rely on a sympathetic hearing, so at one o'clock, Anne left, and caught the bus home. It dropped her at the top of Pickering Avenue, and it took her less than five minutes to walk home from there. It was still raining, though not quite as heavily as earlier in the day, but it wasn't the kind of weather to hang around in. A decent cup of tea. That was what she wanted. And to kick the instruments of torture off her feet.

She walked up the path, and put her key in the door. The chain was on, and the door wouldn't open beyond a couple of inches, but she and Graham were forever warning the kids that if they were alone in the house, they weren't to open the door to anyone, and they were to keep the chain on. She assumed that Becky had forgotten to take it off.

She went round the back of the house tried the kitchen door. It wasn't locked, which annoyed her. Maybe she'd forgotten to lock it after Craig left for school, though she could have sworn she remembered putting the key back on the hook. Either way, what was the point in keeping the chain on the front if the back door was left unlocked?

She flicked the kettle to life as she walked through the kitchen, and took her coat off as she reached the hall. As she slung it over the banister, she called Becky's name, and when she didn't answer, she

stuck her head round the door to the front room. Once the fire was lit, it warmed up quickly, and Becky sometimes liked to curl up on the sofa. She wasn't there, so Anne went up to her bedroom. The bed was a mess, but there was still no sign of Becky. *Where the hell was she?*

The bathroom was opposite, and there was an inch gap between the door, and the door frame. Anne pushed it, but she couldn't get it open. Not completely. It opened to about a quarter of the extent that it should have, but that was enough to enable her to edge round it.

How long she stayed in that bathroom, she wasn't sure. Two or three minutes perhaps. And during those few minutes, sounds from the outside world filtered through a vent in the window. Kids were kicking a ball around on the school playing fields. It seemed all-important to put a stop to their shouting, to make the world as silent as could be, so she shut the vent by pulling a cord, and then she left the bathroom.

Moments later, she knocked on the door to the house that belonged to her neighbour, Mrs. Jessop. Mrs. Jessop answered, but Anne just stood there.

“Is something the matter, love?”

“It's my daughter, Mrs. Jessop. I think she's had an accident...”

Mrs. Jessop was already half way down the path. “Where is she?”

Anne began to retch, but what came up wasn't vomit. It was a sound that she'd had never heard herself make before – a sound that she wouldn't have thought herself *capable* of making.

Mrs. Jessop gripped her arm. “That won't do any good...” Then she went into the house, and looked for Becky.

Moments later, she came out again. “I'll call the police,” she said.

## 2

Crozier and his wife were having a throw-out. The house was on the market, and the agent had told them that if they hoped to sell it, they'd have to clear some of the clutter they'd managed to accumulate over the years. But what the agent regarded as clutter, they regarded as treasure – the football boots that Stuart wore when he was still young enough to enjoy a kick-around with his dad. The terracotta ash-tray that his daughter, Polly, made at school. Now, the kids were gone. At least, Crozier *hoped* they were gone. These days, you could never be sure you wouldn't get them back. All it would take was for one or other of them to decide to leave their partner, or do another degree, or 'take time out to find themselves' and that would be it. Unless, of course, he and the wife moved somewhere smaller – somewhere less convenient for Manchester City Centre – somewhere that wasn't on a bus route to civilisation.

They were going for a cottage. It was more Jean's dream than his, but she'd spent her life accommodating his need to live within easy travelling distance of the station. He was set to retire in a couple of months, so if Jean said she wanted a cottage, then a cottage she would have. It wouldn't be thatched, and there probably wouldn't be roses round the door, but it would be a cottage – probably in Derbyshire – they hadn't decided yet. Wherever it was, there'd have to be countryside on the doorstep – somewhere to walk the dog. Not that they had one, but Crozier didn't doubt that it wouldn't be long before

the wife dragged him off to a rescue home, and back they'd come with something that had a bit of Spaniel in it. Jean was a real soft touch for soulful brown eyes. *You should be glad, if not for that, I wouldn't have married you would I?*

He'd miss this house, but that was only natural. Jean would miss it too, though she wouldn't miss the view. When they bought it, the house was brand spanking new. There were fields opposite, and they'd been assured that there were no plans to build houses on them. It wasn't a lie. Nobody built any houses, but they did build a Texaco Garage, and a row of shops.

Jean felt cheated, though she supposed it was convenient to have a few shops on the doorstep. It wasn't so convenient anymore. The butcher had gone. Driven out by supermarkets, same as the grocer. The baker was hanging on, and so was the Post Office, though Crozier doubted that would be there much longer. For the moment, however, the mail continued to be collected from the bright red pillar box opposite, and yesterday, Crozier had used it when he'd posted his card to Anne.

He wasn't in the habit of sending cards to the relatives of murder victims. It was just that Becky's murder had stayed in his mind. That had partly to do with the fact that Becky was exactly the same age as Polly when she was murdered, but it also had to do with the fact that when her killer was sentenced, he threatened Anne from the dock. *When I get out, I'll find you, and I'll kill you.* The Judge had recommended that he never be released, but it was too much to hope for. You couldn't lock people up for the rest of their life – not without good reason – that would be an infringement of their Human Rights. Murdering people wasn't a good enough reason, apparently. *God help us all.*

When writing the card, he'd said he hoped Anne was well. At best, it was inadequate, but he never knew what to say. This year, however, he had in fact considered adding something more – something along the lines of, *I'm sure they wouldn't have let him out if they thought he was still a threat.* In the end, he'd left it. As the mother of one of his victims, Anne would have been informed of his release. She would be worried enough as it was. To have given her his home telephone number, and to have told her to use it if she needed – day or night – might only make her realise he was concerned, and that would only have worried her all the more. Better to say nothing. Better to stick to the usual routine by sending a card to let her know that as ever, she and Becky were still very much in his thoughts. The more time passed, the more important it was to let her know that he hadn't forgotten. Not that he was likely to forget. You didn't forget being called to the scene of a murder when the victim was the same age as your own daughter. You tried not to let the fact that she even *looked* a bit like your daughter affect you, but coppers were only human. You couldn't help it.

In certain parts of the country, even quite senior detectives could go through their entire career without handling a single murder investigation. That wasn't true of detectives in Greater Manchester. Even so, it was rare for a girl of 14 to be found dead in the bathroom of her own home. Crozier had been on his way to a conference in Leeds when the call came in. Conferences weren't his thing. He was only too glad to have a good reason for turning the car round and heading back to Manchester. The rain had been particularly heavy throughout the night, and localised flooding had brought the traffic to a halt in places. Cars were being diverted to avoid the worst of it, and one of the diversions put a good half hour on his journey. As a result,

SOCOS were already at the house by the time he got there. So were two of his colleagues from the Murder Squad. One was the solid, meticulous Sergeant Hoskins and the other was Bennet, who ought to have made the rank of detective inspector by then, but whose knack of bending the rules had almost guaranteed that he never would.

When he and Hoskins saw Crozier, they got out of the cars and led him towards the house. Not that he needed leading. If the multitude of vehicles gathered in front of it weren't enough of an indication that something was going on, the tape that was stretched across the gateposts left no doubt.

Some of the neighbours were out. They nudged one another as Crozier, Hoskins and Bennet approached the cordon, and strained their ears to hear what they were saying.

“What’s the situation?” said Crozier.

Bennet replied, “SOCOs are in the house. So’s the pathologist.”

“Have you seen the body?”

“Pilkington wouldn’t let us anywhere near it.”

Typical of Pilkington, thought Crozier. Not that he blamed him. The last thing a Forensic Scientist wanted was a multitude of people contaminating a scene of crime, but Crozier was a different matter. He guided him into the house, but requested that Bennet and Hoskins remain outside.

It wasn't the first time Crozier and Pilkington had met, and as usual, they kept a professional distance. They both preferred it that way. It made it easier for Pilkington to present forensic evidence that sometimes blew a carefully constructed case apart. Not that it happened often, but it did happen, and it was a reminder that forensic scientists weren't police officers. It wasn't their job to secure a

conviction against an individual. It was their job to find and present whatever evidence there might be at a scene of crime.

“Choudhuri’s with her,” said Pilkington, and he led him upstairs to a bathroom that could best be described as inadequate for a house of this size. The suite was plain and white, the simple fittings chrome. A shower had been mounted over the bath. There wasn’t the space for a separate unit and the same lack of space was making it difficult for Choudhuri to work. He was crouching beside the body of a girl who was sitting with her back to the bath, her head on her chest, her legs splayed out in front of her.

“Do we know her name?” said Crozier.

“Becky,” said Pilkington.

Becky, thought Crozier. *Who did this to you my love?*

She was naked apart from a short pink skirt that was rucked around her waist, and whoever had killed her had opened her legs as if to make an exhibition of the most intimate parts of her anatomy.

“Who found her?”

“The mother,” replied Choudhuri.

“Christ,” said Crozier.

This was a respectable part of Manchester, the houses owner-occupied by people who paid the mortgage, stuck within the speed limit, and gave regularly to charities. Sensible, *decent* people who didn’t deserve to come home to find their daughter dead.

“When did she die... approximately?”

“I won’t know for sure until I’ve done the post mortem, but if we use body temperature as an indication, then I’d say... around mid-day.”

Three hours wasn’t long, but it was long enough for certain of the changes that took place in the first few hours after death to have

occurred. Whatever she might have looked like when her mother found her, Crozier hoped she didn't look like this.

He was in the way. There wasn't a lot he could do by standing there, watching Choudhuri take scrapings from under Becky's fingernails, so Pilkington took him into the master bedroom where SOCOs were lifting clothes from the kind of fitted wardrobe that didn't fit. It didn't contain many clothes – just three goods suits and five good shirts, and socks and ties and shoes all stored 'just so'. The casual clothes consisted of a couple of sweatshirts, a couple of pairs of jeans, and trainers that looked as though they had rarely been worn.

A quick glance round revealed a chest of drawers that was almost empty, and a double bed. There were two pillows, but they were positioned in such a way as to suggest that this bed was only slept in by one person. "How many bedrooms are there?"

"Four," said Pilkington, and he took him into a bedroom off the landing. Another fitted wardrobe, equally cheap and cheerful, the white, plastic veneer coming away from the chipboard doors in places. Pilkington opened them to reveal a mish mash of the kind of clothes a working mother might wear. Skirts, jumpers, dresses, boots and shoes. All of them practical in nature. Again, the bed was a double, and again, the pillows were arranged in a way that suggested the bed was only slept in by one person, but there were any number of reasons why a couple might choose to sleep apart. Maybe the husband snored, or maybe the wife got up in the night to see to the kids on occasion. So separate bedrooms didn't necessarily imply an unhappy marriage. He noted it though, in case it proved relevant.

The smallest bedroom lay at the back, over the kitchen below. Its walls were adorned with posters of Triumph Bonneville. The half made model of a Boeing 747 stood on a small pine table behind the

door. A single bed, the duvet cover designed to resemble a dirt track with pit stops and obstacles. Next to it stood a bookshelf that also doubled as a bedside table. The books on the shelves were titles Crozier recognised from his own childhood. – *Kidnapped*, *Call of the Wild*, and *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

He and Pilkington left it for the bedroom which was obviously Becky's. The walls were cream and yellow, and the curtains were cream to match. The pine chest of drawers was on its last legs. An effort had been made to modernise it with a lick of varnish. A pile of text books was stacked on one side of the table that stood beside it, the exercise books they related to stacked beside them. A single bed, the bedclothes half on the floor, a hairbrush on the dresser along with the kind of make-up that teenage girls were attracted to. Lip gloss, Khol, and mascara. An eyebrow pencil.

The wardrobe doors were open. One side was taken up by clothes that hung from a rail. The other was taken up by shelves and two deep drawers filled with clothes that had been folded neatly. Shoes were arranged in pairs beside the wardrobe, and the blouses, jumpers and box-pleated skirts that hung above them were clearly all part of a school uniform. The clothes that hung beside them were similar in style to those that Crozier's own daughter might have worn. Skin tight jeans and skimpy tops. A couple of skirts of a kind that were liable to give any father a heart-attack. Shoes with heels, and shoes without, but all infinitely more feminine, more alluring, than the shoes that were worn for school. "She liked her shoes," said Crozier.

"What girl doesn't," said Pilkington, and Crozier brought out a dress that was more wishful thinking than fabric. "They grow up fast," he remarked.

“Too fast for their own good at times,” said Pilkington, and from that remark alone, Crozier was able to gather that Pilkington was thinking along similar lines to him. Some of these clothes were provocative, but you try telling a girl of 14 that what she was wearing could well get her killed. The rows that Crozier had had with his own daughter, Polly. *You can't go out wearing that...*

*But dad... it's the fashion.*

Becky's bedroom window looked down onto the garden. It was divided from the railway embankment by a hedge. SOCOs were searching it. Soon, they would extend their search to the playing fields on the other side of it, and the boundaries that defined it, “I'd like to take a look at the embankment.”

First, however, he took a look at a downstairs room that looked out onto a half moon of grass. It divided the Crescent from the houses opposite and should have been pleasant enough, but with its old-fashioned pelmets it wasn't particularly welcoming. At some point, the open fireplace had been plastered over and an electric fire that was just this side of deco stood in front of it.

The dark mahogany mantel that framed the electric fire was adorned with photos. Most were of Becky. In one, she was riding a tricycle. In another, her first two wheeler. There she was again, building a sandcastle on a beach that had all the hallmarks of Southport.

There was also a photograph of a couple on what was obviously their wedding day. The woman was more of a girl to be honest. She didn't look old enough to be getting married. Not a white dress, but a suit. Pale cream wool was Crozier's guess, and if the snowdrops on the wind-blown bit of grass were anything to go by, she would have been glad of it. She wasn't showing. Not in this photo, at any rate

But he suspected this was Becky's mother, and that she couldn't have been a day over 17 when Becky was born. The lad at her side couldn't have been much older. The suit he was wearing looked borrowed and the haircut would have won him damages. They were young to be married. Life must have been a struggle. Judging by the furnishings, Crozier thought it likely it still was.

The room at the back was given over to sofas that were arranged in an L shape – one against each wall. A medium sized television set diagonally across one corner. A coal-effect fire in a cast iron grate, the mantel around it original, but the wood painted white. The kitchen led off it and Crozier noted the clutter of dishes not yet cleared from breakfast.

The kitchen door was wide open. Crozier stepped outside, and the narrow concrete path that divided the lawn drew his eye to a gap in the hedge. The embankment rose up behind it, the grass worn to bare earth in places. Crozier wanted to take a look at it, but Pilkington didn't want him anywhere near it until SOCOs had finished their preliminary search. Crozier could understand it, and in any event, it wasn't in his interests to make the SOCOs job difficult.

“Where's the mother?” he said.

“Next door with a neighbour.”

“Right then,” said Crozier, and he prepared himself mentally for what lay ahead. Talking to the mother of a murdered girl was a part of the job that he would gladly have left to somebody else, but if he was to stand a chance of finding this girl's killer, it had to be done.

\* \* \*

Crozier was shown into a room that was reminiscent of a time when the parlour was sacrosanct. The carpet was slightly more expensive here than in the hall, the wallpaper Regency Stripe in maroon and cream. It

smelled of the kind of polish that took him back to his childhood. His gran had used a heavy beeswax polish, and Mrs. Jessop looked very much like her, right down to the wisps of thinning hair. She'd pulled the curtains – a mark of respect, she said, for that poor young girl. And as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw Anne Slater. She was sitting very upright on the edge of a wing-backed chair, and in her hand, she held a cup and saucer. Crozier was surprised by how young she was. He'd expected her to be in her mid to late 40s, but she was younger than that by a good few years. Young, and not unattractive in a quiet sort of way. Small and slim, with dark blonde hair. He crouched beside the chair. "Mrs Slater," he said, and she looked down at him. Crozier wasn't really sure she saw him though. "I'm sorry," he said, "so sorry this has happened."

The cup she was holding was tilting. The tea was slopping onto her clothes and onto the carpet. A female police officer tried to prize it gently from her fingers. She got the cup, but Anne held onto the saucer. She needed something to hold, thought Crozier, and that delicate China saucer, with its band of small blue flowers, was a lifeline.

"I know how very difficult this must be, but I need to ask you some questions."

She showed no sign of hearing him, and Crozier tried to coax her along a bit. "Is there a Mr. Slater?"

This time, Anne managed to stammer, "Graham's at work," and the slow, slightly distant way that she answered spoke of shock.

"What does he do?" said Crozier.

"He's a rep."

"What does he sell?"

"Double glazing."

Crozier turned to the female officer. “Has anybody managed to contact him yet?”

“We’re still trying,” he was told, so Crozier turned his attention back to Anne.

“Becky didn’t go to school today. How come?”

It was the first time Anne had heard Becky referred to in the past tense, and it hit her like a train. He had to wait a while before she could answer.

“She said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Not well... in what way?”

Anne was clinging to that saucer as if her sanity depended on it. “I don’t think she was ill, as such. Just tired. But I didn’t have time to argue. I had to go to work...”

“Don’t blame yourself...”

“You don’t imagine....”

“No,” said Crozier. “You don’t....”

“She was fourteen....”

“It’s old enough to be left,” he said. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why is she dead!” she shouted, and the saucer fell to the floor. The carpet broke its fall, and it lay there, white and round, a pattern of small blue flowers around the rim.

*“Then why is she dead?”* she repeated.

### 3

The rain was easing off, but it showed no sign of stopping. Not that it deterred the crowd that had increased in the past few minutes. Bugger the rain. People were prepared to stand in it if it gave them the chance of seeing a body brought out. That might happen shortly. Then again, it might be another few hours. Either way, they'd stay where they were until it did.

Reporters were working the crowd – ignoring those who didn't live in the crescent and focusing on those who did. Some of the people around that cordon had seen Crozier going into Mrs. Jessop's, so it wouldn't be long before the press realised where Anne was. Crozier wanted to get her out of there before they started hammering on the windows.

“Is there someone you can stay with while we find Graham... a friend, maybe... or a relative?”

Anne couldn't think of anyone other than Graham's mother, Maureen.

“Where does she live?” said Crozier.

“Warrington.”

Crozier was familiar with Warrington. Once, and not so long ago, it had been divided from Manchester by countryside. Over recent years, suburbs had sprung up so that it was difficult to determine

where Warrington ended, and Manchester began. Liverpool lay to the north, and the same applied.

Anne gave Crozier Maureen's address and a telephone number for her, and Crozier turned to the female officer. "Can you find out what the situation is?" Then turning back to Anne, he explained that Graham's mother was unlikely to know what had happened. The murder of a young girl would have been reported on the news by now, but her identity wouldn't be revealed until all known next-of-kin had been informed.

"Is there anyone else we should contact?"

What few relatives there were on Graham's side of the family were so distant they were what you'd call Christmas Card acquaintances, and both Anne's mother and father had died in recent years, so no, there was only Maureen. And then she remembered Craig. School was nearly over, and he'd come home over the playing fields. She pictured him being prevented from crossing the embankment, and not knowing why, and somebody telling him a girl had been found dead in one of the houses. She imagined what he would go through when he realised the house they were talking about was *his*, and that the girl lying dead must therefore be Becky. She didn't want him finding out like that...

"Craig would be your son, am I right?"

"Foster son," she told him.

"Which school does he go to?"

"Wilfred Pickering."

"Is that the school you can see from the back of the house?"

When she confirmed that it was, Crozier turned to the female officer again and asked her to see to it that somebody was sent to the school.

“While you’re at it, you’d best tell Social Services,” said Crozier. That sorted, he turned his attention back to Anne.

“What time did Craig leave the house this morning?”

“Twenty past eight,” said Anne. “It’s a bit early to be honest, the school being so close, but I have to leave by half past to catch the 8.35, and I don’t like to leave it to Craig to lock up.”

Crozier could understand why she wouldn’t want to leave a lad of 12 to lock the house before he left.

“How does he get to school?”

“He walks,” said Anne, which was much what Crozier expected given that Wilfred Pickering was on the doorstep.

“Must be handy, living so close.”

Anne confirmed that it couldn’t be more convenient all things considered. All he had to do was walk to the top of the road, turn left into Pickering Avenue, and he’d be at the gates in under five minutes. But despite that it was easy enough to get there as it was, he sometimes took a short cut.

“This short cut...”

“Down the garden path, then he nips through a gap in the hedge, and scrambles over the railway embankment.”

Crozier had seen the embankment from Becky’s bedroom window along with the school and the playing fields on the other side of it.

“Mud all over his shoes...his trousers,” said Anne. “I keep telling him not to...”

“Still does it though?”

“He’s a lad,” she replied. “You know what they’re like.”

Crozier knew exactly what lads were like. “So you got Craig off to school... then what?”

“Then Graham left.”

“And is that what happens every morning,” said Crozier. “First Craig leaves, then Graham?”

“More or less,” said Anne.

“And what about Becky, doesn’t she leave at about the same time as Craig?”

“They go to different schools,” said Anne. “Becky’s first out as a rule. She has to catch two buses.”

“Which school did she go to?”

“Loreto.”

“The grammar school in Altrincham?”

Anne confirmed it with a nod, and Crozier added, “It must have made for a very long day for her.”

“Come the end of the week, she’d be exhausted.”

“Is that what you thought was wrong with her – exhaustion?”

“I thought it might be...”

“Is that why you let her stay off?”

“I didn’t think it could do her any harm.”

“What did Graham think?”

“He wanted her to go, but I said... “ She broke down, then added, “I said there was more to life than passing exams.”

“Had she taken many days off school?”

“Not until lately.”

“Was she having problems?”

“If she was, we weren’t aware of it,” said Anne. “Nothing in her school report, and nothing from any of her teachers, so like I say, I thought she was tired, and anyway, there wasn’t time to try to get to the bottom of it. I had to get to work.”

“Where do you work?”

“Kendals.”

Crozier was familiar with the large department store in Deansgate. It was Manchester's answer to Bloomingdales. "Which department?"

"Bedding."

"What's your job?"

"People pull things off the shelves...I put them back...help the customers find what they want, if we've got it."

It wasn't much of a job when all was said and done, but what with the mortgage and two growing kids...

"What time do you have to be in by?"

"9.30," said Anne, who reflected that Kendals was good like that. Most of the staff had kids to get off to school before they went to work, so management fixed the hours accordingly.

"And what time do you normally finish?"

"Around about six," she replied.

"You didn't leave at six today..."

"No," she confirmed. "I told Mrs. Stevens Becky wasn't well..."

"Mrs. Stevens?"

"My supervisor. She told me I could take the afternoon." Kendals was good like that, as well. If one of the kids was off colour, you'd mention it to the supervisor and she'd see if someone could cover.

"What time did you leave?"

"I caught the 1 o'clock.."

"The 1 o'clock bus?" said Crozier, and she nodded.

She'd sat with her cheek almost resting against a window, and she'd suddenly remembered they'd nothing in for dinner. She'd have to nip to the Co-op later on. It now seemed obscene that such ordinary things had gone through her mind with her daughter lying dead, but she wasn't to know. There should have been some warning. She *deserved* a premonition – a feeling that something, somewhere, was terribly

wrong. There was nothing... nothing but the rain that had drizzled down the pane. Anne liked the rain. She'd *always* liked rain. She liked to watch the rivers forming on glass.

“And what time did you get home?” said Crozier.

“About twenty to two,” said Anne.

“Then what?”

“The chain was on.”

“Was that usual?”

“It didn't surprise me,” said Anne. “We've always told the kids that if ever they're in the house on their own, they mustn't open the door to anyone, and they should keep the chain on. I just thought our Becky had forgotten to take it off, that's all.”

“So how did you get in?”

“I went into the garage for the key to the back door.”

She could imagine him thinking that the world was full of people who kept a spare key to the house somewhere in the garage in the mistaken belief that it wouldn't be one of the first places a villain might look, but Crozier's expression didn't alter, and he didn't remark on it. All he said was, “I take it you don't keep a key in the back door as a rule?”

“We wouldn't be able to open it with the key from the garage if we did.”

“So where do you keep the key that opens the door from the inside?”

“We keep it on a hook on the back of the door.”

“Go on,” said Crozier.

Anne went on: “I tried the back door before I went into the garage. It was open.” She bit her bottom lip and added, “It annoyed me to be honest. What's the point in putting the chain on the front if the back isn't locked?”

“I take it it’s locked as a rule?”

“I check it last thing at night.”

“And did you check it last night?”

“I think so... I don’t remember...”

“Is Becky likely to have opened it to someone?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so, but you never know.”

No, thought Crozier, you never did know what kids might do when their parents weren’t around. “What did you do when you found the back door open?”

“I walked in.”

“Did anything strike you as different?”

Clutter on the table. Dishes in the sink. “No,” said Anne. “Not until... I got upstairs and I... pushed the door to the bathroom and...”

As he watched her reliving the moment, Crozier prompted her gently. “Take your time,” he said.

“I tried... to pull... her skirt down...but... I couldn’t...she...was lying on it and...”

Something exploded inside her, and Crozier put his arm around her. He held her for a moment. “You’re doing fantastic,” he said.

## 4

When Crozier got word that the news of Becky's death had been broken to Maureen, he held out his hand as if were Anne to take it, he would impart sufficient strength to enable her to shake off a paralysis born of shock. "You'll need my jacket," he told her. "It's bucketing down outside."

He put it round her shoulders, the feel of it damp, but warm. It drowned her, but it also went some way towards protecting her from the prying eyes of neighbours and reporters, and as he led her past them, Anne said, "I want to see Becky..."

"Best not," said Crozier, and she'd followed his advice, though it wasn't as though she hadn't seen her already. But that had been a while ago, and later, she'd come to learn that a body could change a lot in the space of four hours. Then he guided her into the back of a waiting car. Sleek and black, it reminded her of the car that she and Graham had travelled to church in the day they were married, but instead of snowdrops poking through the frozen ground to wish them luck, there was only the rain.

The quickest route to from Manchester to Warrington was down the M60, but the driver chose the back roads that took them through Sale, then Altrincham. It brought them close to Becky's school, and Anne wondered whether Crozier had asked him to go that way for a reason. It seemed as though he might have, because as they passed the school, he said, "How many buses did you say Becky had to catch to get here?"

“Two,” she replied, and even as she said it, Crozier drove past the stop that she got off at.

Anne was numbed by the sight of it. She couldn't take it in. Becky would never be getting off at that bus stop again. Becky would never be going to school again. Becky would never be coming down to breakfast in her pyjamas or anything else. Becky was dead. It didn't seem real. You heard people say that when tragedy struck, they didn't feel the blow. Not at first. So she looked at that bus stop, and all she could feel was mild curiosity as to what she'd go through when it finally hit her.

Up ahead, there were two stone pillars. They marked the drive to a house that was set back from the road. It was one of only a handful of houses along this road, all of them prestigious, all of them surrounded by a couple of acres. This particular house belonged to a friend of Becky's, and as they approached it, Anne said, “Somebody ought to tell Natalie.”

“Natalie?” said Crozier.

“Becky's best friend,” said Anne. “She lives in that house, over there.” She pointed to a 16<sup>th</sup> Century farmhouse. Its tall sash windows flanked a door that might have looked like the entrance to a church if not for the deer and hounds that were carved into the stonework that framed it. Crozier said, “There must be a fair bit of money in the background.”

“Her dad's a surgeon,” said Anne.

The front of the house was prestigious enough, but it was nothing by comparison with the interior, as Anne had discovered last summer when she'd dropped Becky off for a sleepover.

Mrs. Muscati invited her into the kitchen. Its ice white walls and units that seemed out of keeping with the period of the property, but

the stone-flagged floors were original. French windows opened out onto a garden that was divided from the Dunham Massey estate by a ditch. It had been constructed in such a way as to make it impossible for cows to get across it. It might have worked with cows, but it didn't work with deer and according to Natalie's mother, they were forever waking up of a morning to discover that almost the entire garden had been eaten overnight. Not that she minded. The loss of a few plants was a small price to pay for the pleasure of looking out on hundreds of acres, none of which they had to manage themselves. They just got the benefit of it with none of the drawbacks.

Craig had come along with them for the ride and when he saw the garden, he asked if he could explore. Natalie's mother said, "Go right ahead," and Anne had felt slightly stupid because on the few occasions they'd spoken on the phone, she'd thought she was Irish. Once she actually met her, she realised she was American, though it wasn't so much her accent as her clothes. She had that beautifully groomed look that only American women seemed to achieve, as though somebody had taken a soft cloth and polished her all over.

She offered Anne a coffee, and while they were drinking it, she did her best to find out what she could about where she lived, and what she did for a job. Anne assumed she was just being friendly, but once she discovered that Graham was a rep, and that she worked as an assistant in a department store, the tone of the conversation seemed to change. There was something quite patronising about the way she mentioned that she often gave Natalie's old clothes to Oxfam, but that if Becky should ever want them...

The coffee had tasted bitter after that. Maybe it was just that she wasn't accustomed to proper coffee. Whatever the case, she found

she couldn't drink it, so she made some excuse about having to get back home.

Moments later, she was scouring the garden for Craig. Natalie said she'd seen him cross the ditch, and she and Becky went to look for him. They found him in an old stone barn that stank of deer and hay, and when they brought him back, Craig asked Natalie's mother whether all the land belonged to her. She wasn't best pleased to have to admit it didn't, but it amused Anne, who still didn't know her name because she hadn't revealed it. She got the feeling that Mrs. Muscati couldn't imagine what the school was *thinking* of in admitting a girl whose father worked as a rep and whose mother worked in a shop – and Americans said the *English* were snobs. You had to laugh. Graham didn't laugh though when she told him. He didn't like the sound of the Muscati's, but at the end of the day, he was no different to the other girls' dads – all of them unusually keen to sit through any number of school plays provided Natalie happened to be in them. You couldn't deny she was lovely, or that she owed her looks to that father of hers. That thick dark hair, and those fabulous eyes. It wasn't so much the shape of them as the way she looked at you. Graham used to say, *That girl doesn't have any idea what it does to a bloke when she looks at them like that.*

Anne wasn't so sure.

\* \* \*

At most, the room in which Graham's dad had spent the last few months of his life was 12 feet square, yet it held a bed, a two-seater sofa, and an armchair. What little space was left was taken up by a television. Maureen had bought it on credit, not for herself, but for Reg. It was the first time she'd ever bought anything on tick, but it was worth it she said, to see the pleasure it gave him. Towards the

end of his life, his legs wouldn't get him upstairs and he'd lived in this room.

It was a good three months since Reg had passed away, but the smell of his death still clung to the walls like an unclean spirit. Rain had seeped through the old metal windows. It must have seemed odd to Crozier Graham could have neglected to see to it that the windows were replaced. If so, then he would have been doing Graham an injustice, for he'd offered to pay to have them done, but Maureen wouldn't have it. Charity, she called it. She didn't want charity. Stubborn. Stubborn and proud. So the windows had never been done, and now they never would be, and now the water was settling on the sill.

There was a female officer in the room with Maureen. She stood up when Crozier came in, but Maureen stayed sitting on the bed that Graham had been promising to shift back upstairs since his dad passed away. She was the same age as Reg, but you wouldn't have thought it. At 62, her hair was still thick, and what little grey she had did nothing to diminish the overall impression that it was auburn. She looked a little pale, that's all, as though the news of Becky's death had dulled her skin to the same off-white as the Anaglypta walls. "This'll kill Graham," she said, and then she broke down.

Crozier wasn't good with weeping women, and that was the truth. Dealing with displays of emotion wasn't his thing. It embarrassed him. He couldn't help it. And he couldn't help but feel sorry for Anne who'd done her best to answer whatever questions he'd put to her, and was now having to go through the whole thing again. Maureen wanted to know what had possessed her to let Becky take the day off school if she knew she was just lagging off. It didn't do much for Anne, who felt guilty enough as it was, and after a few minutes of

it, Crozier gave the female officer a look that said quite plainly, *Get the mother-in-law out of the way while I talk to Anne.*

Maureen followed the female officer into the kitchen, leaving Anne and Crozier alone. He didn't like having to try to draw information out of her at a time like this, but the first 24 hours of a murder investigation were crucial, and if he was to stand a reasonable chance of finding Becky's killer, he needed to know as much as she could tell him about her daughter.

"Anne... I know this is difficult for you, but I need to find out as much as I can about Becky."

"What do you need to know?"

"How would you describe her? Was she sociable? Was she quiet? Who did she hang around with? *Anything* you can tell me."

Anne did her best. "Becky was quiet," she said. "She didn't go out at lot. The odd school disco, that sort of thing, and we'd let her go into Manchester on Saturday afternoons so long as we knew who she was with..."

Crozier wanted names, addresses, and telephone numbers of all Becky's friends. She couldn't remember. He *forced* her to try. And one by one, he dragged their names and addresses out of her. Natalie he already knew about. The rest of her friends were girls she knew from school and most of them lived miles away, not only from Becky, but from one another. Some girls travelled a considerable distance for the privilege of going to Loreto.

"What about the girls who lived locally?"

"She lost touch with most of them after primary school."

"How come?"

"They went to Wilfred Pickering."

Crozier found it hard to believe that Becky was the only girl in her class to have got into a grammar school.

“The primary school she went to didn’t agree with the children sitting the 11 plus,” said Anne. “But we paid for private tuition, and even then, Graham had to go up to the school and *insist* they let her take the exam. He threatened to sue if they tried to stand in her way. It didn’t go down very well with some of her teachers.”

I’ll bet it didn’t, thought Crozier.

“And as I say, she lost touch with most of her old friends, but it wasn’t deliberate. What I mean is, she wasn’t a snob. It was just that she got home from school a lot later than they did, and she always had stacks of homework. Come the weekend, she was usually too exhausted to go out much.”

“But she must have gone out sometimes?”

“Sometimes, yes...”

“You mentioned she’d go into Manchester of a Saturday afternoon. Who would she be with?”

“Girls from Loreto,” said Anne.

“And what did they used to do when they went into town?”

What did girls of that age usually do? They talked about boys, and went into shops, and tried on clothes they couldn’t afford to buy.

“What about boyfriends?” said Crozier, and Anne replied that Becky didn’t have a boyfriend. “She was... well... she was still *young*, if you see what I mean.”

Crozier didn’t say anything to that. He didn’t have to. Anne knew as well as he did that there were plenty of girls who were sexually active at 14. “I’ve no reason to say she didn’t have a boyfriend if she did,” said Anne. “But she didn’t... that’s all... she wasn’t interested.”

For a girl who wasn't interested, she certainly knew how to dress, thought Crozier. "The skirt that Becky was wearing when you found her...."

"What about it?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but the material it's made from – I'm no expert on women's clothes, but you don't see girls today in skirts made from PVC."

"No," said Anne. "I must have had it fifteen years or more."

"*You?*" said Crozier.

"You don't have to tell me... to look at me now, you probably can't imagine me ever having been able to squeeze into it, but women change shape, don't they?"

Crozier agreed that most women did indeed change shape, especially after childbirth. But it wasn't *that* so much as the fact that she'd bought it in the first place. "When did you buy it?"

"Back in the late 1970s."

"Even so, it must have been a bit risqué for Warrington?"

Anne admitted that it was a bit. London might have been swinging, but Warrington wasn't.

"Why did you keep it?"

"That was the skirt I was wearing the night I met Graham, and you know how these things are... women keep things, don't they?"

"I suppose they do," said Crozier, who had to admit that his wife was a terror for hanging on to clothes that had gone out of fashion, though she justified it by pointing out that she only kept them so that their daughter could play at dressing up. That was little girls for you. When they were young, they raided their mother's make-up bags and tottered around the house in high-heeled shoes, but when they grew older, they sometimes, came across garments that could almost be

regarded as historical documents. He assumed it must have been the same for Becky?

“Not really,” said Anne. “She wasn’t much of a one for dressing up.”

“But she obviously came across the skirt at some point?” said Crozier. “She found it in a cupboard under the stairs. There was a cardboard box in there. It was stuffed with old clothes...” Most were clothes that she’d worn to work before she married. Somehow, the skirt had found its way into the box. “She asked if she could borrow it.”

“Why did she want to borrow it?”

“One of the girls from school was having a party. Everyone had to go dressed as somebody famous from the 60s.”

“Who did Becky go as?”

“Dusty Springfield.”

That brought a smile to Crozier’s lips. He was partial to Dusty Springfield.

“And you didn’t mind her wearing it?”

Oddly enough, she did. Nobody wanted their daughter going out in a skirt like that. When she herself was only three years older than Becky, she’d hidden it from her parents. If ever her father had found it... but he hadn’t, and she’d kept it, and she’d allowed Becky to borrow it, but only the once. Even then, she’d had her reservations. But then again, it was just a fancy dress party. The parents of the girl who was giving it were going to be in the house, albeit it that they’d been banished to a bedroom.

“And you’ve no idea why Becky would have been wearing it today?”

“No,” said Anne. “So far as I knew, she’d put it back where she found it.”

Maybe she did, thought Crozier. And maybe somebody got it out of the cupboard, and made her wear it. In order to do that, the person who made her wear it would have to be aware that the skirt existed. “To the best of your knowledge, did Becky ever wear it again, other than to that party?”

“Not that I know of.”

“And this party,” said Crozier. “How did Becky get there?”

“Graham took her.”

“And how did she get home?”

“Graham picked her up as well...” She started to sob. “Where is he?” she said, which was pretty much what Crozier was beginning to wonder. “Do you have a number for Mulholland?”

She gave it to him, and Crozier spoke to Graham’s employer. Police had already been to the warehouse, but nobody would tell him what was going on, and Mulholland, his soft southern accent sounding out of place in a northern landscape, added, “They asked me to stay at the warehouse in case he comes back.”

“Is he likely to?” said Crozier.

“It wouldn’t be unusual for him to call in on his way home, but I’d have thought he’d have done it by now if he was going to.”

“Would you mind just hanging on a little longer?”

“What’s going on?” said Mulholland.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you.”

“Is he in some sort of trouble?”

Crozier merely replied, "I'm coming over. If Graham turns up, try not to let him leave."

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# 5

The firm that Graham worked for operated from a unit on an industrial estate. It was one of several, four of which appeared to have been abandoned and boarded up. The gates that should have secured the site at this time of night were unlocked. There was no security guard. Crozier drove straight in. Presumably, thieves could have done the same, and would have, if there'd been anything worth nicking. Double glazing didn't get nicked that often. When it did, it was nicked by the container load from the docks. It didn't get pinched, window by window, from units such as this.

Mulholland was waiting in reception. Crozier thanked him for waiting given that he should have shut up shop by now, then introduced himself. The bullish looking man in his mid thirties he introduced as Bennet, and the shorter, stockier Hoskins just showed his ID.

There were only a handful of reasons why the police would call on a man at his place of work – none of them good. “What’s all this about?”

The area given over to reception had a concrete floor. A vending machine took up most of it. The walls were of a thin, prefabricated material and Crozier didn't know who or what was on the other side of them. He didn't want to run the risk of being overhead, and in any case, it was bitterly cold. “Is there somewhere we can talk?” he said.

Mulholland pushed a door that opened onto what looked like the interior of a small aircraft hangar. Row upon row of windows in various shapes and sizes were stacked at right-angles to the walls, but a section of the building had been partitioned off. Everything about it

had the feeling it was temporary, from the movable plasterboard walls to the oil-filled portable heater that worked off the mains, but it served as an office, and Mulholland suggested they use it. There were two chairs. He offered one of them to Crozier, but Crozier preferred to stand, so Mulholland did likewise.

“What’s all this about?”

Crozier replied, “I’m trying to contact one of your employees – Graham Slater. I’m hoping you’ll be able to tell me if he had any customers to see today, and if so, where.”

Mulholland seemed surprised that the police should want to talk to Graham, and Crozier took that as a good sign.

“Is there a problem?”

Until they found Graham, Crozier was reluctant to tell Mulholland anything other than that Graham wasn’t in any kind of trouble. “We just need to find him,” he said.

Mulholland said he couldn’t really help them. “He was supposed to be in Newcastle today, but I had a call from him earlier to say the customer cancelled.”

“So where is he now?”

Mulholland hadn’t the faintest idea, and neither did he seem particularly concerned. Small wonder business was bad, thought Crozier, and business was undoubtedly bad. Mulholland had an air of resignation about him. The desk that took up most of the space in that small, prefabricated office was smothered in bills. Crozier doubted Mulholland was able to pay them. “Business isn’t too good, I take it?”

Mulholland clearly saw no point denying it. “I’m way past hoping for miracles,” he admitted. “To tell you the truth, I should have wound it up by now, but I thought I’d get Christmas out of the way before I broke the news to Graham and Charlie.”

“Charlie?”

“He’s my only other rep,” said Mulholland. “This time last year, I had seven men working for me. Graham and Charlie are the only two left.”

Crozier took a note of Charlie’s contact details in case they came in useful.

“If you do talk to him, don’t mention the state of the business in front of his wife. She’s just had a baby.”

Crozier didn’t see what difference it would make. If Charlie was going to be out of work in the New Year, then he was hardly likely to be able to keep it a secret from his wife.

“Maybe not,” said Mulholland, “but he might have managed to find himself another job by then.”

Not that he held much hope for him. Charlie’s qualifications were a bit on the thin side whereas being made redundant might just kick Graham him into doing something more with his life.

“Like what?” said Crozier.

“I don’t know,” said Mulholland. “But given that he went to university, I would have thought he could have done better for himself.”

“Which university?”

“Bristol.”

Crozier raised an eyebrow.

“I know,” said Mulholland. “How does a man who went to a university as good as Bristol end up selling double glazing?”

“How long has he worked for you?”

“Three years, on and off.”

“And before that?”

“He’s had a number of jobs. All of them in sales. His references check out all right.”

“Maybe he just likes being a rep?” said Crozier.

Mulholland agreed that it might well be the case. “When business is good, a rep can earn a fortune in commission...”

“And when it’s bad?” said Crozier.

“Graham gets a basic salary, but I’d be the first to admit it isn’t a fortune.”

“How much isn’t a fortune?”

Mulholland told him. Crozier winced, but before he could ask how anyone could be expected to support a family on such a low wage, the phone on Mulholland’s desk rang out. Mulholland answered it, and Crozier looked up sharply when he said, “Graham,” and then, “Where are you?”

Crozier couldn’t hear what Graham told him.

“Could you come back to the warehouse?” said Mulholland, and whatever Graham might have replied was lost to Crozier.

“I’d rather not tell you over the phone,” said Mulholland, and then, “I’ll meet you in reception.”

There was pause while Mulholland listened to Graham, followed by Mulholland saying, “*Don’t go home.*” He took a breath, and added, “I need you to come straight here.”

Another pause.

“I can’t say. Not over the phone. Just come straight to the warehouse...”

\* \* \*

It was almost an hour before Graham arrived. Mulholland met him in reception and brought him through to the office. Crozier’s first and lasting impression was of a bloke of above average height and above

average looks. His suit was off the peg, but it fitted him well. He knew how to dress on a budget, though Crozier, but then, he had an advantage in that physically, he was well proportioned. A lot of women would have been attracted to him purely on account of the dark brown hair and blue grey eyes. Anne, whose appearance was more what Crozier would have described as 'homely', would have her hands full keeping an eye on a husband like him.

Graham looked curious when he saw three people in Mulholland's office, but he didn't look alarmed. Mulholland hadn't told him who they were.

"Mr. Slater?"

"Yes..."

"Mr... *Graham* Slater, of 6, Vermillion Crescent."

"Yes," he repeated.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Crozier, and this is Detective Sergeant Bennet."

There were only a handful of reasons why the police would call on a man at his place of work – none of them good. "What's all this about?"

Crozier turned to Mulholland. "Could you leave us alone for a moment?"

Mulholland took himself out of the office. Not that it made any difference. The office had no ceiling. The fact that it had walls just gave the impression of privacy. In reality, Crozier's words were as audible to Mulholland as they were to Graham, and because he knew that there was no easy way to break bad news, Crozier just gave it to him straight:

"Your wife came home from work today, and found your daughter dead."

Mulholland's reaction was audible – a gasp that sounded like steam as it bursts from a valve. Graham said not a word, but he grabbed at the desk for support, and between them, Bennet and Hoskins helped him into the chair.

Crozier gave him a moment, and then said, “Are you all right Graham?”

Graham said, “Yeah...yeah... I'm okay.”

Crozier went on, “We're treating her death as suspicious,” and it took a moment for Graham to absorb what he meant by that.

“You think she was murdered?”

“It's yet to be confirmed, but all the indications are that she was.”

For what seemed a very long time, Graham said nothing at all, and then he said, “What did he do to her.”

“The indications are that she was strangled.”

“That isn't what I meant,” said Graham. “What I meant was... did he... was she... *raped*?”

Crozier replied, “I'm afraid that's something we won't know until after the post mortem.”

“When will that be?”

“Some time tomorrow,” said Crozier.

The thought of a post mortem was too much for Graham. “I don't want anyone cutting Becky up.”

“I'm afraid it's required by law.”

“I don't care what's required by law... I don't want Becky...butchered...and I don't want anyone pestering us to donate organs...nothing like that...”

He broke down, and Bennet slipped out of the office, returning moments later with a plastic beaker of water. The beaker was cold. The water was warm, but Graham took a mouthful, then Crozier said,

“Your wife’s at your mother’s. She’s asking for you. There’s a car outside...”

Between them, Bennet and Hoskins supported him as they left Mulholland’s office with Mulholland following behind them, then Graham suddenly said he needed the bathroom.

“You’d best go with him, make sure he’s okay” said Crozier to Bennet, but Graham said he felt okay, and he’d prefer to be on his own for a moment.

Crozier wasn’t sure about letting him go, but Graham insisted, and Crozier felt that to refuse him a few minutes privacy would be unreasonable, so he let him go.

\* \* \*

Graham turned a tap on in the washroom. He cupped his hands, then caught the icy water and splashed his face with it. He lifted his head, and caught his reflection in a highly polished sheet of stainless steel. It distorted his image, pulling his face into this shape and that so that he could hardly recognise himself. But what he saw, above all else, was the future, and he couldn’t face it. Whatever it took, he had to go *now*, while he could.

The washroom had long, narrow windows set high into the wall. He took the car keys out of his trouser pocket and threw them through the window. He did the same with his wallet. He tried to throw his jacket through the window, but it dropped to the floor and he left it where it fell. He then stood on one of the basins. Almost immediately, the grout that held it to the wall gave way, but it didn’t give completely. Graham fumbled with the latch that held the window closed. He pushed it. The window opened. But it took an almost superhuman effort for him to heave himself through it. His trousers were torn at the thigh. He lost a shoe. It didn’t matter. The only

thing that mattered was escaping what the future held. Anything was preferable to that.

\* \* \*

Crozier wasn't sure how long they hung around waiting for Graham to come out of that bathroom, but it seemed long enough to indicate that something wasn't right. "How much longer should we give him?" said Hoskins.

Crozier checked his watch. "Give him a few minutes more," he said, and after those minutes had passed, he turned to Mulholland and said, "Where's are the lavatories?"

"Out the back," said Mulholland, and he led the way to a door at the rear of the warehouse. It gave out onto an area with two further doors leading off it, one marked 'Men', and the other marked 'Women'.

Crozier walked into the Gents and the first thing he saw was a jacket on the floor. He picked it up, then turned to face the cubicles. There were four, and the doors to them were open. There were also four urinals and a couple of hand basins, one of which had come away from the wall. The window above it was open.

Hoskins and Bennet came into the washroom. Mulholland was right behind them. "Where is he?" said Bennet.

"You tell me," said Crozier.

He searched Graham's jacket. Whatever his reasons for doing a runner, he'd had the presence of mind to empty his pockets. No car keys. No wallet. Then his fingers connected with something and he pulled it out of the inside pocket. It was a photo of Becky. The house in the background might well have been hers – Crozier couldn't be sure – he'd yet to see the back of Vermillion Crescent but the way a concrete strip divided the lawn looked familiar. He'd seen that same strip of concrete from Becky's bedroom window.

Becky was on the lawn, and she was playing tug of war with a medium sized dog – a Collie, by the look of it. The photo was taken in summer, and Becky was wearing shorts. There might have been a time when they fitted her. If so, she'd long outgrown them. They barely covered her buttocks, and the contours of her breasts were easy to define in a skimpy vest. He didn't want to show it to Bennet and Hoskins in front of Mulholland, so he put it in his own jacket pocket, then handed Graham's jacket to Bennet. "This needs to go to the lab," he said, then turning to Mulholland, he added, "Is there an Exit on this side of the building?"

Mulholland led them down the corridor to a door marked 'Fire Escape'. He opened it by shoving a horizontal bar that released bolts at the top and bottom of it.

Crozier stepped outside and saw two cars. One was the unmarked car that he'd arrived in, and the other belonged to Mulholland. "I'm assuming Graham would have driven here?"

"I can't think of any other way he might have got here," said Mulholland.

"Where's his car?"

Mulholland didn't know.

"Is there anywhere else he might have parked it?"

"No," said Mulholland. "This is a designated space." He grew concerned. "It's a company car... I hope it hasn't been nicked."

"It hasn't been nicked," said Crozier. "He's gone."

\* \* \*

Crozier's first thought was for Graham's safety. Manchester had more waterways than bloody Venice and he didn't want to have to tell Anne that within hours of losing her daughter, she'd lost her husband as well.

He got the registration of Graham's car from Mulholland, then used his phone to contact the station and alert all the patrols in the area. He then returned to Grosvenor Road to explain the situation to Anne and Maureen. He'd expected to find them alone, but in the past few hours, Maureen had phoned a couple of her neighbours. Crozier could understand it, but he wished she hadn't done it. Neighbours were notorious for talking to the press. They didn't mean to do it, but reporters took advantage, and Crozier was keen to keep Graham's disappearance quiet for as long as was reasonably possible. That way, there would be a chance of finding him before his disappearance came to the attention of the press.

"He might turn up here," said Crozier. "If he does, I'd appreciate it if you could phone the station."

"He must be in a hell of a state," said Maureen, and she started to cry, but Anne just sat there, a plate on her knee, the sandwich Maureen had made her lying there, untouched. "Where's Craig?" she said.

Crozier couldn't understand it. Graham was gone, yet Anne seemed more concerned by what arrangements had been made for Craig than by the thought that he might have harmed himself. He replied that Social Services had gone up to the school when the news of Becky's death had been broken to him. "They felt it would be best if he they looked after him for the moment."

"Yes, but where is he?"

"Silver Street," said Crozier.

Craig would have been familiar with Silver Street. He'd lived there on and off, in between being fostered. It wasn't the best of places according to Anne, who said, "He'll be devastated."

"If you want him brought here..."

“No,” said Anne. “I can’t look after him properly at the moment. It wouldn’t be fair on him.”

Crozier replied, “Maybe in the circumstances, his mother could have him back for a while?”

“His mother died four years ago.”

“What about his dad?”

“He comes and goes.”

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# 6

The rain was easing off, but it showed no sign of stopping. Not that it deterred the crowd that had gathered in front of 6, Vermillion Crescent. The house was cordoned off. The curtains were drawn. The door was screened from view. There was nothing to see. Yet still, they stood there.

Some were immediate neighbours. Some had come from the other side of town. They were waiting for something to happen, and it happened when Becky's body was brought out of the house. As it was loaded into the back of a vehicle, the crowd surged forward and Crozier, Hoskins and Bennet had to fight their way through to reach the officers guarding the cordon.

Pilkington came out to them, and now that the body was gone, he was more willing to allow Hoskins and Bennet into the house. He gave them the guided tour, finishing up in the kitchen. The back door was closed, but unlocked, which was just as Anne had found it. The key still hung from hook on the back of the door. "The mother says there's a spare key in the garage," said Crozier.

He and Pilkington stepped out onto the path and walked a few short yards to a door set into the side of the garage. Pilkington yanked it open then felt for a light switch and found one. The garage was lit by a single bulb. It cast an inadequate glow over an oil-stained concrete floor. The walls were lined with shelves that were cluttered with tools and rusting pots of paint. He lifted them one by one until he found the key. He showed it to Crozier who couldn't imagine that

someone would bother to put it back where it belonged after using it to gain access to the house with a view to murdering the girl who lived there. He was more inclined to think the door was left unlocked. People were often more careless than they realised when it came to security.

Arc lights now lit the garden. They drew Crozier's attention to the strip of concrete that divided it, and then to the gap in the hedge. The embankment rose up behind it, the grass worn to bare earth in places by Craig's habit of taking a short cut to playing fields. And moments later, Crozier, Hoskins and Bennet were standing on it.

Crozier looked along its length and recognised the buildings in the distance by the shape of the lights that lit them. These were buildings that formed the outskirts of the city. That track led to the very heart of Manchester. Somebody could have used it to get from Vermillion Crescent and into the city without so much as setting foot on a road or pavement.

He turned to face the house and focused on the window to the bathroom. The glass was frosted, and the image of the SOCO who was working behind it was indistinct, but not so indistinct as to make it impossible to work out what he was doing. With Becky's body gone, the bathroom was being dismantled. Every tile, tap, nut and bolt of it was destined for the lab.

The window nearest the bathroom was the one to Becky's bedroom. The curtains were closed, but they were of such a thin material, they might as well have been net. Crozier pictured Becky pulling the curtains and thinking she was safe from prying eyes. She wasn't.

"She had a routine," said Crozier. "Two buses to school every morning. Two buses home. All her friends were girls she knew from

school. Sometimes they went into Manchester on Saturday afternoons.”

“And you think somebody saw her somewhere and took a fancy to her,” said Bennet. “He followed her home.”

“If he did, he must have thought it was Christmas when he discovered that she lived in a house that backed onto a disused railway track.”

Easy to picture somebody standing where they were standing now and staring up at Becky’s bedroom window. *Come on darlin’, take that little top off... now the panties...good girl.* Equally easy to imagine somebody watching Becky and the family over a period of time. By doing so, he would have come to know what her movements were, what her *family’s* movements were. He would have come to know that her parents worked, and that the boy he took for her brother went to the local school. He would have noticed somebody using the key that was kept on a shelf in the garage. All he had to do was wait for a day when the rest of the family stuck to the usual routine, leaving Becky alone. Yet despite that the existence of that embankment was almost an open invitation to gawp through a young girl’s bedroom window, Crozier didn’t believe that was what they were dealing with.

He pulled out the photo that he’d found in Graham’s jacket and passed it to Bennet, who recognised the back of the house and the garage. “This was taken from where we’re standing now.”

Hoskins took it from him and whistled through his teeth. “I can see why Graham didn’t want to hang around long enough to be questioned.”

“Would he have needed to stand here, staring at his own daughter through her bedroom window?” said Bennet. “He would have had fairly easy access to her when her mother wasn’t around?”

“You wouldn’t have thought so,” said Crozier. “But maybe he got off on it, and maybe Anne was around too much for his liking.”

“Do you think she knew?” said Bennet.

“Difficult to say. Ask the mother of any girl who’s known to have been abused by a member of the family and most of them will deny they had any idea.”

“Maybe it was a regular thing,” said Hoskins. “He knew Becky didn’t go to school today. He knew she was alone. Maybe he came home with the intention of making the best of a rare opportunity.”

“Maybe it was a regular thing,” said Bennet. “Maybe she’d had enough of it. She threatened to tell. He panicked, and killed her.”

“I don’t have a problem seeing how that might happen,” said Hoskins.

“Me neither,” said Crozier. “But what I *can’t* see him doing is murdering her, then having the presence of mind to think up a way to make it look as though she was raped and murdered by a sex offender, because make no mistake about it, only a sex offender would ruck up a young girl’s skirt and splay her legs so as to leave no doubt as to what had been done to her.”

Bennet and Hoskins knew that the body appeared to have been positioned in a way that was guaranteed to shock whoever found it, and they knew that Becky was wearing nothing but a skirt when she was found, but they didn’t know what type of skirt, so Crozier now described it.

“It’s pink, it’s plastic – some sort of PVC – you’re too young to remember, but I remember when skirts like that were all the rage. It used to belong to Anne.”

“You think there’s a possibility she was made to wear it?”

“Possibly. Then again, maybe she wore it for somebody other than her father. Maybe she stayed off school so that she could meet him. Maybe she invited him to the house. Maybe she opened the door to him. But I doubt it. Either she was murdered by her father, or somebody was watching her. He knew she was alone in the house, and he took his chance.”

“Which do you think it is?”

Policing was a bit like buying houses at times, thought Crozier. Any agent would tell you that people made up their minds within 30 seconds of entering a house as to whether it was for them. Murder investigations were no different. Coppers were apt to come to certain conclusions within minutes of entering onto a scene of crime. It might be a cliché, but it was also a fact of life that wealthy, elderly men whose lives were insured to the maximum were more likely to be murdered by their young attractive wives than by a business rival. Women were more likely to be murdered by their partner than by a stranger. And girls who were found dead in their own home were more likely to have been murdered by a male member of their own family than by a sex offender.

This plus the photo, plus Graham’s disappearance was almost enough in itself to convince Crozier that Becky would turn out to have been murdered by her dad. That said, he was willing to accept that he could be wrong, and that if she *was* in fact murdered by a sex offender, then he was almost certain to have come to police attention at some point. The average, law abiding bloke was no more likely to wake up of a morning with the intention of raping and murdering a girl of 14 than he was to stroll into Barclays waving a sawn-off shot gun. He would have form.

Turning to Hoskins, he said, "By this time tomorrow, I want to know the current whereabouts of any and every sex offender known to have links with the area."

To Bennet, he said, "Go to the school. Question Becky's friends. Find out whether Becky ever mentioned feeling that she was being watched, or followed. Or maybe she was even approached by someone on her way to or from school."

"What about Graham?" said Bennet.

"He's got some explaining to do when we find him."

\* \* \*

They returned to the station where Crozier pulled a team together. These were the people who would co-ordinate house-to-house enquiries, take statements, deal with much of the paperwork, and sift through information that came into the incident room. Crozier briefed them in a room that was purpose built. One of its walls was taken up by a notice board. Photographs of Becky's body had already been developed, and were pinned to it. And during the briefing, word came in that a car that was registered as belonging to a company called 'Mulholland's Double Glazing' had been found abandoned at Dunham Massey.

It was less than six hours since Crozier had driven past the gates to the estate. It seemed a bit of a coincidence that Graham's car should be found there.

"Whereabouts?"

"The visitor's car park."

At this time of year, November, the car park shut at 5pm. The fact that a car had been left there aroused curiosity. A member of staff investigated, and found the car unlocked. The keys were in the ignition. Paperwork was strewn on the passenger seat.

“Any sign of Graham?”

“No.”

Crozier knew the Dunham Massey Estate. Not well. But he knew it. It was the kind of place that people took their kids to for a picnic. Some liked to walk the dog there, or jog through the woods. Others found it a convenient place to end their lives. What with the woods and the lake, they were spoiled for choice as to how they might do it, and with 3000 acres to do it on, the likelihood of them being disturbed was remote.

“We’d better get somebody down there,” he said, and he considered whether to take a look himself. But all things considered, he didn’t see that him being there would add to the proceedings. If Graham had gone there to kill himself, he’d have done it by now, and Crozier didn’t much fancy hanging around while they found his body. If, on the other hand, Graham had simply dumped the car, then he’d be long gone. Why Dunham Massey, he wondered? Granted, it was close to Becky’s school, but Crozier could think of no other reason why Graham might have chosen to dump the car there.

He considered returning to Grosvenor Road to explain the situation to Anne and Maureen. But it didn’t take him more than a moment to realise that there was nothing to be gained from telling them anything at this stage. An hour from now, the situation might change, in which case, he’d go down there and tell them Graham, or his body, had been found.

## 7

Home meant different things to different people. Hoskins had only recently separated from his wife so he was currently dossing on a mate's sofa. He was in no great hurry to call it a day so he stayed at the station to make a start on that list of known sex offenders. Crozier went back to a semi on the south side of Manchester to a wife that had waited up for him. She heard the car. She opened the door before he could use his key, and the warmth of the house seemed to wrap itself around him.

It wasn't just the warmth of the house. It was Jean. She'd never been one for make-up and although she'd had her 40<sup>th</sup> a couple of weeks ago, nobody would have guessed it. She worried about the extra few pounds that no amount of dieting seemed to shift, but what did it matter that she'd lost her figure to children when everything about her was warm and good and clean? She was the very opposite of everything his work brought him in to contact with.

Bennet wasn't so lucky, for whereas Crozier had walked into the warmth and tranquillity of a well-run home, Bennet walked into chaos. Liz seemed to think that the interior of the flat, like the interior of an oven, ought to be self cleaning. Washing that had been dumped in front of an empty machine had now been there three days. The smell of a Chinese takeaway had permeated the house for almost as long.

Liz was wearing a strapless Lycra dress. She still had the figure for it, and there was once a time when Bennet might have forgiven her the state of the flat on account of it. As it was, he couldn't have fancied her now if she'd danced the Fandango.

"You're off out then?" he said.

"What's it to you if I am?"

"Nothing," he said, and he meant it. The days of asking her where she was going, and trying to second guess who she might be with were long gone for him. She could do what she liked with whoever she liked, provided she didn't do it within the same four walls that was home to their son.

He could hear music coming from Alex's bedroom. At this time of night, he expected him to be asleep. Early next summer, he would be taking 9 O Levels with the expectation of A Grades in most of them, so it was limited TV for him, and bed by 10.30pm at the latest. No argument.

"Alex shouldn't have his music on at this time."

"Tell him to turn it off then."

"Why haven't you already told him?"

"Doesn't take any notice of me," said Liz.

No, thought Bennet, and who's fault was that?

He looked around the kitchen and was sickened by the filth and general chaos. Small wonder Alex never brought anyone home.

Liz pulled a mirror out of her bag and examined her lipstick as she added, "You'd better have a word with him. He came home from school upset."

"What's wrong?"

"He wouldn't say."

Bennet doubted she'd gone to any great lengths to find out, but there was no point starting an argument about it. He dumped his jacket and went into Alex's bedroom with its black and purple walls.

Alex was lying on a single bed, fully clothed. He'd grown that much in the past few years, his feet hung off the end of it. But he was still a boy, and right now, he looked frightened.

“What's up son... something happened at school?”

There was nothing Alex couldn't tell him. Bennet had impressed that on him. Whatever he'd done, or whatever had happened, there was nothing that couldn't be sorted – within reason.

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## 8

Crozier was sitting at the kitchen table, a ball-point pen in his hand. He inserted the nib into a hole cut into a plastic cog the approximate size and shape of a cookie cutter, then used the pen to push the teeth of the cog around the outer edge of second plastic cog which was very slightly larger than the first.

“You’re too old to be playing with a Spirograph,” said Jean.

“You’re never too old,” said Crozier as he studied the pattern he’d made. “Stuart used to play with this for hours.”

“I know...I’ve still got marks on the carpet from all the felt tipped pens.”

“Seems a shame to chuck it in the bin.”

“Don’t then,” said Jean. “Stick it on Ebay.”

“Half of it’s missing,” said Crozier. “The box is shot.. who’d want it?” He sighed as he looked around him at the various games and toys that he’d brought down from the attic earlier on. “Maybe Polly and Stuart can store their old toys?”

“Where?” said Jean. Stuart was living in a one-bedroomed, waterside apartment in Salford Quays. Polly was in London, living with her boyfriend in a studio flat. “And why would they want them?”

“For when they have kids of their own.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Jean. “They’re not going to want them are they!”

She did have a point. Kids didn't play with the same sort of games anymore. When was the last time he'd seen a child play Ludo, or Snakes and Ladders. It was all Grand Theft Auto now.

"Times have changed," said Jean, and Crozier had to concede that they had, and not necessarily for the worst. The day of Becky's death, he'd thought nothing of leaving Anne and Maureen in the care of a female officer whose training hadn't equipped her to cope with two devastated women, because that was the way things were done back then. The role of the Family Liaison Officer had yet to be created. There was no-one to act as a buffer between the family of a murder victim and the officers who were investigating the murder. There was no-one whose job it was to inform the family as to how the investigation was progressing – if at all. It was left to the discretion of the most senior investigating officer to decide what, if anything, the family should be told. And similarly, it fell to the senior investigating officer to answer any questions the family might have when the results of the post mortem were made known to them.

At some point after he'd left the night before, Maureen had been on the phone to various relatives. She hadn't wanted to phone them, but she'd felt it was only right. She didn't want them finding out about Becky on the news.

The result was a house full of people that Anne barely knew. She didn't want them there. But relatives were relatives, and just since when did anyone have any control over whether or not the relatives turned up?

It was odd, thought Crozier, how people could ignore the every day needs of those they were closely related to but drop everything at the mere suggestion that one among their biological number had been murdered. It wasn't so much a desire to 'be there' for their nearest

and dearest as curiosity. He found their presence distasteful, but at least them being there kept Maureen occupied while he talked to Anne.

She sat on the bed in the room that Graham's father had died in. Yesterday, a bedspread the colour and texture of oilcloth had hidden the sheets from view. Somebody had snatched a few hours sleep in it. The bed was unmade. The sheets were now visible, and it was obvious it had been a good while since they'd last seen the inside of a washing machine. The air was stale, and Crozier opened one of the metal framed windows. A sweet, clean breeze blew in like disinfectant as he said, "We've found Graham's car."

"Where was it?" said Anne.

"Dunham Massey."

She didn't understand the significance of that until he added, "Divers are dragging the lake...." And then she broke down.

Dogs had been taken to the car. Clothing that had come from Vermillion Crescent and was known to have been worn by Graham had been wafted under their noses. They'd followed his scent from the car to the lake, and they'd stopped at the edge looking slightly pugged off, as hounds were apt to do when their quarry didn't play by the Queensberry Rules.

The estate was managed by someone called Thorndyke. Crozier hadn't met him, but he had the feeling it wouldn't be long before he did. Hoskins had conveyed to him the gist of Thorndyke's attitude, and it wasn't entirely sympathetic. People brought their kids to Dunham Massey. Thorndyke didn't want some duck-feeding 4 year old child traumatised by the sight of a bloated corpse.

Crozier had other concerns. The press still didn't know that Graham was missing, but they were onto the fact that a car had been

found abandoned at Dunham Massey. They knew police were dragging the lake. They would already have run a check on the plates, and they would have linked the car to Mulholland's Double Glazing. They would know that the father of the girl who was found dead the day before was a rep with Mulhollands. They would know the car was a company car. They would enquire as to whether the father of the murdered girl just happened to be missing, and when they were told that he was, they would draw their own conclusions.

*"How could he do this to us?"*

She was shouting because she was angry, but anger was good, thought Crozier. Anger would help her cope.

Maureen came into the room. "I heard shouting..."

*"Graham's dead!"*

"Anne, we don't know that," said Crozier.

*"He's bloody killed himself!"*

Women didn't faint gracefully, or if they did, Crozier had yet to see it. Maureen fulfilled his every expectation by collapsing where she stood. A Family Liaison Officer would have known what to do. Crozier didn't. He was no more use to Maureen than the Christmas Card acquaintances. Anne was screaming. The relatives were shouting. *Christ*, thought Crozier.

\* \* \*

The relatives had their uses, he discovered. Looking after Maureen gave them something concrete to do and it enabled him to carry on talking to Anne. Such was her state of mind, he was tempted not to mention the post mortem, but he had no choice but to give her the gist of Choudhuri's report. It wasn't a good time to do it, but when would be good? "Cause of death was vagal inhibition."

Anne mouthed the words as if trying to make sense of them. She couldn't speak them. She tried, but the words wouldn't come.

"It means she was strangled," said Crozier.

"Then why doesn't the bloody pathologist just say so?"

Why indeed, though Crozier, who wished Choudhuri had stated the cause of death in those simple terms. Vagal Inhibition sounded like an illness. A bit like asthma. Something to do with the respiratory system, but nothing too serious. *Just take these tablets, and this nasty bout of vagal inhibition will clear in a couple of days.* There was no mistaking what strangulation meant. Vagal Inhibition conjured a different image altogether, and Barristers used the fact to their advantage. They pointed out that a man could sometimes put his hands round a woman's throat without actually meaning to strangle her. The pressure, though comparatively slight, sometimes caused the vagal nerve to stop working. If the vagal nerve stopped working, the heart stopped beating. Juries were often invited to consider a verdict of accidental death on account of it.

"How easy would it have been for someone to do that to Becky?"

Crozier had asked Choudhuri the same question. Now, he repeated to Anne what Choudhuri had told him:

"Individuals vary," he said. "Women – particularly girls – can be killed quite easily. Men less so. Their necks are more muscular. In men, the vagal nerve is better protected."

"And was she raped?"

"No," said Crozier, "but Becky *did* have sex before she died."

\* \* \*

Jean came into the kitchen carrying another box of toys. "You're not still playing with that Spirograph?"

Crozier inserted the nib of a pen into something the size and shape of a Viennese finger biscuit as she added, “I don’t suppose I need to ask what’s on your mind?”

The shape of this particular cog resulted in a pattern that Crozier could have predicted. If only there was some way of predicting how people might behave. The world might be a safer place...

“You’re not still worrying about Anne Slater.”

“I am, as a matter of fact.”

“What’s the point in worrying? It’s not as though you can do anything about it.”

That was true enough. Crozier had added his voice to those who’d protested when it was known that Becky’s killer was making an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. He might have known better. He might have saved his breath.

It was now a good few months since he’d been transferred to the Arndale. It was said to be every bit as secure as Wakefield, but what was the point in constructing a building that was almost guaranteed to keep the prisoners in if the bloody fools who ran it let them out?

“They wouldn’t let him out if they thought he was still a threat,” said Jean.

“Wouldn’t they?” said Crozier. He wasn’t so sure. They might not do it deliberately. But mistakes were made, and when they were, innocent people suffered. He didn’t want Anne Slater to be one of them.

“If it’s bothering you that much, why don’t you find out what’s going on?”

“You can’t expect some bleeding heart liberal to tell a copper anything...”

“You don’t know he’s a bleeding heart liberal. He might be just as concerned as you are. He’s got a job to do, that’s all.”

“I wish he’d go and do it somewhere else...”

“Phone him.”

“What’s the point?”

“You could try.”

Jean was right. He could try. He phoned the station and spoke to a colleague. He wanted a telephone number for the Arndale – one that would connect him to a human being rather than a recorded message inviting him to choose from a number of options that would lead nowhere.

Armed with a number, Crozier managed to get through to a secretary. She didn’t seem enthusiastic about putting him through to Gilbolton until he told her he was a senior officer with Greater Manchester. That did the trick. Moments later, Crozier was talking to him.

“I was involved in the Becky Slater case,” he explained. “You’re about to release the man who killed her.”

It wasn’t every day that Gilbolton got a call from someone like him. “You’re obviously concerned about it.”

“You must be aware that he threatened to kill her mother on his release.”

“I’m aware of it, yes...”

“All I want to know,” said Crozier, “is whether you think he still presents a threat.”

“That isn’t for me to decide,” said Gilbolton. “He was assessed by a number of psychologists. It was their assessment of him that resulted in him being transferred to the Arndale. Not mine.”

“And now he gets days out...”

“Only under escort,” Gilbolton replied.

“But am I right in thinking that at some point, he’ll be allowed to leave the unit unescorted?”

“It’s part of the process of rehabilitation.”

“So when can Becky’s mother reasonably expect to bump into him on the street?”

Gilbolton wasn’t about to reveal that sort of information. He wouldn’t have put it past Crozier to tip the press off.

Crozier lost his rag with him. “Aren’t you even *slightly* concerned that he might still have every intention of carrying out the threat he made from the dock?”

“The possibility has to be considered,” said Gilbolton. “But those are the risks that have to be taken by a society that believes in redemption and forgiveness.”

Crozier had heard enough. “Try telling that to Anne Slater if you happen to get it wrong.”

\* \* \*

Crozier had hung up on him, and Gilbolton regretted not having had the chance, or the courage, to admit that as a matter of fact, he was more concerned than he was prepared to admit. But decisions relating to who was transferred to the Arndale didn’t rest with him. Such decisions were made by committee, so to speak. If nothing else, it spread the risk of any one person having to take responsibility should an unfortunate error of judgement be made.

He realised how concerned Crozier must have been to make the call. How much more concerned would he have been had he known that even as they spoke, Becky Slater’s killer was experiencing his first taste of unescorted freedom?

He glanced at his computer screen. One of the icons on it informed him that he had a meeting at 11.30am. It also informed him that today was Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2009.

Friday 13<sup>th</sup>, thought Gilbolton. Unlucky for some.

He pushed the thought away.

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## 9

This part of the city was once filled with warehouses and holding yards for goods trains. The yards were gone, and the warehouses had been converted into offices. He hardly recognised the place, so he asked a girl for directions. “I haven’t lived in Manchester for over 15 years. Everything’s changed.”

“Where are you going?”

“Myddleton,” he told her.

She thought for a moment. “You want the 32,” she said, and she pointed to a bus stop up the road.

He thanked her, and the girl gave a smile, and something he’d been told by a psychologist at Wakefield Prison came to mind. *Just because a woman smiles, it doesn’t mean she fancies you. It’s difficult, but you’re going to have to learn to interpret social signals that most of us take for granted.*

The route hadn’t changed. The roads, at least, were still familiar. Patches of land that once divided one estate from another had been built on, but that was all, so he had no trouble identifying the stop closest to Vermillion Crescent.

The bus dropped him off within yards of a school. He walked straight past the gates, then turned into Wilmot Road. It came to a dead end at a row of metal railings and a railway embankment. Over the years, generations of kids had prised the railings apart so that could they play on the track, and he squeezed through, then scrambled up it.

The track was no longer used, and he followed it for several hundred yards. It was only when you saw Vermillion Crescent from the embankment that you realised it wasn't a crescent at all. It curved, but only just, and the gardens to either end were longer than the gardens at its centre.

The garden at the back of number 6 was better kept than it used to be. The narrow concrete path still divided the lawn, but the borders had been deepened, and the edge of the lawn had recently been trimmed. The old, prefabricated garage had been replaced with a brick-built affair and the house had been painted.

A hedge divided the garden from the embankment. Once there was a gap in it, but at some point, it had been replaced by a gate. He stood on the other side of it in the knowledge that sooner or later, he would be seen, and eventually, the door to the kitchen opened. The man who stood in front of it had to be knocking on 70, but there was no mistaking the square-shouldered look of a former soldier. Officer class. He could see it in the thrust of the jaw, the assumption that if he were to tell him to bugger off, he'd damned well do so! He folded his arms, and planted his feet squarely. Everything about him said, *on guard!*

The wife came out behind him. She was slightly younger than him, and her herringbone skirt and knitted top were shapeless, like their wearer. She and her husband looked him straight in the eye to let him know that they'd clocked him watching the house, and when that failed to send him on his way, they marched down the path as if hoping that he might have disappeared by the time they reached him. But he stayed where he was, so they had no choice but to confront him.

The man spoke first. "What do you think you're playing at?"

He played dumb. “Playing at?”

“What business do you have looking at our house?”

They hadn’t recognised him. That much was obvious. If they had, they wouldn’t have confronted him. They’d have barricaded themselves inside the house, and called the police. Not that he’d thought it likely they’d know who he was. Prison put years on people. He looked nothing like the photographs that appeared in the press over 15 years ago.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I realise how it must look, but I used to live around here, and I just wanted to see if your house still existed.”

“Why wouldn’t it?” said the husband.

“I heard they’d pulled it down.”

That as good as told them that he knew what had happened there, and the wife piped up, her accent marking her out as having once lived somewhere more upmarket than a suburb such as this. Knutsford, or Bowden. He would have staked his life on it. “When you say you lived round here...”

“Back in the early 90s.”

She and her husband looked at one another, but it was the wife who spoke. “Did you know the people who used to live here?”

“Not very well, but well enough to have been invited in now and then.”

He got her talking. It wasn’t difficult. When a woman had spent the best part of 50 years married to someone who cut short her every sentence by saying, *For God’s sake Margery, give it a rest...* she was only too pleased to find somebody to talk to. But winning somebody’s confidence was like getting a woman into bed. You had to *woo* them. You had to make them *like* you. You had to make them *want* you to fuck them. That took time, and patience, and he had plenty of both.

“You’ve done a lovely job on the garden... I wouldn’t have recognised it.”

“We haven’t done as much as we’d like, have we Gerald?”

Gerald admitted that they hadn’t done as much as they would like, but at their age, it was as much as they could do to keep it straight.

“Anne wasn’t much of a gardener,” he remarked.

“Anne?”

“Mrs. Slater.”

“Oh yes... of course.” Margery was embarrassed not to have realised who he was referring to. “But of course, we never met her,” she explained. “The house was put on the market after the trial. Plenty of people looked at it, but we were the only people to make an offer.”

He could imagine that a house in which a murder had been committed would have generated a lot of interest, but most of it would have been from people who simply wanted to see where the victim died.

“She would have been glad to see it go to somebody like you,” he said. “Someone of your class, I mean.”

Margery bridled with pleasure. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” and he knew that he’d hit the mark. Flattery got you nowhere with some women and *everywhere* with others. But you had to know which part of their nature to appeal to. Some women liked you to compliment their looks. Others liked you to compliment their brains. A woman like this – one whose clothes were shabby but genteel, liked to be told it was obvious she was a cut above.

Gerald got bored listening to them yakking. He potted off into the house, and that was where he stayed until he happened to glance through the window and see his wife fumbling with the gate. He

marched back up the path. “Margery...” But by the time he’d reached her, she’d opened it, and there was nothing he could do to prevent him from stepping through and into the garden. That was bad enough, but things took a turn for the worse when Margery turned to him, and asked him very sweetly to, “Pop the kettle on Gerald...”

It was obvious Gerald didn’t like the idea of inviting him into the house, but he couldn’t exactly come out with it and say so. Instead, he did what the British always did in a crisis, and lied through his teeth. “I don’t think we’ve got time dear... we’re going out. Remember?”

He put a certain emphasis on *Remember?*

Margery chose to ignore it. “Are we?”

“Yes!”

“Where are we going?”

She’d put him on the spot. “Shopping,” said Gerald.

“It can wait,” said Margery, so Gerald, his eyes bulging slightly, had no option but to follow let him in.

The kitchen had been modernised. The sink had once been underneath the window. Now it faced a lemon yellow wall. Everything crisp and clean. White, melamine cupboards. Tiles instead of Lino. Radio 4. The 1 o’clock news. *The Manchester girl found dead in the bathroom of her home has been identified as Rebecca Slater, a pupil at Loreto Convent, Altrincham...*

“You’ve changed the kitchen...”

The fact that he appeared to have been in the house before didn’t make Gerald any more comfortable, and when Margery asked whether he would prefer coffee to tea, Gerald looked at her as if she’d gone out of her mind.

“Tea would be great, thanks.”

Margery filled the kettle and switched it on. “The kettle can be a bit slow,” she said. “While we’re waiting, why don’t you come and see what we’ve done to the living room.”

“Margery....” said Gerald.

Margery swept straight past him, and he and Gerald followed, though Gerald was barely able to conceal his fury.

Moments later, they were standing in a part of the house that had once been the television room. An arch had been knocked into the wall that divided it from the front to make it long and thin, with a bay window at one end, and sliding doors at the other.

“What do you think?” said Margery.

He wanted to reply that these particular houses had been designed to have two reception rooms. Knocking them into one destroyed the proportions of both. “Very nice,” he replied.

Almost every wall was adorned with Military Memorabilia. A couple of swords. A rifle. Photographs of a younger, fitter Gerald in combat gear, posing in front of a Hercules as tanks were being loaded into an aircraft. Photographs of a younger, prettier Margery pruning the roses in front of a stone-fronted house. Once, there must have been money in the background. It was written on the walls. No children, he noticed.

The fireplace was meant to look as though it had been carved from a solid block of limestone, but the stone had been reconstituted from finely ground chippings mixed with resin. A lacquered box took pride of place on the mantle. Porcelain ornaments flanked it to either side – animals mostly, a Siamese cat, a donkey, and a chestnut horse that was obviously Arkle. They weren’t to his taste, but because he sensed that Gerald was watching him as if suspecting that he might be trying to calculate their value, he said, “That’s quite a collection.”

“Beswick,” said Margery. “I’ve been collecting it for years.”

He had no idea what Beswick was, but he assumed it must be worth a bob or two.

“This is my favourite,” she said, and oddly enough, she picked up the figurine of a sheep dog. “When we were digging the borders, we found some bones – it quite upset me. One doesn’t like to think of disturbing the grave of a family pet.”

He remembered that dog. “I think his name was Spicer.”

“Really?” said Margery. “Who did he belong to?”

What she meant was, had he belonged to the Slaters, or to someone who lived there before them.

“He belonged to Craig,” he replied, and Margery seemed to remember an uncomfortable detail: “Wasn’t he their foster son?”

“I believe so.”

“And didn’t he kill *him* as well as their daughter?”

“Not straight away...”

“No...not straight away... but didn’t he lure him away from a children’s home?”

He didn’t answer, and Margery, who’d last read up on the case some years ago, couldn’t remember the details now. “He knew something, didn’t he... something that the killer couldn’t risk him telling the police.”

“Something like that,” he replied.

“I don’t like to think about it really...”

Gerald interrupted them. “Then don’t,” he said, gruffly. All this talk of death reminded him that he wasn’t as young as he used to be. He wanted to get them off the subject, so he said something he knew would irritate Margery. “That sheep dog isn’t Beswick by the way.

It's just some piece of junk that Margery picked up in a bric-a-brac shop."

"It most certainly *is*," she retorted, and she turned it upside down to show him the base.

Gerald fumbled for glasses in his top pocket, took it from her, and appeared to examine the gold mark. "Well... I stand corrected," he admitted. "It *is* Beswick."

It couldn't have been often that Margery got the better of her husband. As she reached for the ornament, she looked slightly smug, so Gerald ignored her outstretched hand and appeared to attempt to put the dog back on the mantelpiece himself. The base connected with the reconstituted stone, and Gerald withdrew his hand, but for some reason, his fingers failed to disconnect from the ornament. As he withdrew his hand, his fingers dragged the dog over the edge of the mantelpiece. It fell to the hearth, and broke into several pieces.

"Oh!" cried Margery. "Oh...."

"Blast," said Gerald, mildly. "What a bloody silly thing to do!"

Margery bent and scooped up the broken fragments, then looked at Gerald, stricken-faced. "You *idiot*," she scolded.

"Let me see," said Gerald. "Perhaps it can be mended," and he plucked the broken fragments out of her hand. He turned them over with fingers that were thick, and heavily muscled, then forced a note of regret into his voice as he said, "Looks as though it's had it."

"But surely..." said Margery. "Superglue, or something..."

Gerald wasn't listening. He marched off into the kitchen, and within seconds, there came the sound of broken bits of porcelain clattering against the metal sides of a bin. There was an air of finality to the sound of the lid slamming down on them, and when Gerald returned to the living room, he noticed that Margery's eyes were

bright with fury and sadness. “Oh come on Margery, it was only a bloody ornament.”

“I know it’s silly,” she said. “But I *loved* that little dog.”

“I’ll buy you another.”

“It was old,” she replied. “They’re not that easy to find. It’s not as though you can storm into John Lewis and order one, is it!”

“Ebay,” said Gerald.

“It won’t be the same.”

“It’ll be *exactly* the same,” said Gerald. “Beswick must have turned them out by the thousand.”

“But it won’t be *that* one, will it!”

“For Christ’s sake Margery, anyone would think it was *Ming!*”

The only thing preventing Margery from letting her tears spill over was fury born of the knowledge that Gerald had smashed her precious dog on purpose. This was his revenge for the fact that she’d let a stranger into the house against his wishes.

“In any case,” said Gerald. “It’s only a bit of pot when all’s said and done. I can’t think why you bought it...waste of money.”

“Yes, well, people like to collect things don’t they... I’ve got my ‘bits of pot’, as you call them, and you’ve got your weapons...”

“Weapons?” he said, casually.

“Hideous things,” said Margery. “Show him Gerald...”

“I don’t think he’d be interested...”

“Oh but I would,” he replied.

“I’m afraid they’re all locked away.”

Margery said, “Well it’s not as though it wouldn’t be easy to unlock them...”

She opened the lacquered box that stood on the mantelpiece, and took out a key. Reluctantly, Gerald used it to open a display case that

looked like a chest of drawers until he slid the drawers out to reveal that each had a glass top. One held a pair of duelling pistols – another, a collection of knives. The smallest had Wilkinson stamped on the band of steel that bound the base, and it was to this knife in particular that he was drawn.

“Can I hold it?”

It was obvious Gerald didn't like the idea of letting him get his hands on it, but to have refused would have been to betray that he knew that if it came to it, there wouldn't be a lot he could do to protect himself from someone who was younger than him by a good few decades. He lifted it out of the drawer and handed it to him as if to say, *Just try it, mate..*

His fingers wrapped around the solid ebony handle as if it had been made for him. He loved the very neatness of its fit. Gerald didn't like the way he wrapped his fingers around it as if almost trying to feel the spirit of the thing, and after a few moments of watching him, he reached out for it saying, “If you wouldn't mind...I'd like it back now.”

Reluctantly, he relinquished it, and Gerald put it back in the display case. He locked it, but instead of putting the key back in the lacquered box, he slipped it into his pocket with the intention of finding a new hiding place for it.

“What about that tea, Margery?”

Margery was still in mourning for her favourite ornament, the loss of which had caused her to forget all about the tea. “Oh,” she said. “Yes... of course...”

She disappeared into the kitchen, and once she was out of the way, Gerald set about finding out more about him.

“You say you used to live around here...”

“That's right.”

“Whereabouts?” said Gerald. “Which road, I mean?”

“Wilmot...”

Wilmot Road was just around the corner.

“Which number?” said Gerald.

“Number 60.”

“I can’t seem to place it...”

It was less than an hour since he’d walked down Wilmot Road. He knew that the houses were numbered from 1 to 60. “The one on the corner.”

Gerald gave him a look that said, *Okay... I’ll give you that one...*” but then he probed further, throwing what he could to catch him out in some way. But he couldn’t. Whoever he was, this character, he seemed to know the area well enough. That, however, only made Gerald feel even less comfortable. He pictured him wandering around the streets and making a note of which of the houses had decent cars in the driveways, which had alarms, and which had dogs, and which had people who obliged by going to work. He didn’t look the type who might take chances. He was more the type of thief – and Gerald was almost *certain* he was a thief – who would make it his business to watch a house for weeks before he robbed it. Well... if he made the mistake of coming back – and Gerald was sure he would – he’d be ready for him.

Together, they sat in silence on furniture designed for a larger house, then Margery returned with tray bearing cups, saucers and a teapot. It was covered with a cozy on which Windsor Castle had been woven into the fabric. She set the tray down on a tilt-topped table, and as she poured the tea, she said, “Must seem strange seeing this house after all this time.”

He replied that it did feel strange, but he didn’t add that it felt a good deal stranger than he’d thought it was going to feel, or that he’d

never imagined it would be so easy to get the current owners to invite him in. How he was going to manage it was something he hadn't worked out until he got there. Maybe he would turn up at the door and ask if they wanted any work done. Or maybe he would force the lock on the shed, then knock on the door to inform them that he'd just stopped someone from trying to nick their mower. But the plan that appealed to him most was one that could only be put into effect if they had a pet. A dog or cat. It wouldn't matter which. Sooner or later, they would let the pet out into the garden. The pet would disappear. The owners would place adverts offering a reward. Two weeks down the road, he would turn up on the doorstep with Tibbles or Rex, and that would give him the opening he was looking for.

"You must have noticed some changes to the area."

"A few," he admitted. "But not as many as I thought I might."

"What sort of changes did you anticipate?" said Gerald.

"I wasn't sure the school would still be here..."

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Prime land," he replied. "A ten acre field could carry a fair few houses."

"He does have a point," said Margery, and reluctantly, Gerald agreed that he *did* have a point.

"I wouldn't have liked to have found that it had been built on," he said. "Becky liked that field. She used to say that whenever she looked out of her bedroom window, she could almost imagine she was living in the country..."

The minute he mentioned Becky, Margery glanced at Gerald, and he realised there was some sort of unspoken agreement between them that if they bought the house, they should try to forget what had happened within its walls.

“It must have been a shock when you heard that she’d been murdered?”

“It didn’t seem real,” he admitted.

The habit of adding two or three spoonfuls of sugar to tea was one that people tended to pick up in prison. Gerald watched him thoughtfully, and he decided it was dangerous to allow himself to be drawn into talking about Becky. A slip of the tongue... a look in his eye. These were the things that might just give him away... So in the knowledge that they knew the history of the house before they bought it, he said, “Didn’t it put you off?”

“A bit,” she admitted. “But Gerald had some trouble with his investments, didn’t you Gerald... and it was so *cheap*.”

Gerald was furious. You didn’t divulge that sort of information to a stranger. You didn’t divulge it to *anyone*, for that matter – not unless you didn’t intend to let your husband forget that you once had a nice big house in a desirable location, and that you might still have it, if only he’d listened to *you*.

In an effort to salvage his pride, Gerald said, “It wasn’t as though it was all we could *afford*. It was just that we didn’t want to miss a bargain!”

Margery added, “It wasn’t just cheap. Mrs. Slater almost *gave* it away...” She took a sidelong glance at Gerald’s face and was gratified to discover that she’d managed to embarrass him. “But when something like that happens, people get... *frightened*, I suppose.”

“What of?”

“Well...you know... they assume....well it’s silly... but I suppose they assume the house must be *haunted* or something, and sometimes... it’s so... well... it’s so *cold*... in that bathroom.”

“Rubbish,” said Gerald. “The only reason the bathroom gets cold is there’s an extractor fan in the window.”

“They say he just walked in,” said Margery. “It doesn’t bear thinking about really... a girl alone in the house, and someone walking in and... well... when you think of what she must have gone through....”

Gerald didn’t want to talk about what Becky must have gone through. “Can’t we change the subject?”

Margery didn’t feel inclined. “I wonder what became of Mrs. Slater?”

“You didn’t keep in touch with her then?”

“No,” said Margery. “Well you wouldn’t, would you... it wasn’t the sort of situation where you were likely to get friendly with the person you bought the house from.”

“Pity,” he said. “I was hoping you might have a forwarding address.”

If Gerald’s expression was anything to go by, he thought that was an odd sort of question, but Margery didn’t. “I’m afraid we don’t,” she replied.

“What did you do with any letters that might have come for her?”

Gerald had had enough of this. “The post was diverted. The police saw to that. We didn’t get any letters, and we don’t know what happened to her, so please, *can we just change the subject!*”

His cup was empty. He pushed it forward as if to suggest that he wouldn’t say no to a refill, but Gerald said, “There’s no more in the pot, I’m afraid, and we really must get on.”

It was his cue to leave, but he wasn’t finished. “Mind if I used the bathroom?”

Left to his own devices, Gerald might well have suggested that he found a bush on his way back to wherever he'd come from.

“Upstairs,” said Margery. “Just off the landing...” And then she stopped herself. “Here I am, telling you where to find it, and of course, you already know...”

He left the room, but paused on the stairs. Gerald's voice was a hiss, but it was heavy with disbelief:

*“What in God's name were you thinking of...inviting someone like that into the house!”*

*“Like what?”*

*“Like that!”*

“I don't know what you mean...”

Gerald didn't know either, but he knew that their visitor wasn't what he seemed, so he followed him upstairs. The bathroom door was open. Wherever he was, he wasn't in there, so Gerald knew immediately that his suspicions were justified. The man had no business to be poking around.

He looked in the front bedroom first, expecting to find him searching through the drawers. He wasn't there, so Gerald tried the middle bedroom next. Once, its walls were painted in a delicate yellow and cream. Now, the walls were ‘String’ by ‘Farrow and Ball’.

“I thought you wanted the lavatory?” he said.

“I've used it, thanks...”

He couldn't have. It was less than 20 seconds since he'd gone upstairs and Gerald had followed straight after. “What are you doing in here?”

“Just looking....”

“Looking at *what*, exactly?”

“This was Becky's bedroom...”

Gerald recalled him saying that he'd known the Slaters well enough to have been invited into the house now and then, but even so, the fact that he knew which bedroom belonged to Becky increased the feeling of unease that had been growing ever since his damn fool wife invited him into the house.

“Look... whatever your name is... I don't know who you are, but I know you're up to no good, so why don't you just leave before I call the pol...”

Gerald stopped mid-sentence. Something had caught his attention – something he ought to have seen the minute he entered the room. How could he not have noticed? It wasn't as though the man had even moved. He'd simply stood and waited for him to realise that he was holding a knife. And not just *any* knife. This was a work of art – the stuff of some terrible dream. “I put that back in the drawer,” he said. “How did you manage to...?”

“Are you threatening me, Gerald?”

Army training had taught him that a man who held a knife yet spoke quietly was always more dangerous than a man who shouted the odds. Training had also taught him that any man who wasn't afraid when confronted by another man armed with a knife was a fool. It wasn't weak to fear. But it was weak to panic. Panicking got you killed. The thing to do was just stay calm and try to take control of the situation, so he answered him equally quietly. “What do you want?”

This time, he didn't reply, but Gerald thought he could guess what he wanted all right. He reached into the back pocket of his trousers and pulled out a wallet. “I drew my pension this morning... here... it's all I've got.”

“I didn't come to steal your pension, Gerald.” He started to move towards him, and Gerald backed away, *hating* himself for doing it, yet

acknowledging that he didn't have much choice. Even as short a time as ten years ago, he could probably have taken him on. But not anymore.

"We haven't got anything else," he said. "Nothing of any value." And then, "The knife... is that it? You want the knife? Take it. Take them all. Here..." He fumbled for the key to the display cabinet. Earlier, he'd slipped it into his pocket intending to find a new hiding place for it. Now, he held it out, and that was a big mistake, because instead of taking it, he grabbed his wrist and dragged Gerald towards him.

"I don't want the knives," he whispered.

They each heard Margery moving around downstairs. The clatter of cups on a tray was followed by Margery shouting up from below. "Is everything all right up there?"

Gerald's only instinct was to protect her. "Fine..." he shouted, and lowering his voice, he added, "Then what *do* you want?"

Margery stood at foot of the stairs. "What's going on up there?"

The blade of the knife was now at Gerald's throat. The man holding that knife said, "You asked me what I wanted... I'll tell you..." He smiled. "*I want Margery.*"

It took a fair few seconds for Gerald to realise what he meant, and when he did, he was more revolted than horrified. "For God's sake man.. she's 67 years old!"

"I like them old."

They heard her foot on the stair. "What are you two *doing* up there?"

"Don't hurt her," said Gerald, and he was ashamed of the note of pleading that had crept into his voice.

"You never know.... she might enjoy it...and you can watch..."

Gerald shouted, “We’re just coming down.... no point coming up...” And then, “Please...she’s old... don’t hurt her...*please*...”

“Tell you what.... I’ll make you a deal... I won’t touch her if you do as I say...”

“What do you want me to do?”

He told him.

“No...” said Gerald. “*No*....”

Margery had her foot on the bottom stair. “Are you *sure* you’re all right?”

“*Stay where you are!*” shouted Gerald, and then, in a desperate effort to convince her all was well, he did his best to try to sound as casual as possible. “We’ll be down in a moment...” It came out like a sob, and Margery shouted back, “I’m coming up...”

“*Oh dear God,*” said Gerald, but he crumpled to his knees and bowed his head.

When he looked up, the man who had inveigled his way into their house was standing over him, his legs apart, his trousers unzipped. He was smiling down on him without mercy. “All those years in the army... I’m sure you can remember how it’s done...”

# 10

Anne didn't encourage the neighbours to just 'drop by', but they sometimes did, and she didn't want somebody picking Crozier's card up and asking what the occasion was. Some would know, but people who hadn't known her all that long might not, and she didn't want to run the risk of embarrassing them by having to explain that tomorrow would be the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her daughter's death.

She put it back in the envelope and took it up to a bedroom that was small, and lacking in character – just four white walls and a row of fitted wardrobes, a double bed and a couple of bedside tables. There were drawers in the bedside tables. The first three drawers were given over to clothes, but the bottom drawer, being deeper than the others, held a shoe box. In it, Anne kept things that she didn't want to throw away, but didn't want to have to look at, either.

It held the usual things. Birth Certificates – both hers and Graham's. Marriage Certificate. Decrees Nisi and Absolute. Death Certificates – one for her mother, one for her father, one for Graham's dad, and one for Becky. Letters and cards from people that came in the weeks and months after Becky was murdered. Anne couldn't hope to keep them all. She'd just kept the cards and letters from people she knew. The rest she'd asked Mr. Crozier to dispose of. She'd felt ungrateful doing it, but some days, the post man would bring an entire sack full.

There were also a fair few photos in that box. Despite what Graham had done, she couldn't bring herself to destroy their wedding photo. Other photos – those of Becky on her tricycle, and Becky on the beach – were on display downstairs. But one particular photograph would never be put on display, and that was the photo of Becky, playing tug-of-war with a Border Collie. It was ultimately shown on the front page of every national paper in the country, for its very existence carried the message that nobody's daughter was safe – that at any given moment, somebody might be watching her, perhaps even taking photographs as she played with the family dog.

The person who took that photo was standing on an embankment that divided Vermillion Crescent from school playing fields. Becky wasn't looking in his direction, but even if she was, she wouldn't have thought there was anything strange about him being there, or that he was taking a photograph of her. Why would she?

Anne put Crozier's card into the shoe box, then walked into the back bedroom. It didn't have much of a view. Just tiny squares of garden, similar to her own and each of them backing onto gardens that belonged to the houses opposite. All these things were hidden by curtains of midnight blue that were patterned with rockets, blazing their way to the stars. A matching duvet and a few stuffed toys had turned it into the perfect room for a little boy, and the child she was currently fostering was under the duvet, fast asleep.

She spent a moment just looking at him. She liked the way kids managed to tangle themselves up the bedclothes so that half of them would be lying under the covers and half of them would be flopping off the bed. Ticky was wearing Spiderman pyjamas. The colours were similar to the colours in the duvet, so it was hard to see where he ended, and the bedclothes began.

He was small for boy of 7. It wasn't unusual for kids in care to be smaller than kids whose parents had cared for them from birth. It was nothing to do with what they were fed or whether they got enough. It was more to do with the nurturing. Children were like plants. If you talked to them, and cared for them, they grew the way they should. If you shoved them away in a dark, cold corner of the garden, they didn't thrive.

He woke as she opened the curtains. "Mummy Anne?" he said, as if reacquainting himself with who she was. It was hardly surprising really. Kids who'd been bounced from home to home often woke up not entirely sure of where they were.

"It's all right," she said, and straight away, he was reassured that for now, at least, he was safe. His hand peeked out from the duvet and reached for hers. She held it as he popped out of bed, then sat on her knee for a moment.

"Do I *have* to go to school?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'm scared of school," he said, but that wasn't true. It wasn't so much school that scared him as the thought that at the final bell, nobody would come to take him home.

"I'll be there to fetch you," she promised.

"*Always?*" he said, but that was a promise too far. Today might be the day that his mother got in touch with Social Services to say she'd sorted her life out and wanted him back. "I'll be there," she repeated, then she took him into the bathroom and sponged his face.

There once was a time when Ticky would have screamed when she ran the tap. The difference in him was staggering given that it had only been two months since Social Services contacted her to ask if she

could take him. She told them she could, and less than an hour later, they were at the door.

Anne took one look at his clothes and bought him new ones. And over the weeks that followed, she watched him attempting to play with some of the games that she'd managed to accumulate over years of fostering children. He'd never seen Lego, or Junior Mechano. He didn't know what to do with them. He'd done a bit better with crayons, but the pictures told a story. None of the faces were smiling, and in one of them, the figure she thought was a King bestowing a Knighthood turned out to be some boyfriend hitting his mother.

“Which jumper would you like?”

“That one,” said Ticky. He had to point. He didn't know his colours. And he couldn't tell the time, or read the simplest of words. His mother, Cheryl, ‘just couldn't get it together’ to take him to school.

Anne dressed him in trousers that were a mass of buckles and pockets. He loved those trousers, but best of all, he liked the trainers with the flashing red lights in the heel. Whenever he stamped his feet, the lights turned green.

Anne took him down to a kitchen so small, a table was out of the question. A breakfast bar divided it from the only downstairs room, and Ticky scrambled onto a stool that was almost taller than him.

“What would you like?”

“Eggy Soldiers!”

She gave him a timer, and as he watched the sand trickling through the glass he said, “Mummy Anne...”

“Yes love?”

“Have you got a boyfriend?”

“Not at the moment.”

He looked relieved, and she realised he must have been worrying about it. More specifically, he was worried that, just when he was growing accustomed to living in an environment in which safety and security were the order of the day, his life might be turned upside down again by some boyfriend or other. Boyfriends equalled trouble. Kids like Ticky learned that early in life. When their mothers suddenly introduced an adult male into the household, life, which was hard enough, often changed for the worse.

“Will you ever get one?”

“Possibly,” she told him, because it hadn’t been unknown for someone to find her attractive. Nothing had ever lasted though. She still suffered bouts of depression, and it wasn’t much fun to live with a woman who sometimes spent weeks at a time behaving like a basket case. She was never as bad when she had a child to look after, which was one of the reasons she fostered. Having someone dependent on her kept her going. It gave her something other than the past to think about, and that was no bad thing.

“What would happen to me though, if you did?”

“Nothing.”

“Would you send me away?”

“Why would I send you away?”

“That’s what mum does...”

She reached into one of the units above the breakfast bar and pulled out a car – a Dinky toy. A boy who was slightly older than Ticky had scratched his name in the paint work. Naughty, but understandable. Some of the kids she’d fostered had never had toys of their own. They tended to try to put their mark on whatever they get their hands on. Yet, in the end, he’d forgotten to take it with him. Either that or he’d left it in the hope that she might foster him again. She’d put it

away to keep it safe because she'd thought there was every chance he'd end up coming back to her at some point, but that was several years ago, and there was no point lying awake at night and wondering what had become of him. Children came and went. Half the time, you never did find out what became of most of them. Given that over forty percent of the prison population was made up of people who'd been taken into care as children, it was probably just as well.

Ticky's face lit up when she gave him the car. "Do you know what day it is?"

He didn't. Days of the week, like the three times table, were as much a mystery to Ticky as the Laws of Astrophysics were to her.

"It's Friday," she told him. "You can take a toy to school on Fridays."

The car was tiny – something he could put in his pocket and hide from the other children. He was apt to hide his toys if he could. It wasn't so much that he didn't want to share. It was more the fear of losing them to older, bigger boys.

He studied it intently, noting that the paint work had been marked. "It's scratched..."

"It used to belong to another little boy. That was his name."

"What does it say?"

"Timmy."

"That's like my name."

She supposed it was. Ticky's name was Thomas, but somewhere along the way, it turned into Ticky. It sounded a bit like Becky, but so did Ricky and Vicky. It wouldn't be fair not to foster some poor kid just because his name was a painful reminder...

"Was he *your* little boy?"

"No love—somebody else's."

Ticky pushed the car. It rolled across the breakfast bar, then came to a stop. As he picked it up he said, “Why was he here?”

“He was like you – he just came to stay while his mum sorted herself out a bit.”

That egg would be hard as a rock by now. She took it out of the pan and popped it into an egg-cup shaped like a basket. A kitten appeared to be carrying the basket, and on the other side, a duckling was hiding from the kitten. If awards were handed out for the most tasteless piece of kitchen crockery imaginable, it would win hands down, but every little girl she’d ever fostered had loved that egg cup. Boys preferred the sailor holding a drum. The egg rested in the drum, and the boys liked to smash its head in.

Ticky preferred the kitten. He’d had enough of seeing heads smashed in. He dipped a toasted soldier into the yolk, but his mind was elsewhere.

“Haven’t you got any children of your own?”

“Only in heaven.”

“Do they come and see you?”

“No love.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think it’s allowed...”

“That isn’t very kind of baby Jesus...”

A lot of things weren’t very kind of baby Jesus in Anne’s opinion.

Ticky played with the egg, making every mouthful last a lifetime. The longer he could make it last, the more he could put off having to go to school. In the end, she took his plate. “Come on,” she said, “or we’ll be late.” Then she gave his hair a final brush, and popped his coat on.

# 11

The beige wool had had its day, but it would have to see her through another winter. Likewise, the skirt was one that Anne had had for years. At least it still fitted. She was still the same size waist as she was at 30, and there weren't many women who could say that. She didn't wear much make up. Just a dab of mascara and a lick of lipstick. The biggest difference these days was her hair. The strawberry blonde had faded to salt and pepper.

As they stepped out of the house, the sudden cold prompted her to put the fur lined hood up on Ticky's Parka. He looked like a little Eskimo in that Parka. "Are you warm enough?"

He nodded, and searched for her hand with mittened fingers, and as he wrapped his hand in hers, he said, "Mummy Anne..."

She knew what was coming.

"You *will* come and get me?"

His wide brown eyes were as fearful as they were trusting.

"Yes," she assured him.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

They set off down the road together. It was nothing but fields when she was Ticky's age. Now the fields were gone, and in their place, an estate. The houses were still fairly new when she moved in. The gardens were small to begin with, but some of the neighbours had made them even smaller by building a conservatory.

The house next door to hers was owned by a property investor. You had to admire him really. He couldn't be older than thirty and this was the fourth house he'd bought in the space of six months. The length of the grass, and the poverty of the curtains marked it out as a rental property aimed at what estate agents described as 'the lower end of the market'.

A woman with a little boy came out of the house a few seconds before Anne and Ticky. She and her partner had moved in over the summer, but so far, Anne hadn't met her. It wasn't for want of trying. The day she'd moved in, Anne had knocked on the door and the woman's partner answered.. His head was a mass of scars. The sleeves had been torn from the old denim jacket – all the better to exhibit his tattoos. His belly hung a fraction over his jeans. Small, feral eyes that weighed her up as if expecting trouble. "I'm your next-door-neighbour," she said. "I just wanted to welcome you to the neighbourhood."

Behind him, the hall disappeared into darkness. Without taking his eyes off her, he shouted, "Kath," but Kath didn't come.

"Kath!" he yelled again, but still she didn't come.

"She must be in the bog," he said, and because there wasn't a lot she could say to that, Anne went away.

A week or so later, she saw the boy playing in the tip that passed for their garden. He was digging a hole with a fork. She stood at the fence and watched him. "Digging for anything special?"

"Ammo," he replied, by which she assumed he must mean ammunition.

"You might do better digging in the borders. The soil's a bit softer there."

"What's a border?"

Small wonder he didn't know. In a well kept garden, it was easy enough to see where the lawn ended and the borders began, but in this one, it was impossible to tell. "The bits round the edges."

He ignored the advice, and settled for digging his fork into a clump of dandelion leaves. Once he'd got it free, he used the fork like a catapult and flicked the clump at the fence. It hit the panels with a satisfying thud, and Kath called him in. Anne didn't actually *see* her. She just heard her shouting "Ryan!", so if not for the fact that she'd just walked out of the house, she wouldn't have known who she was. Her clothes were loose and shapeless, but even so, she could see that she was thin. She walked along with her head down, almost as if she was trying not to draw attention to herself, her face hidden by a sheet of mousy hair.

She walked very slowly, and Ryan ran on ahead. He wasn't really old enough to be allowed to run on by himself, but she didn't call him back, and as Anne fell into step with her she said, "The road can get quite busy at this time of morning."

Kath didn't call him back. She just kept her head down, and in the end, Anne was the one who called out to him. "Ryan, *stay there!*"

As was so often the case when an adult a child didn't know told them to do something, he obeyed, but he wouldn't obey for long. Anne reckoned she had roughly 20 seconds to get hold of him and physically prevent him from running down the road. She marched up to him, and grabbed the hood of his Duffel coat. "You're going to get run over if you're not careful."

"I can't see no cars..."

"No... and they can't see you, either," said Anne. "That's how kids get killed."

He wriggled, but she wouldn't let go. "Mum!" he shouted.

Kath had reached them by then.

“Tell this woman...” said Ryan.

Tell me what? Anne wondered. Anyone would think I was assaulting him.

“You’d best let him go,” said Kath. “Ryan don’t like people grabbing him.”

Anne didn’t see what choice she had but to do as Kath had asked, and Ryan reacted much as she’d thought he might. He tried to shoot off down the road, but Anne was an old hand at this particular game. He hadn’t so much as put one foot in front of the other before she’d grabbed his hood again, and this time, when he appealed to his mother, she hung onto him regardless.

“I’ve got a pair of baby reins in my pocket. Do I have to put them on, or are you going to do as you’re told?”

The threat of being attached to a pair of baby reins pulled him up short. She doubted he actually knew what they were, but the word *baby* had terrified him almost more than if she’d pulled a gun on him. The last thing a boy of 7 wanted was to be seen to be treated like a baby. But that didn’t stop him from calling her bluff. He thought it through, and he reached a conclusion:

“Bet you haven’t got none,” he said.

He was right. She wasn’t in the habit of carrying baby reins around in her bag. Fortunately, Ticky came to her rescue. He winced as if to say, *I wouldn’t bank on it mate!* and Anne made the most of the moment by saying, “Oh *haven’t I!*”

She used one hand to keep a grip on Ryan, and dipped the other into her pocket. As she did so, Ryan tried to wriggle out of his coat, but it was just that bit too small, so he was stuck. Anne gave his hood a bit of a rattle as if to imply that the next thing she’d be rattling were his

teeth. “Are you going to do as you’re told, or do I have to clip the reins on?”

He wouldn’t commit himself one way or the other, but he went a bit limp, and Anne’s book, going limp amounted to submission.

Kath, who’d said nothing while this was going on, now said, “He’s a bit of a bugger is Ryan.”

What child wouldn’t be if they got away with it? Anne made him walk beside her, but she warned him that if he put one step out of line, there’d be no second chances. He’d walk down the road clipped to a pair of baby reins, and everyone would laugh at him. He wasn’t sure whether to believe her, but he wasn’t about to risk it. Besides, he’d noticed Ticky, and he was now more interested in him than in running down the road to antagonise his mother.

Ticky walked next to Kath as good as gold. “How are you settling in?” said Anne.

“All right,” she mumbled.

It was a start, though not much of one. “Takes a while,” said Anne, then nodding down at Ryan, I added, “How about you?”

“I don’t live wi’ me mum,” he said, and immediately, Kath said, “Ryan!” She jerked her head up as she said it, and it was immediately obvious that this business of walking with her head down had some purpose to it. Her cheekbone was swollen. She’d dabbed a bit of make-up on it, but nothing short of theatrical paint was going to cover a bruise the size of a fist.

“That looks nasty.”

“Yeah,” said Kath, and gingerly she raised her hand to touch it.

“How did you do it?”

She'd obviously thought about what she was going to say if anyone asked her. "I was carrying a box upstairs and I tripped, and banged my face on the banister."

Ryan grassed her. "No she never. Baldy belted her one!"

"Ryan!" said Kath. Turning to Anne, she said, "We had a bit of an argument," and when Anne didn't comment, she added, "Don't tell anyone – if it gets round, I might lose Ryan."

It took a moment for Anne to realise that this could only mean Ryan wasn't currently living with her. That would explain why she'd only ever seen him once.

"I got took off her," he said.

"Ryan, *shut it!*" said Kath.

Anne was amused. What was the point in trying to keep anything private with kids around?

"Baldy broke my arm," he added, and Kath reacted instantly by clipping him round the ear. Ryan was clearly accustomed to being clipped. He shrugged it off as if to imply that if you couldn't do the time, you shouldn't do the crime.

Kath said, "It was an accident," but Ryan wasn't having that.

"No it wasn't. He done it on purpose. He said if I scratched *Bugger off Baldy* on his car, he'd bleedin' kill me!"

Bugger off Baldy was a complex sentence for a boy of 7. Anne was impressed. Clearly, Baldy wasn't. And neither was his mother.

"Speak when you're spoke to *you!*"

"It bloody hurt an' all."

She liked this kid. He had guts. Just as well, because if even half of what she'd just heard was true, he was going to need them.

"What did you tell the hospital?"

"She never took me," said Ryan.

Kath didn't try to deny it, and Anne added, "Didn't you realise it was broken?"

"I thought it *might be*," she admitted, "Cos it isn't like Ryan to cry..."

Anne could imagine it wasn't like Ryan to cry. He'd have to have been in agony before he'd have given Baldy the satisfaction.

"But Phil wouldn't let me take him to the hospital. Kept telling me it was just a sprain, and to keep him off school, but it didn't get better, and I couldn't keep him off for weeks, could I... so I sent him back."

Anne could guess what had happened next. The school would have got Ryan down to A & E. Hospital staff would have alerted the police, and the police would have alerted Social Services. She knew the ropes.

"The next thing I know, there's a copper and a woman from Social Services at the door. Social said I couldn't have him back unless me and Phil went to parenting classes."

Fat lot of good *that* was likely to do, thought Anne. Not that she had anything against parenting classes, but an eight week course on how to make your child stand in the naughty corner wasn't about to effect a miraculous cure for male violence.

"Where's Ryan living at the moment?"

"Mam's got him," said Kath. "But can't really cope with him. She's got her hands full already."

Given that Kath was obviously still quite young, Anne thought it highly probable that her mother was, herself, still young enough to have kids of her own to look after. The last thing she would want was the added responsibility of a 7 year old grandson who was verging on out of control. "Aren't you worried that Phil might hurt him again?"

Kath seemed to take offence at the suggestion. "Like I said, it was an accident," so Anne moved onto what she hoped would prove to be

less contentious territory. The way Ryan was dressed, coupled with the fact that it was half past eight in the morning implied that he was on his way to school. “Well at least you’ve got him with you at the moment.”

“Only for the weekend,” said Kath. “He’s spending the day at St. Oswald’s, just to see how he gets on like...”

That gave Anne a grasp of the current state of play. Once a woman reached the point of feeling she could care for her child properly again, there began a process of trying things out. She’d have her child for a long weekend, and maybe take them to whichever school they’d be going to if they went back to live with her.

“Do you know it?”

Anne replied, “That’s the school that Ticky goes to. It’s my old school, as a matter of fact.”

“You must have lived round here all your life then?”

“Not all of it. I lived in Manchester for a while.”

“What brought you back?”

Anne replied that she’d returned to take care of her mother-in-law, and left it at that. She and Graham weren’t married to one another any more. By rights, he ought to have been the one looking after Maureen, but she didn’t tell her *that*, either.

Kath was more interested in how Ryan was going to get on at his new school than in any problems Anne might have. “I’m worried he won’t like it.”

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t. It’s a good little school. Most of the kids seem happy enough.”

That cheered her up a bit. The news that a child would attend a good school could often make the difference between Social Services deciding to give the mother another chance, or leaving the child where they were.

“What if he doesn’t, or what if they don’t like him?”

She obviously wanted him, because she’d got herself into a state about the possibility that she might not get him back. As to whether she would or not was anybody’s guess. “No point worrying about things before they’ve happened,” she replied, though who was *she* to talk? Never a day went by without her worrying about what might be waiting round the corner.

“Which school does he go to at the moment?”

Kath told her. The name meant nothing to Anne. It wasn’t local.

“It’s in Wakefield,” Kath explained, and then she added, “Yorkshire.”

Anne didn’t need to be told where Wakefield was. The man who murdered Becky served the latter part of his sentence at Wakefield. He’d recently been transferred to the Arndale Unit.

She’d always known, of course, that the day would come when he would be released, and it wasn’t that she wanted to see him kept inside for the rest of his life for the sake of it – it was just that, on the day he was sentenced, he issued a threat from the dock. *When I get out, I’ll find you, and I’ll kill you.*

She could only assume that the Parole Board was satisfied that he no longer presented a threat to her or to anyone else, otherwise they wouldn’t have released him, but they sometimes got things wrong. When they did, they apologised for having made a gross error of judgement, but apologies weren’t much use to the people they’d murdered.

“Is that where you’re from,” she said. “Wakefield?”

“Yes.”

“What brought you to Warrington?”

“Phil,” said Kath, and because Anne had yet to see him leave the house of a morning, she didn’t bother to ask if he was working. Men like Phil didn’t work if they could help it.

“Have you got family there?”

“Two brothers, and a sister.”

“You must miss them.

Kath replied, “It’s my mum I miss the most. I didn’t realise how much I relied on her.... she was always there to talk to.” Before Anne could make the obvious suggestion, she added, “Phil doesn’t like me phoning her. It runs the bill up...”

“Your mum could phone you...”

“Not when Phil’s there,” said Kath, and then, “They don’t get on.”

Anne could imagine that Phil would make a point of ‘not getting on’ with anyone who had any influence over her. Some men had a habit of putting as much distance between their partner and the people who loved them as possible. It gave them control.

They crossed the road at the top of Birchwood Drive and followed the line of a dry stone wall that separated a close of executive homes from the rest of the estate. Anne could remember a time when that dry stone wall surrounded a convent. When the estate was built, the convent was torn down along with the magnificent trees that surrounded it. The developer had felled them on the excuse that that they were so old, it wouldn’t have been safe to leave them standing. The truth of it was, they would have dwarfed his houses. You didn’t stand much chance of convincing prospective purchasers that the houses were large when the surrounding trees made them look as though they belonged in Lilliput.

The executive homes were detached, the gardens neatly tended. And the names of the various cul-de-sacs meant something to Anne. She knew ‘Meadow View’ when it looked out onto Bennet’s field. She

doubted the people who lived there were aware that their houses stood on land that was once the convent graveyard. The developer was careful not to draw attention to the fact because the merest whiff of death could reduce a property's value, as she discovered when 6, Vermillion Crescent went on the market.

"Listen to them two," said Kath. "You'd think they'd known one another all their lives."

"They soon make friends at that age."

"It's easier for them," said Kath, and Anne detected the feeling of isolation common to women whose partners had dragged them away from their roots.

"Yorkshire isn't far..."

"It is when you don't have a car."

An old Ford Escort had arrived on the end of a tow rope the day they moved in. It was currently in pieces on the drive. "Maybe when the car's fixed..."

Kath almost smiled. "That'll be the day..." And then, "It's more of a hobby really, but men need a hobby, don't they, especially when they're not working."

Anne thought back to the fishing rods that had stood in an old umbrella stand at 6, Vermillion Crescent and the golf clubs that had lived in the boot of Graham's car. What had she known about men and their hobbies? Nothing. Nothing at all. It wouldn't have occurred to her to study the clubs and wonder why they showed no sign of wear, and she wouldn't have known that the fishing lines couldn't have supported the weight of the fish that Graham claimed to have caught. He never brought fish home, but that was because he always let them go. He didn't like to kill them. *I couldn't do it Anne... you know what I'm like.*

A strip of land divided Meadow View from St. Oswald's, though at some point, the developer hoped to get planning for houses that he'd so far been refused permission to build. This strip of land with its brook, and the patch of roughened ground was just as it was when Anne was at the school. As they crossed it, Kath said, "Is Ticky your grandson?"

The fact that she'd asked was fair indication that she hadn't got into conversation with any of the neighbours. That would change. Sooner or later, somebody would take her aside and tell her what happened to Becky.

"No," I replied. "I'm fostering him."

What with the possibility that Ryan might end up being fostered if she didn't get him back, Kath was keen to know more about how it worked from the point of view of someone who did a lot of it. "What got you into fostering?"

"I'm not really sure," said Anne, and although that wasn't true, she felt the lie was justified. You didn't tell people you barely knew that you wanted more kids of your own, but your husband wouldn't look at you and wouldn't tell you why. He said it wasn't *her*. He said he still found her attractive. It was just that... he couldn't bring himself to touch her. He didn't know why. And wouldn't entertain the idea of talking to a doctors. Anne had suggested adopting, but he wouldn't entertain the idea of *that*, either, so when she suggested fostering, nobody could have been more surprised than she was when he agreed.

It was the money that swung it. She realised that now. People were paid to foster, and some were motivated by that alone. It wasn't the money that motivated *her*. "I just like kids. Can't imagine life without them, frankly."

"How long do you normally foster them for?"

“It varies. Some stay a day, and others stay months, but it’s rare for them to stay more than a year, and I’d rather they didn’t if I’m honest. Otherwise, it’s a wrench when they have to leave.”

“Why don’t you adopt?”

“I could have done once, but not anymore,” said Anne. “Too old.”

“So they’ll let you foster, but they won’t let you adopt?”

“They like to know you’ve got a reasonable chance of being around to look after them when they’re older,” I explained. “Take Ticky, for instance. By the time Ticky’s 21, I’ll be 59, and it wouldn’t be fair. You can’t ask a kid to take responsibility for an old person just when they’re starting out in life themselves. You have to be there for *them*, not the other way round.”

“I won’t have that problem with Ryan,” said Kath. “By the time he’s 21, I’ll only be 36.”

As soon as she’d said it, she clamped her mouth shut as if wishing she could bite this piece of information back, but it was too late. Embarrassed now, she added, “I was 14 when I fell for him.”

Anne had guessed as much. She didn’t look old enough to have a lad of 7.

“Phil’s not the father,” she added, but Anne had also guessed that as well. Ryan, with his intelligent eyes and his cheeky little grin looked nothing like him.

“Mam went mad when I told her I was pregnant, but once she’d got over the shock, she was all right... I don’t know what I would have done without her to be honest.”

That made Kath one of the lucky ones. Some girls had mothers who helped them, and others didn’t. The ones that didn’t sometimes couldn’t cope. All you could do was try to help the kids, thought Anne. The trouble was, no matter how hard you tried to stop yourself

from getting attached to them, you couldn't help it, and allowing yourself to grow to love a child who was destined to be returned to his biological mother was like handing someone a knife and inviting them to cut your heart out. At the end of the day, the mother could click her fingers and then... he'd be gone. In a few months time, if you asked how he was, you'd be told that it hadn't worked out. You would offer to have the child back, but some 20 year old would tell you it wasn't policy to allow a child to return to its former foster home in case the child and the foster carer formed too great a bond.

Sometimes, she wondered what planet these people were on.

The school came into view, a barn shaped building that once had a corridor running its length. At some point, the classrooms had been extended into the corridor, and what was once the church was now the hall. When they reached the gates, Kath said, "I don't suppose you could do me a favour?"

"Depends what it is."

"You couldn't take Ryan in for me?"

Anne wasn't surprised she'd asked. She wouldn't have wanted the teachers to see her face.

"Do you know who's class he's in?"

"Mrs. Coakley's."

Anne didn't have much choice but to agree. No sooner had Kath asked her than she was telling Ryan she'd see him after school. The process of transferring responsibility onto somebody else had taken her less than thirty seconds, if that. Kath then left her to it, and as Ryan watched his mother walking away, Anne said, "You okay?"

"Yeah," said Ryan, but although his tone of voice implied that he was accustomed to his mother dumping him off on people, his face told a different story.

“Got any money for break?”

“No.”

She gave him some. It wasn't much, but would buy him a Wagon Wheel if he got desperate. She wondered what arrangements Kath had made over school dinners. Still, the school secretary could sort that one out.

Children began forming lines in the playground. Ticky ran to join them, taking Ryan with him and introducing him to some of the others. Anne called to him, and he waved, and she couldn't help but feel it was a step forward. Even a couple of weeks ago, Ticky would have clung to her to the last. It used to upset her to see just how distressed he could get when the moment of parting came. It was understandable. Parting involved an element of risk, and up until recently, Ticky hadn't been prepared to take that risk. Each time she returned to collect him from school, he grew to trust her just that little bit more.

One day, he would have to trust other people. The teachers, the friends that he was slowly learning how to make. Ultimately, he would have to learn to trust whoever he fell in love with. That would be the most difficult thing of all, for a man who had learned as a boy that he couldn't trust his own mother would find it difficult to trust *anyone*.

# 12

In terms of layout, the houses in Grosvenor Road were similar in design to those in Vermilion Crescent, but Anne felt ashamed that in all the years she lived there, she'd never managed to grow anything beyond a few geraniums whereas up until late, Graham's mother, Maureen, had managed to coax a world of colour out of a few feet of miserable soil.

She walked round the back to a door that should have been locked, and through a tiny kitchen with its ancient Electrolux cooker and cupboards that were coming away from the walls. Nothing had been done to that kitchen in years. It was still as was when she was 17, and Graham was in his final year at Bristol.

The first time she saw this kitchen, Graham was at the sink, his rugby boots on the drainer, a tin of Dubbin beside them. The back door was open, but Anne had been too shy of him to knock on it. It took him a while to notice she was there, and when he did, she said, "Is your mother in?"

Graham called his mother, and Maureen came into the kitchen. When she saw Anne, she said, "Hello love."

Graham was surprised that Maureen knew her, but then again, he didn't know that for the past six weeks, Anne had been making herself useful to Maureen by collecting bags of jumble for St. Oswald's summer fete. "I just came round with these," she said, and she thrust two plastic bags full of jumble towards her.

Maureen took them from her, then opened the kitchen door a little bit wider. "Get the kettle on Graham," she said, and Graham got the kettle

on. “You remember Anne,” she said, and Graham replied that as a matter of fact, he didn’t.

“You were at school together.”

That would have been eight years ago when Graham was 11 and Anne was nearly 9. How could he be expected to remember? And anyway, he’d gone off to grammar school in Liverpool, whereas she’d been sent to the local secondary modern. Not that Graham said these things, but then, he didn’t have to. Anne could imagine him thinking them, and that was bad enough. He gave her a look of such total disinterest it brought the colour rushing to her face. She liked him. She couldn’t help it. And she couldn’t help but show it. Graham must have been used to it. All the girls were after him, and if, to quote her dad, the length of his hair made him look like ‘a nancy’, he more than made up for it by the fact that he was now at Bristol University. It meant he had ‘prospects’. Anne, however, wasn’t half so interested in his ‘prospects’ as in the way his hair just touched the back of his collar.

She was suddenly conscious of how plain she was. It wasn’t just that her dad wouldn’t let her wear make-up. It was her clothes. Mini skirts were in fashion, but her father wouldn’t have let her out of the house in one, so her hem came well below the knee. Her shoes had a bit of a heel, but they were the shoes she wore to work, and a lad would have had to have had X-ray vision to know that her chunky sweater hid a nice little figure.

“Anne works at Broadbents,” said Maureen, and Anne had squirmed with embarrassment. To someone of Maureen’s generation, working in an up-market shop that sold ladies lingerie was a big step up from working at Woolworths. Still, the point of it was that she was working.

It marked her out as having passed the stage of being a schoolgirl. Maureen had thought that Graham might be impressed.

“But she wants to be a teacher, don’t you love.”

What Anne wanted, and what she was capable of achieving were two different things. She would in fact have liked to have been a teacher. She’d written to Padgate College for the prospectus. It only confirmed what she already knew – that Grade 1 CSEs weren’t really equivalent to an ‘O’ Level and that the teachers who told you different were lying through their teeth. They wouldn’t get you into a teacher training college. She wanted to go to Night School, but her father wouldn’t hear of it. Was the point in educating girls? And anyway, he wasn’t having her wandering around Orford all hours. Protective, her mother called it, as if that excused him never taking his eyes off her for so much as two seconds.

Maureen poked inside the bag of jumble. She pulled a few things out and nodded her approval when a couple of the garments looked as though they still had a bit of wear in them.

“Kettle’s boiling, Graham.”

Graham made tea for them, and coffee for himself. Anne had thought it was one of the most sophisticated things she’d ever seen somebody do. He didn’t just shove instant into a mug and add boiling water. He took out a packet of coffee beans, ground them, then filtered the coffee. But he didn’t ask if she’d have preferred it to tea. He could have offered her poison, and she’d have drunk it.

Maureen stuffed the garments back in the bags. “Are you out tonight?”

Graham replied that he was.

“Where are you off to?”

He mentioned the name of a pub. Maureen disapproved of pubs, but Graham was nearly 20. There wasn't a lot she could say other than, "You'll want a shirt."

Graham took the coffee up to his bedroom, leaving Anne with Maureen to drink her tea. Anne could hardly wait to escape and once she got outside, she burst into tears of embarrassment. What must he have thought of her? And all that talk about Broadbents. Didn't Maureen realise how *embarrassed* she was.

She didn't live that far from Graham Slater. You wouldn't have thought that two people who lived less than a mile from one another, who spoke the same language, who came from similar backgrounds, could almost inhabit different planets. That was how she felt. Graham belonged to one world. She to another. He probably had a girlfriend at university. Why would he be interested in somebody like her? And yet, instead of going home, she'd gone to Warrington market to buy herself a pair of false eye-lashes, some midnight blue eye shadow, and pale pink, glossy lipstick. The rest of her wages had gone on that little pink skirt, though even as she was buying it, she was wondering how she was ever going to get it past her father. There was no use telling him 'everybody' was wearing skirts like that, because he wouldn't have cared what 'everybody' was wearing. He wouldn't have let her out of the house in a skirt like that. So when she went out that night, she was dressed in a skirt that she must have worn a dozen times before, along with a polo-necked sweater. She presented herself for inspection with the word's, "I'm off."

"Where to?"

"One of the girls from work is having a party."

Her dad glanced up from the telly, his eyes flicking over her and settling on a pair of white boots.

“What have got on your feet?”

Her mother tried to enlighten him. “That’s the fashion, Jim.”

Anne thought he was about to forbid her to wear them. She was saved by the length of her skirt and the fact that she was wearing hardly any make-up.

“Make sure you’re back by ten thirty,” he said, and Anne just nodded agreement.

Forty minutes later, she was in the pub that Graham had mentioned. She didn’t go near the bar. The Landlord wouldn’t have served her if she had. She looked what she was – a girl of 17 dressed in fairly frumpy clothes. The pub began to fill. But it wasn’t until she saw Graham that she slipped into the Ladies and wriggled out of the clothes she’d left the house in. Underneath them, she wore little pink skirt and a halter necked top. Then she pulled a comb, clips and hairspray out of the bag and teased her toffee blond hair into a beehive.

She folded her clothes and wrapped them in her coat. Then she walked out of the Ladies and went to sit within sight of Graham Slater. He looked at her once or twice, and she could see he thought he knew her from somewhere. He just couldn’t place her, that’s all. And then he placed her. He came over. “Anne?” he said.

She couldn’t even smile at him. Her nerves had got the better of her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for someone.”

He didn’t ask who, but he asked if she’d like a drink. She wanted a Britvic Orange, but she thought he’d laugh if she asked for one, so she asked for a port and lemon. It was the only drink she knew of, and only then because her mother used to ‘treat herself’ come Christmas.

Women who drank were one of her father's bug-bears. A sherry or a port and lemon now and again – that was acceptable. Anything more was akin to advertising your services according to her father.

Graham bought it for her, but he didn't sit with her. He was with his mates, and she was left to wait for the mystery 'someone'.

After an hour or so, he noticed she was still there, and she was still on her own. She'd finished the port and lemon. She wanted another. He bought it. "Looks to me as though you've been stood up," he said.

"I was waiting for a girl from work," said Anne.

"What... dressed like that?"

His eyes slid over her as if seeing her for the first time. It wasn't from him that Becky had inherited those long, slender legs.

He walked her home. And that was the start of it all. That was the start of him sneaking her into the house at Grosvenor Road when Reg was on shift and Maureen was out of the way. *Wear that skirt for me Anne... like you promised.*

\* \* \*

Maureen heard her walking into the kitchen. Her voice was muffled by the wall that divided it from the living room. "Is that you?" she shouted.

Who else would it be, thought Anne. "Yes," she shouted back.

Dishes from last night's supper had been left on a sideboard – a plate, and a few bits of cutlery. But nothing to suggest that Maureen had eaten.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Cornflakes."

Anne checked there was milk left. She also checked the pantry and the bread bin and made a list of things to get from the shop. The cupboard was full of tinned food. Soup and semolina. One small can

of fruit cocktail. Still, it was better than nothing. No point buying apples or anything else that Maureen couldn't bite. Bananas were all she could manage, but she didn't like bananas. Later, *Meals on Wheels* would bring her lunch.

The kitchen led to a room in which the carpet had worn to the underlay in places. The ceiling was Anaglypta, the wallpaper painted over to hide that the pattern had faded. Some of the family treasures were still on show – a delicate china service in a glass-fronted cabinet. The clock that was given to Reg when he retired. A photo of Grandma Beattie, dead this 40 years, watching over the family with eyes that seemed to follow you round the room.

Maureen sat in the armchair, her feet in front of an old electric fire. The colour had gone from her hair in recent years. When Becky was alive, her hair was auburn. Now it was almost white, and she wasn't as good on her pins as she'd have you believe.

“I was getting worried.”

“I can't think why. It's only half past nine.”

“*Hours* I've been sitting here.”

She probably had, thought Anne. Sleeping through was a thing of the past for Maureen. A cat nap here and there, irrespective of whether it was day or night. And the hours in between, she sat in that chair with a copy of the TV Times on her lap and her bandaged legs closer to the electric fire than was advisable. “You'll get chilblains again.”

“Least of my problems,” said Maureen, who pointed to bandages that had loosened since the nurse last came to check them. “I need my legs done again.”

The ulcers had wept yellow fluid into the gamgee. It turned Anne sick to touch them, but somebody had to do it, and as she knelt at

Maureen's feet to tackle the filthy dressings, Maureen said, "How's that little lad of yours?"

"He's coming on."

"When are you going to bring him to see his Aunty Maureen?"

"I could bring him over for tea if you like, after school..."

"Lovely little lad," she said. "What's his name again?"

"Thomas," said Anne, for if she'd said 'Ticky', Maureen might think she'd said 'Becky'.

"I thought his name was Stephen?"

Stephen had gone back to his mother a good few months ago now. But what would be the point in putting her right?

She washed her hands in the bathroom. One of the taps was left dripping. It didn't need a washer. It was just that Maureen couldn't turn it off. The hands that were once so strong had lost their strength of late. But Anne could remember a time when those hands had held the world together. *You've got to eat...*

Graham's old bedroom faced opposite, just off the landing. Anne glanced inside as if expecting to find that something about it had changed. But the room was no different – a bed, a bookcase, and a wardrobe – a Warrington Rugby League scarf spilling out of the bottom like somebody's guts.

It was cold in a way that only a house that didn't have central heating *could* be cold, but once, it had been a sanctuary of sorts, and that was where Crozier had found her when he came to say that Craig had been asking after her. "His case worker phoned the station."

"Sheena?"

Crozier couldn't remember what her name was. "She wondered whether there was any chance you could go and see him?"

"When?"

“The sooner the better really. He’s not settling in.”

She didn’t want to go. It wasn’t that she didn’t care how Craig was settling it, it was more that she couldn’t face leaving the house. She hadn’t set foot outside it since the day of Becky’s murder, and she imagined there’d be reporters waiting to ask her questions. *It’s been two weeks since your husband’s car was found at Dunham Massey but the police haven’t found him. Do you think he’s dead, Mrs. Slater?*

Anne didn’t know what to think. The lake wasn’t wide, and the lake wasn’t deep, and the water that flowed to and from it wasn’t swift. If Graham was in that lake, they’d have found him by now. That was Maureen’s argument, and there was no point asking Maureen what she thought Graham was playing at. Maureen didn’t know, but the difference was, Maureen didn’t care. Graham was her son. There was no question of him having disappeared to avoid being questioned about Becky’s murder. It wasn’t a subject that Maureen wouldn’t discuss. Graham wasn’t *well*, that’s all. The shock of Becky’s death had been too much for him. She didn’t trouble herself to consider where he might be or how he was managing to survive without drawing any money from his bank accounts. Those were minor details in Maureen’s book.

Anne had shown her the photo that Crozier found in Graham’s jacket. She’d expected Maureen to be shocked by it, but all she said was, “Who did the dog belong to?”

“Nobody. It was just some stray that Craig found on the playing fields.”

Crozier was waiting for her answer. Would she, or wouldn’t she, go and see him, and Anne said, “I don’t feel up to leaving the house, to be honest.”

“You’re going to have to leave the house at some point, and it’ll make Becky’s funeral all the worse if that’s the first time you have to face people.”

She wasn’t aware that the Coroner had released Becky’s body for burial. Maureen hadn’t told her, and neither had she told her that the only thing preventing her from making funeral arrangements was Graham not being there. She wanted it put on hold until he was found.

“At least, if you go to see Craig, it’ll give you something positive to do, and I’ll be with you – not while you talk to him – not unless you want me to be, but I’ll be around in the background in case you need me.”

“How would I get there?”

“I’ll take you.”

“How will I get back?”

“I’ll wait,” said Crozier.

“I can’t face it. People, I mean. All talking and staring...”

“There’s nobody outside,” he reassured her. “And there won’t be anybody at Silver Street either. Nobody knows you’re going, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

# 13

It was a strange experience to leave that house for the first time in two weeks. The world had tilted on its axis, but nobody had bothered to mention it to the neighbours. Everything looked the same. Same houses. Same curtains at the windows. None of the reporters that Anne had thought would be there. Just Crozier's car looking slightly in need of a wash.

They turned out of Grosvenor Road and almost immediately came to Kingsway North. The toyshop on the corner reminded Anne that Craig had a birthday coming up. Not that you could say it was imminent. He wouldn't be 13 for another few months, but what with the way things were, she might not see him again for quite some time. "Can we stop," she said. "I want to buy him something."

Crozier pulled over, and Anne went into the shop. Its walls were shelved and the shelves were stacked with models. Anne picked out a motorbike. It had already been constructed, but it needed painting, and she knew he'd enjoy doing that. At £4.99 it was expensive, but buying it took the edge of some of the guilt she felt at him being back at Silver Street when she'd promised him she'd never send him back. She asked for it to be wrapped, and then she left the shop with it, shielding it from the rain that had started up again.

"What did you buy him?" said Crozier.

"A motorbike," said Anne, "though thinking about it, I'm wondering whether it wouldn't have been better to buy him one that

he had to make before he painted it. I'm not even sure he's got paints. Maybe I should have bought him some?"

"They're bound to have paints at Silver Street."

"Not enamels though..."

"Let me know, and I'll see to it that somebody drops some off."

"That's good of you."

"No bother," said Crozier, who added, "You're obviously very fond of him."

"He's a lovely kid," she said. "They all are. Most of them anyway. Some are bit of a handful."

"How many have you fostered?"

She'd lost count. Over the years, children had come and gone. Some stayed days and some stayed weeks or months.

"What about Craig?" said Crozier.

"He came last February

"So that's what... 8 months?" said Crozier.

"Nine," said Anne.

"He must be part of the family by now."

"We love him like our own," said Anne, and it wasn't until she said it that she realised that wasn't true. If Craig had been their own, he wouldn't be at Silver Street. He'd be where he belonged – with her, and Graham.

"What's he like at school?" said Crozier.

"Like in what way?"

"Does he get on with other kids?"

"Same as most kids, he gets on with some, and not with others."

"What about his schoolwork?"

"He doesn't do badly considering the number of times he's had to move schools," said Anne. Sometimes, she felt guilty – not just for

Craig, but for every kid who'd never had a chance. It didn't matter whether a kid had ability or not. If they didn't come from a stable background, they weren't going to do as well as the kids who did. It wasn't fair, and she sometimes thought she shouldn't have let Becky take the place she was offered at Loreto. But as Graham said, the world was full of kids who didn't even have enough to eat. What were people supposed to do, starve their own kids in a show of solidarity?

“Can't be easy fostering as well as working full time..”

“We need the money,” she replied. “I wouldn't be doing it if we didn't. I'd rather be at home, and I think the kids would prefer it. Neither of them likes school dinners. Becky doesn't have much choice, but Craig could come home if not for the fact that there's nobody in the house.”

“So he takes school dinners as well...”

“No,” said Anne. “I pack him a lunch. I feel a bit guilty about it...”

“You shouldn't... I'll bet you give him enough to feed an army.”

“At least he eats it nowadays...”

“I take it he didn't always...”

“He used to give his sandwiches to Spicer.”

“Spicer?” said Crozier.

“Spicer was the dog Becky was playing with in that photograph,” said Anne.

Crozier recalled the photograph that was found in Graham's jacket and he was immediately interested.

“So Spicer was the family dog?”

“Not exactly,” said Anne. “Craig found him on the playing fields.”

“When was this?”

“Last June.”

You could see he was mostly Collie. His coat was tan, but the ruff round his neck was white, and the long thin nose and thin white stripe down his face was a bit of a giveaway. Anne had grown to like him. He was such a lovely looking dog. Intelligent too. It was as though he knew his future with the family depended on him winning Graham over, and whenever he saw him, he'd crawl towards him, his belly on the ground, dragging himself along by his two front paws. If Graham bent down, he'd lick his face all over. But try as he might, he couldn't lick his way into Graham's heart. “Graham wouldn't have it,” she said. “He was crawling with lice for a start... and his coat was all matted...I wasn't about to put him in the family bath, though I did shake lice powder on him. It didn't get rid of them all, but at least it stopped him scratching himself raw.”

“And he just hung around?” said Crozier.

“Well he would, wouldn't he – what with Craig feeding him.”

Crozier hadn't noticed any sign of a dog at Vermillion Crescent. “What happened to him?”

“Craig started bringing him into the house and hiding him under his bed at night. Graham caught him. It prompted him to do something about finding him a home.”

“That must have been hard for Craig.”

“Hard for Becky as well. She was all for us keeping him, but Graham wouldn't have it.”

Becky knew her dad well enough to know there was no point trying to persuade him once he'd made his mind up, so she gave it up in the end, but Craig didn't:

*What'll happen to him?*

*The RSPCA will find him a home.*

Craig wasn't having any of that. "And what if they *can't*?" He knew very well what could happen. "They'll put him to sleep."

"They won't," said Graham. "He can't be more than a year old, and they don't do that to youngsters. Anyway, he's a lovely dog – there's every chance someone'll take a shine to him."

"And what if they *don't*?" said Craig.

Anne had wanted to promise that they'd phone the RSPCA every day, just to make sure that they didn't put him down. But the RSPCA didn't have infinite resources. What if there came a day when they said that unless somebody took him within the next 24 hours, they'd have to put him to sleep so that another dog could have a chance? It would have put her and Graham in an impossible situation. They would have had no choice but to take Spicer back.

She and Graham had talked it through when Becky and Craig were in bed. "Maybe we should keep him?"

"Don't be bloody stupid Anne, we *can't* have a dog... we're both at work all day."

"Craig will take responsibility... you've seen how he is with him."

"And what if he loses interest?"

"He won't," said Anne. "And if he does... I'll do the looking after."

"You've got enough on your plate, and I can't do it... I'm away from home three nights a week, and let's face it," said Graham. "Craig won't be allowed to take it with him when he goes, and neither of us are dog lovers. We won't want to be stuck with it, will we?"

"He doesn't have to move on though, does he. We could..."

"No, we *couldn't*..."

"But..."

"Once he's 16, he's on his own so far as Social is concerned."

“I hope you’re not saying the money matters more than Craig...”

“You know I’m not,” said Graham. But he was. That was *exactly* what he was saying. “It isn’t that simple,” he said, and nobody could deny he had a point. They were paid for every foster child they took, and although they didn’t do it for the money, the fact of the matter was, the money *was* important. Mulholland’s was in trouble. A short while from now, Graham might not have a job. She was working full time just to help make ends meet. If they’d had the resources, they wouldn’t have thought twice about supporting Craig until such time as he could stand on his own two feet, but as things stood, they didn’t even know where they were going to find the money to see Becky through university. That wouldn’t be for another few years, but you had to plan for these things. It was rumoured grants were under threat, and even if they weren’t, a grant alone wouldn’t keep her. With Craig gone, they could foster another child and be paid for doing it, and the extra money would solve the problem of how to finance Becky. Even then, things would be tight, so there wouldn’t be money to spare for a child who – and these were Graham’s words, not hers – wasn’t even *theirs*.

When she broke the news to Craig that Spicer would have to go, he couldn’t have taken it worse. But once he’d got over the initial upset, she managed to persuade him to help her write an advert. They placed it in *The Manchester Evening News*. WANTED: LOVING HOME, FOR FRIENDLY YOUNG DOG. HOUSETRAINED. GOOD WITH CHILDREN. It put her in mind of the ads that were sometimes placed by Social. EVER THOUGHT OF FOSTERING? ELLEN IS A NERVOUS, BUT FRIENDLY GIRL WHO LONGS TO BE WITH A FAMILY BY CHRISTMAS.

Graham dealt with the callers. There weren’t that many. Some were clearly unsuitable. They wanted to know if Spicer would be any

good as a guard dog. Graham told them Spicer would be more likely to lick an intruder to death than bite them. But when a couple from Statham offered to let Craig see where Spicer would be living, they knew they'd struck gold. Pete and Maggie Renshaw lived on a country lane. There were fields at the back of the house. They had a boy of 11, and a couple of months ago, they'd had to have their old dog put to sleep. They'd been in two minds as to whether to get a puppy, but their other dog had come from a rescue centre when he was about a year old, and they wanted another just like him, so could they please see Spicer?

Graham had said they were welcome, but that he and Anne would like to see where Spicer would be living before they could come to a decision as to who should have him.

"Absolutely," said Maggie.

"No problem at all," said Pete.

She couldn't remember whose idea it was that they should take Craig, but that weekend, Becky went somewhere with the school, so she, Graham and Craig went to the Renshaws with Spicer in the back of the car.

Getting him into the car had been one thing. Keeping him under control while he was in it was another. They didn't have a dog guard, so Craig had put a collar on Spicer, who wasn't used to collars, and spent almost the entire journey trying to get it off. He couldn't manage it, so in the end, he'd taken to chewing the lead. He didn't stop until Graham drew up at the gates of Crab Orchard Cottage. It stood in a couple of acres, with woodland at the back, and what must formerly have been a byre had been converted into stables.

A boy of around Craig's age was grooming a pony – a pretty strawberry roan – in front of the stables. When he saw them, he

stopped and came running over. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Seb.” Anne gave Craig a nudge. “Say hello,” she said, and Craig said, “Hi.” He sounded sullen, and Graham gave him a look as if to say he was to mind his p’s and q’s.

Craig bent down to Spicer and took him off the lead. Anne wasn’t sure that was a good idea because he went straight off like a bullet, and Craig flashed Seb a look that said, *When your mum sees what a handful he can be, she won’t let you have him.*

Seb said, “I’ll go get my mum, and he ran into the house, with Spicer nearly bowling him over en-route.

Moments later, Maggie Renshaw came out of Crab Orchard Cottage. She was of medium height, and her thick dark hair was a mass of natural looking curls. She smiled, and there was something very fresh about that smile, a *genuine* smile, was what Maureen would have called it. You couldn’t help but like her. “You must be Anne and Graham, and that must be Spicer.” She nodded towards the ball of energy that was hurtling round the paddock. Spicer came over, and she let him sniff her hand. He licked it, and wagged his tail, and then he started yipping.

“Mum, he’s just like Bobbins,” said Seb, and Maggie laughed. “He is a bit,” she agreed, and then she explained that ‘Bobbins’ was the name of their last dog. “He was a pure bred collie,” she said. “You know what they can be like.”

Anne wasn’t all that well up on dogs, but if Bobbins was anything like Spicer, she could see where he got the name. Bobbins was a word that came from the mills. The bobbin was what shot to and from under the machines, carrying the threads at the speed of light. So Bobbins was what you called someone if they couldn’t sit still. Spicer couldn’t sit still. Not for the life of him. Off he went again, running

round the paddock, and Seb went running after him, but Craig just stood and watched.

“Come in the house,” said Maggie. “Pete’s just in the loft.”

Anne and Graham followed her into the house. Craig stayed outside, and Anne had half an eye on him as Spicer went to investigate what Seb was holding out to him. It was a biscuit. He took it, and crunched it, then used those lovely eyes of his to plead for another. Seb produced another. “Spicer,” called Craig, but Spicer was more interested in the biscuits.

Crab Orchard Cottage, with its low beamed ceilings and its inglenook fireplace was stuffed with the clutter of family life. If you weren’t stepping over the saddle that leaned against a table leg, you were stepping over a basket of laundry. Cups and mugs and dishes cluttered the sink. Socks hung down from a wooden rack strung over a solid fuel Rayburn. Maggie put the kettle on – an iron affair that went straight down on to one of the Rayburn’s hotplates and threatened to take an hour or more to boil. Anne didn’t mind. She could have stayed there forever. There was something homely about Crab Orchard Cottage. It felt... what did it feel? When she identified what it was, it came as a shock to discover that she was so unfamiliar with the feeling as to have to search for its name. But the cottage felt... happy. The Renshaws were *happy*. Seb was a *happy* little boy, and you didn’t come across genuine, uncomplicated happiness all that often. It therefore stood to reason that Spicer would be happy, and she caught a look from Graham as if to say that this was the best possible home for him. The basket in front of the Rayburn used to belong to Bobbins. The bedding had been washed as if in readiness for the newest member of the family. Here, in this kitchen, Spicer would be warm and fed and *safe*. When his energy got the better of him, he

would have acres and acres to run round, just outside the door. It was nowhere near a road. Not a main road at any rate. And Seb was getting on with him something famous. To look at them through the window as Anne was doing now was a sheer pleasure. You'd think they'd been together, boy and dog, their entire lives.

Graham was talking to Maggie's husband, Pete. He was dressed in overalls but you could see he wasn't the type to wear them as a rule. He had his own business in Manchester. Something to do with home computers which he seemed to think would be the next big thing. For the past few years, his company had been supplying offices with word processors. Out went the old electric typewriters, the IBM Golfs and suchlike, and in came Wangs and Nexus. "Mark my words," he said. "It won't be long before everyone has a computer in the home."

Anne couldn't see it herself, but Graham could, and she marvelled, not for the first time, at Graham's gift for making people feel as if they were the most interesting, most important person on the planet, though it wasn't so much a gift as a skill, for people could learn how to do it. Her Majesty the Queen did it all the time. She had to, and so did Graham, for they were both of them in sales in a manner of speaking.

Maggie was asking her questions about Spicer, or rather, she was trying to find out why they didn't want him.

"It isn't so much that we don't want him," said Anne. "It's more that we can't cope with a dog at the moment, what with me and Graham working, and Becky and Craig at school."

Maggie said precisely what *she'd* said to Graham when she was pleading Spicer's case. "Surely Craig could care for him. After all, it sounds to me as though he's been doing that already..."

Anne now had to admit the truth of the matter. “Craig’s fostered,” she explained. “If....” And by ‘if’, she meant ‘when’ “...he moves on, he won’t be able to take Spicer with him, and Becky wouldn’t want to have to take him on. Not really. She likes the idea of having a dog, but only so long as somebody else is doing the looking after, and like I say, me and Graham have got enough on our plates.”

When she learned what the situation was, Maggie was reassured. She’d been a bit concerned in case Spicer had behavioural problems. “I wouldn’t want to find we couldn’t cope,” she said. “It would be terrible to promise him a home then move him on in a couple of months.”

It was the same with kids. People needed to know what they were taking on, but half the time, they didn’t. Either they weren’t told, or the severity of the problem was played down, or nobody ensured that they really understood what sort of problems lay ahead. Months down the road, the new found family would say they couldn’t cope, and the child would be returned to a place like Silver Street. And every time it happened, the child was damaged just that little bit more.

Pete and Graham had gone outside to see what the boys were up to. Anne and Maggie joined them. Seb was brushing the mud off his pony’s legs with Craig looking on, his hand on Spicer’s collar.

“Y’ll look after ‘im, won’t yer?”

“Course we will,” said Seb. “And you can come and see him whenever you like.”

As a further act of generosity, Seb said, “Want a go on Pom?” Craig didn’t know who he meant by ‘Pom’, but it turned out his pony was called Powder Monkey, and that this was what he’d abbreviated his name to.

“Don’t know how to ride,” said Craig.

“I could show you,” said Seb, but his mother looked vaguely uneasy.

“Do you think that’s wise?” she said. “You know how naughty Pom can be.”

“Bucking isn’t naughty. Not when he doesn’t mean to get you off. He just gets excited, don’t you Pom...” Spicer broke free from Craig – or did Craig let him go? Anne wasn’t entirely sure that she didn’t see him loosen his grip on the collar. Either way, Spicer started barking and ran round the back of Pom, but you could see the pony didn’t mind dogs at all. “He’s used to hounds,” said Seb.

He reached out for Spicer, but Spicer darted off and Seb went running after him. Spicer waited at one point for Seb to catch him up, then off they went together, dog and boy. It was lovely to see. Anne glanced at Graham and knew he was thinking exactly the same thing she was. *We couldn’t have found him a better home than this.*

As Seb and Spicer got further away, Craig called out “Spicer, here boy, here boy Spicer... here boy...”

Just for one brief moment, the dog looked back. Then Seb disappeared into woodland, and Spicer went bounding after him.

“They’ve gone off down the dingle,” said Maggie, but she didn’t seem alarmed. “It’s very safe,” she added. “Just a lovely woodland walk. He’ll love it down there. Lots of rabbits to chase.”

“Can I go?” said Craig, and Graham said, “We’d best be getting back.”

“But I want to say goodbye.”

“You don’t need to,” said Graham. “You heard Seb... he said you can come and see him whenever you like.”

“But how will I get here?”

“Come on, jump in the car,” said Graham, and he and Peter Renshaw shook hands. “If ever I need a computer I’ll know where to come...”

“And if ever I need double glazing...”

Craig started kicking up at that point. *Spicer’s mine!* It got a bit embarrassing to be honest. These were such nice people, and suddenly, Craig was effing and blinding and showing them up... She was thankful she’d had the opportunity to explain to Maggie Renshaw he was fostered. She wouldn’t have wanted her thinking he’d been brought up to use language like that! Graham had to grab hold of him in the end and physically drag him to the car. He as good as threw him in the back, then pointed a finger at the window as if to say *you just dare to try to get out of there mate!* But Craig was still shouting. Even with the doors closed you could hear him. “We’d best get him home,” said Graham.

The Renshaws were as embarrassed as they were. They didn’t know what to say. They stood at the gate and they waved as Graham drove the car away with Craig thumping the windows and kicking the back of his seat. Then half way down the road, Craig called Graham something that caused him to stop the car and pull him out the back. They stood at the side of the road, with Anne begging him not to belt him, “Graham... don’t... not here... we’ll sort it at home... Graham... please...he’s just upset... there are people... please... not here...”

“What did you call me?” said Graham.

Craig replied, “I didn’t call you nothin’.”

Graham didn’t just smack him. He laid into him. Then he threw him back in the car, he didn’t start the engine. Not straight away. He was so angry, he didn’t trust himself to drive. He just sat there, his

hands shaking on the wheel, and after a moment, he turned to Craig and said, “Now you listen to me. I know you’re upset about Spicer, and I’m sorry, but I’m not putting up with that sort of behaviour.” He brought his finger and thumb together so that there was an eighth of an inch airspace between them and said, “I’m this close....*just this close*... to phoning Silver Street, and sending you back. Understood?”

Craig just gave a nod. He understood all right.

“And as for your language ... if you ever call me a *cunt* again, I’ll rip your bloody tongue out!”

Anne was in tears by now. They’d thought that if they took Craig to see where Spicer was going to be living, it would make him easier in his mind about letting him go, but it had turned out to be one of the few, serious mistakes they’d ever made with a foster child. In effect, they’d asked him to give his dog to a boy of much the same age as himself, a boy who had a home, and parents who loved him. Craig didn’t have a home or parents of his own, or a pony for that matter. Not that he wanted one. All he wanted was Spicer. It wasn’t a lot to ask.

He started to cry, and Graham softened then. “All right,” he said. “It’s over now. Let’s all put it behind us and move on...” But Craig was inconsolable, not just then, but for weeks after. *What’s up with Craig?* said Becky. And when she found out it was something to do with Spicer, she did her best to be extra specially nice to him. Becky being extra specially nice would have got round most people, but it didn’t get round Craig. Nothing got round Craig. He wouldn’t eat, he wouldn’t sleep, and he wouldn’t do his homework, so what with one thing and another, Anne wished to God he’d never set eyes on that dog. It had brought nothing but grief on the whole family.

# 14

Silver Street had taken its name from the road it was in. The house was two old semi's knocked through into one. If you weren't aware that it was a home run by the Local Authority, you'd never know to look at it, but that was the idea. Gone were the days of sprawling institutions, and in their place, houses like this, and each of them home to several children in care.

"How long do you think you'll be?" said Crozier.

"Not long," said Anne. "I just want to give him the present, and explain."

"In that case, I'll wait," said Crozier.

Anne left him waiting in the car, and minutes later, a woman who didn't look old enough to take responsibility for the children in her care was showing her into a room with lilac walls. There was nothing to sit on other than a couple of orange bean bags dumped on a Marmoleum floor that failed to resemble the carpet it was intended to imitate.

Craig had ignored the bean bags. He stood at one of two windows. It looked out onto a climbing frame where children of a similar age to him were keeping the younger one's off by the roughness of their game. It was less than a day and a half since she'd last seen him, but already, he seemed smaller than she remembered, as though he'd shrunk into himself. "Craig," she said, and he turned from the window. Anne made a move towards him with the intention of giving him a hug, but he turned away from her.

“Where’s Uncle Graham?”

Funny that he should call her Mum, but refer to Graham as ‘uncle’. All the kids did it. It wasn’t just Craig. They didn’t feel comfortable calling Graham ‘dad’, and because he wouldn’t have wanted them to call him ‘Mr. Slater’ he asked them to call him Graham. Some of them did, but most of them settled for ‘uncle’.

“He couldn’t come,” said Anne, and before he could ask her why, she rooted in her bag. “But he sent you this....”

The model was gift-wrapped. Craig took it and pulled the wrapping off.

“It’s *Slippery Sam*,” he said, and for a moment – but *only* a moment – his face lit up.

““You asked for it for your birthday... remember?”

“But that’s not for another few months,” said Craig, and then the look on his face, for suddenly, he realised that she and Graham had thought they’d better give it to him now in case he wasn’t with them on his birthday.

“I don’t like it here...”

“I know you don’t...”

“Can I come home with you?”

“I’m staying with Maureen,” she said. “There isn’t room...”

“There’s the box room...”

He had her there, so all she could say to that was, “It just isn’t possible...”

“Why?”

“Because it’s Maureen’s house...”

“You could ask her...”

“Craig...”

“She likes me... I know that she likes me... and I could do things... I’ll wash the dishes and stuff... and I could do the garden....she’s always saying she hates to do the weeding...I could weed it...”

“It isn’t that Maureen doesn’t like you. It’s just... the situation.”

Craig didn’t know what she meant by ‘the situation’. “Becky’s dead,” he said. “Me being left here isn’t going to bring her back, is it!”

He was just a kid. How could he be expected to understand that when people lost their child, life didn’t go on as normal. And anyway, he was right. Him being left at Silver Street wouldn’t bring Becky back. But it wasn’t the point. Even if Maureen had no objection, the fact of it was, Anne didn’t think she could cope with him at the moment. “I’m sorry Craig, it just isn’t possible...”

Craig hurled the model at the wall. It smashed into the skirting board, and one of the wheels was left spinning on the forks. There was no rider. Probably just as well, thought Anne. Who could survive such an outburst from the Gods?

# 15

It wasn't until she climbed back into the car with Crozier that she gave in to the tears that she hadn't wanted to cry in front of Craig.

"I take it that didn't go as well as you'd hoped?"

"He wanted to come back to Maureen's, but I had to say no..."

"Is there absolutely no way you could have him?"

"I couldn't cope with him. Not at the moment."

"Maybe, in time, it'll be possible for you and Graham to have him back?"

"I don't think that's likely," she admitted. "Even if this hadn't happened... to Becky, I mean... Craig would probably have ended up back to Silver Street in the not too distant future."

"Why?" said Crozier, and reluctantly, she admitted there were financial considerations. "Foster parents are paid for every child they foster," she explained. "Once they hit 16, kids in care are on their own so far as Social Services are concerned, and we couldn't afford to see him through college – always assuming he goes."

"What if he got a job?" said Crozier.

"What use would that be?"

"It'd help," said Crozier, and Anne pointed out that an unskilled lad of 16 would come out with a quarter of what foster parents were paid, and she and Graham wouldn't have wanted to take his wages. "Graham just thought it would be less....*complicated*...if he moved on. And anyway... it wasn't just the money. If that was all it was, I

might have talked Graham round. But then his dad turned up on the doorstep one night, and that pretty much sealed his fate...”

This was the first that Crozier had heard of Craig’s biological father turning up. “When was this?”

“A couple of months ago.”

Becky was up in her bedroom. Anne was getting Craig ready for bed. She poured him a glass of milk, and handed it to him saying, “I’ll be along in a minute.”

“It isn’t even 10 o’clock,” he protested.

“School tomorrow,” she reminded him.

“Back at Silver Street, we stayed up until way after midnight, even if it was school...”

That wasn’t true, and she knew it for a fact. “Tell you what, I’ll read you a story.”

“Stories are for kids.”

“In that case, you can turn the light out and go to sleep.”

That had done the trick. It wasn’t long before Craig was in bed, and Anne was trying to decide what to read to him. The book she eventually chose was a bit young for him to be honest, but kids from Craig’s sort of background tended to have missed out on some of the books that younger children would have been introduced to as a matter of course and she made a point of reading this particular book to every child she fostered.

“What’s it about?”

“A rabbit.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance it gets run over?”

“No,” said Anne. “It doesn’t get run over. The boy who owns it loves it so much, it turns real.”

Craig pretended to vomit.

“Do you want to be read it, or don’t you.”

“Go on then,” said Craig, “if you must.”

The book was *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which lived in a nursery full of wonderful toys. The rabbit badly wanted the other toys to accept him for what he was, but he was rejected on the grounds that he was stuffed with sawdust whereas they had mechanical parts. Indeed, they were so clever, and so expensive, and so obviously admired that they thought of themselves as real. They wouldn’t play with the rabbit, but he did at least have an ally in the Skin Horse, who told him that ‘real’ wasn’t how toys were made, but were what they became when somebody loved them.

When Anne reached the sentence that began with, ‘What is real?’ the doorbell rang. It was a bit late for visitors, but Mrs. Jessop sometimes called if she needed a hand with something.

Graham answered the door. She heard him talking to someone, so she carried on, thinking that whoever it was, he’d see to them. But within seconds, the talking had escalated into shouting, and Craig said, “That’s my dad...”

He sounded alarmed, and that made Anne uneasy. In all the years of fostering, she and Graham had never had somebody’s father turn up on the doorstep, and from what she could hear, he didn’t sound too happy.

She shut the book and put it down on the bed. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she told him. She closed his bedroom door on her way out because she didn’t want him hearing any unpleasantness, but by the time she was half way down the stairs, Craig’s father was trying to push his way into the house. Even if Craig hadn’t told her who he was, she would have known. She’d thought Craig looked like Graham, but once she’d seen Brannah, she realised it was only a passing resemblance by comparison.

“Craig’s in bed,” said Graham.

“Well you’ll have to get him up then.”

Becky heard the commotion. She crept out onto the landing alongside Anne. Her hair hung to her waist in a tousled mass, and the sight of her succeeded where Graham had failed. It stopped Brannah dead.

“Dad,” she said. “Is everything all right?”

It wasn’t often Graham spoke to her abruptly. “Becky... get back in your bedroom.”

She went.

Brannah went on, “All I want you to do is bring him to the door a minute so that I can see he’s okay.”

It didn’t sound unreasonable to Anne. In his position, she would have wanted the same, so she suggested a deal.

“If we bring Craig to the door, and if we let you talk to him for a minute, will you leave it at that?”

Brannah didn’t answer, but Anne got the impression he’d agreed to it. She went back up to Craig’s bedroom. Craig had pulled the duvet over his head. Anne drew it back, and when she saw how scared he looked, she had second thoughts about asking him to come down. But Brannah appeared to have given up trying to barge his way in for the moment, so she said, “Your dad’s at the door. “He wants to say hello...”

“Tell him I don’t want to see him.”

“He just wants a very quick word...and then he’ll go.”

In the end, reluctantly, Craig got out of bed. Anne made him slip his dressing gown on, then he crept down the stairs in her wake. He stood behind her as Brannah asked him questions.

“You okay son?”

Craig wouldn't answer.

"They treatin' you okay?"

And still he wouldn't answer.

"Come on, let me see you proper," said Brannah, and Anne stepped aside a fraction so that Brannah could take a good look at him, but when he tried to touch him, Craig shrank away.

"You're not scared of your own dad are yer?"

It was blindingly obvious that Craig was frightened to death of him, so Graham acted accordingly.

"Right," he said. "You've seen him now, and you've spoken to him, so..." He didn't finish the sentence with *fuck off*, but then, he didn't have to.

Brannah gave him a look that said that at any other time, and in any other circumstances, he would have made an issue of it. For now, however, he merely directed his only comment at Craig. "You're still my lad," he said, and then he walked off.

\* \* \*

The car was drawing close to Grosvenor Road. Another half mile, and she'd be back in the room that was once Graham's bedroom. She shouldn't have left it in the first place. She shouldn't have gone to see Craig, and she didn't want to talk about him anymore. Crozier, however, had other ideas. "Where did Brannah go when he left the house?"

"I've no idea."

"I thought you might know where he lived, that's all..."

"I wouldn't have a clue," said Anne. "He's recently come out of prison though... that much I *do* know."

Crozier was immediately interested. "What was he inside for?"

Again, she didn't know. "Whatever it was, he did four years for it."

Four years was a long enough sentence. It put him out of the petty criminal league. All the more reason not to want him turning up on the doorstep.

“Haven’t Social Services told you what he was sent down for?”

“Social don’t reveal more than they need to about the reasons for a child being placed in care.

“They must have given you *some* idea?”

“No,” said Anne. “They don’t give that kind of information. They say it would be an infringement of the child’s right to privacy.”

“Seems a bit irresponsible to me.”

“You can see their point,” said Anne. “Kids are often judged by who their parents are.”

Crozier could accept all that, but he still thought people had the right to know *something* about the background of the child they were fostering.

“Was that the final straw then – his dad turning up on the doorstep?”

“No,” said Anne. “The final straw was a letter from Social warning us that he was applying for supervised access.”

“And if he’d got it, what would that have meant?”

“It would have meant us complying with whatever the court ordered,” said Anne.

She’d spoken to Social Services in the hope that they’d tell her not to worry about it, but they hadn’t exactly given her the reassurance she’d been looking for. Craig’s dad was, after all, *married* to his mother at the time of her death. That gave him parental rights, and provided Craig agreed to it, nobody could *stop* him from seeing his son.

“Graham did his nut when I told him that.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Crozier, but Crozier didn’t know the half of it, thought Anne. Graham had said that if *that* was how it was going to be, then Craig would have to go. He wasn’t prepared to put up with having his dad in their lives, and that was what it would amount to. Some bloody do-gooder would see to it that he got supervised access, and who would be doing the supervising? Not Social bloody Services, that was for sure! They’d have expected *them* to let him into their home on a regular basis. Either that, or they’d have made them trail all over Manchester to sit in some bloody *Roadside Chef* while he had his weekly chat with Craig. Graham wasn’t having it. *You can just get on to Social and tell them to find someone else to foster him...*

\* \* \*

The room that was gradually becoming Maureen’s universe was directly below Graham’s bedroom. Maureen shouted up at her through the floorboards: “What are you doing up there?”

She went back down to an agitated Maureen.

“I thought you’d gone...”

“Well as you can see, I haven’t.”

“You were that quiet...”

“Just checking that all was in order.”

“Why shouldn’t it be?”

“You left one of the taps dripping again.”

“It needs a washer.”

What was the point in telling her it didn’t. She’d only argue.

“I’ve finished them books you got me.”

“I’ll get them changed,” said Anne, though truth to tell, there weren’t that many to choose from. Libraries didn’t stock as much fiction as they used to, and although there were still a fair few books in large

print, Maureen had read most of them. Not that it mattered. Her memory wasn't what it was. At worst, she merely said the story sounded familiar, not realising it was a book she'd read before. Anne envied her that. *What she wouldn't give to lose her memory.*

“Is there anything else you need?”

“More tablets,” said Maureen.

“I'll nip to the Chemists...”

“And bacon...”

“You know you can't chew it...”

“I'll suck it then...”

Anne said she'd get her some bacon.

“Smokey bacon mind, and none of that streaky stuff...”

“I'll see what I can do...”

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# 16

As Crozier slammed the phone down on Gilbolton, Jean eyed him warily.

“I take it that didn’t go very well.”

“Let’s just say I didn’t get the reassurance I was hoping for,” said Crozier.

“What did he say?”

“Some claptrap about redemption and forgiveness,” said Crozier, who grabbed his coat off the back of a kitchen chair. “I might as well head off,” he added, though he needn’t have left for the station as early as this. But he wasn’t in the best of moods, and Jean would probably be glad to have him out of the way while she packed various odds and ends into boxes. She needn’t be doing it in Crozier’s opinion, but Jean was a terror for watching the property programmes. They all said the same. Get rid of the clutter. Paint the house white. Make it a blank canvass so that prospective purchasers could put their mark on it.

Crozier didn’t want somebody else putting their mark on his three bed semi. Crozier didn’t want to move at all, but love and marriage didn’t go together like the proverbial horse and carriage. The trouble was, whoever wrote the song couldn’t find a word to rhyme with compromise.

The weather was turning cold again. The minute he thought it, Crozier felt a chill that wasn’t entirely due to the drop in temperature. He was going to turn into the kind of bloke who sat in the pub, moaning about the weather and reminiscing about the cases he’d worked on.

*When I was a Detective Inspector with Greater Manchester...*

Sometimes, you came across people who'd retired from the Force, and they *did* reminisce, especially if they'd worked on a murder case that was in the public eye. Becky's case had been in the public eye, but it wasn't what you'd call 'high-profile'. Not to begin with. It wasn't until it became obvious that there was more to it than people first realised that the press became more interested.

As Crozier had anticipated, it hadn't taken long for the press to get wind of the fact that Graham was missing. The press were constrained by laws that prevented them from suggesting that perhaps he'd killed his daughter and done a runner. Therefore, the press had gone quiet, but they hadn't gone away. They were just waiting for a new development, and it came when Hoskins took a call from someone called Whittle. He taught at the school, and he took the lads for PE. He, himself, had had a call from one of the other boy's mothers – a woman called Sally Mundy, who lived in Wilmot Avenue, just around the corner from the Slaters.

The houses in Wilmot Avenue weren't as big as those in Vermillion Crescent. Their gardens were smaller, and backed onto Fairbrother Road. Both ran at right-angles to the playing fields and like most of the kids who went to Wilfred Pickering, Sally's son Michael often took a short cut over the embankment. None of the mothers liked it. The track wasn't used, so it wasn't that it was dangerous, it was just the general wear and tear on the school uniforms. Clothes didn't grow on trees. They had to be paid for. And sometimes, they had to be washed more than was necessary because the kids who did it got themselves covered in mud. Michael was *banned* from going anywhere near that embankment, and he was also *banned* from

playing football in his school uniform. If he wanted to play football, fair enough, but he could change into his football kit.

The day that Becky was murdered, he'd brought his football kit home soaking wet. Sally stuck it in the washing machine while she got the dinner on, and later, when she and Michael were eating in the narrow kitchen diner, she asked if he knew the girl who'd been murdered. Michael said he did, but not to speak to – only by sight. He knew her brother better. Her *foster* brother, that is, and Sally had asked what his name was. Michael said 'Craig Brannah'.

That was as far as it went until Sally pulled the football kit out of the washing machine. There were name tags sewn into the collar of the shirt, and the waistband of the shorts. "You brought the wrong football kit home," she said. "This belongs to Craig."

"Where's mine then?"

"You tell me," said Sally, and she told him he'd better find it.

A couple of weeks went by, and Michael hadn't found it. "It's probably in Craig's locker," he said, and that presented a problem. Craig hadn't been back to school since Becky was murdered. If it was in Craig's locker, then the only person likely to have a key was the PE Teacher, Mr. Whittle.

In the end, she phoned the school, and explained the situation. *If Michael's kit is soaking wet, I don't want it left rotting in a locker... kits cost money you know, and I wouldn't mind, but Michael's kit was nearly new whereas Craig's is on its last legs, so if you wouldn't mind...*

Whittle let her rabbit on, then he promised to find Michael's kit, even if it meant hunting through every locker in the changing room. In the event, he found it easily enough. It was in fact in Craig's locker, but even as he made a mental note to see to it that Michael

took it home the following day, something Michael's mother had said struck him as odd. The more he thought about it, the odder it seemed, and in the end, he decided to tell the police in case it proved significant.

When Hoskins conveyed this piece of information to Crozier, Crozier said, "What makes Whittle think that somebody's son taking the wrong football home might be of interest to us?"

Hoskins replied, "Mrs. Mundy told Whittle that when she put Craig's football kit in the washing machine, it was wet."

"*Was it now,*" said Crozier, and a short time later, he and Hoskins went to the school to speak to David Whittle. They found him in a room that was lined with lockers. He had the physique of man who was probably athletic in his youth. Apathy, and a love of fast food, had added a bit of padding.

The changing rooms stank of chlorine and the lockers to either side were divided by low wooden benches. Whittle rested a foot on one of them as he handed Michael's football kit to Crozier.

"Where was it?" said Crozier.

"In Craig's locker."

"Where's the kit that belongs to Craig?"

Whittle produced a kit that showed signs of wear. There was a tear underneath one of the armpits. Some of the piping was coming away on the shorts. "According to Mrs. Mundy, it was wet when she put it in the wash.

"And you thought that was odd."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Whittle replied, “The day Craig’s sister was murdered, it was raining. I didn’t want to stand around getting piss wet through for an hour, so I took the class into the gym.”

“Then how did Craig’s kit come to be wet?” said Crozier.

“That’s what I was wondering.”

Crozier thought about how significant this was likely to be. “How long did the lesson go on for?”

“Two hours,” said Whittle. “It ended at 12pm.”

“And then what?”

“And then the lads piled into the changing room, stripped out of their kits, showered and got back into their uniforms before going in for lunch.”

“Did you see Craig in the changing room?”

“I’m not in the habit of watching the boys shower, Mr. Crozier. “If I were, I’d find myself out of a job.”

“Is he likely to have gone out onto the playing fields after gym?”

Whittle replied, “I don’t know what the rain was like on the other side of Manchester, but I can tell you what it was like here, and I can also tell you that none of the kids were kicking a football around outside. You couldn’t see your hand in front of your face.”

It was a figure of speech. If Craig had crossed the playing fields, he might have become a rain sodden blur in the distance, but somebody would have seen him. Crozier was certain of that. He pictured him running back, stripping out of the kit, and stuffing it into a locker... not his own locker... but the locker next to it. Maybe he’d done it by mistake, or maybe he didn’t want it found. But surely, if he didn’t want it found, he’d rip out the name tags and get rid of the kit altogether?

Questioning the entire school to find out whether anybody saw him crossing the playing fields would be a long, slow process. Also, it would have to be done in such a way as to ensure that nobody realised what, exactly, the police were trying to find out. There was another option, and that was to talk to Craig.

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# 17

Craig was a minor. Crozier couldn't question him unless there was an adult present to serve his interests. In the circumstances, the person most appropriate was his Social Worker, Sheena. She agreed to meet Crozier at Silver Street, and after leaving Whittle, he went straight there.

Crozier was expecting somebody young, and idealistic. Sheena was in her forties. Sensible face, and sensible shoes and a sensible view of the world. They stood in the room with the lilac walls and waited for Craig to be brought to them by the housemother.

"He's upset," she warned him. "I thought a visit from Anne might do him good, but it seems to have unsettled him."

"I think he thought she'd come to take him home."

Craig refused to leave his room at first. It was only the threat of being taken down to the station that made him agree to speak to Crozier at all.

"He's got his own room at the moment," said Sheena. "Normally, he'd share, but the lad he's supposed to be sharing with did a runner a couple of nights ago, so he's got it to himself."

Whether or not he had a room to himself, it was hardly likely to compare favourably with the bedroom he'd had when he lived with Anne and Graham, thought Crozier. He could well understand why a kid wouldn't want to end up at a place like Silver Street. The locks on the doors and the bars at the windows reminded him of Juvenile Detention Centre, but what could you do. Kids in care were inclined

to run away. Finding them could be difficult, so it was preferable to try to prevent them from running away in the first place.

Craig was brought into the room by the housemother, and Crozier was surprised by how very young he seemed. Granted, lads of 12 came in all different shapes and sizes, but Crozier was accustomed to dealing with those that looked as though they were training for some future heavyweight title. Craig would have made a poor featherweight. He was taller than average for his age, but there wasn't much of him. He looked slightly shell-shocked, as if the events of the past few weeks had left him reeling. Once, he had a home and foster parents who cared for him. Maybe he even deluded himself that they loved him. Now he was back in the very place that Anne had said he dreaded being sent to. Poor bugger, thought Crozier.

Sheena reached for his hand, and Craig held onto it as she said, "This is Mr. Crozier. He's trying to find the man who murdered Becky."

Crozier had discarded his usual plain grey suit in favour of cord trousers and a navy jumper, but even so, Craig treated him to the wary look that kids so often wore when told that the person in front of them was a copper.

"What does he want wi' me?"

"I came to show you something." Crozier reached into a plastic bag and brought out shorts and a sweatshirt. "Recognise this?" he said.

Craig said, "Yeah, it's my football kit."

"Actually," said Crozier. "It isn't. This belongs to a boy called Michael Mundy. We found it in your locker at school."

Craig gave a shrug and said, "Where's mine?"

"Michael took it home to his mum by mistake."

Craig had no idea what to say to that. Was it important? How could he possibly know? So all he said was, “When do I get it back?”

“I’m not sure you will,” said Crozier. “You might not need it again.”

Craig’s reaction was interesting. He was alarmed, but not for the loss of his kit. The alarm had more to do with what lay behind Crozier’s comment, which implied that he would probably never return to Wilfred Pickering. This, in turn, implied that he was unlikely to return to Vermillion Crescent to live with Anne and Graham.

“Mrs. Mundy noticed it had your name tabs sewn in the collar. That’s how she knew it was yours.”

Craig didn’t know what to say to that, so he said nothing. Crozier added:

“It was wet when she pulled it out of the kit bag.”

“So?”

“So I was wondering... how did it come to be wet?”

Craig gave a shrug. “It rained.”

“When?”

“When we played football.”

“Where did you play?” said Crozier, and Craig said, “On the pitch...”

“Which pitch?”

“The playing field,” said Craig, and Crozier said, “You sure about that?”

Alarm bells were beginning to ring for Craig, and yet he said, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“According to Mr. Whittle, you went in the gym.”

Craig looked worried now.

Crozier added, “And I was wondering... how did it come to be wet?”

The seconds ticked by, and Crozier let them tick.

“Dropped it in the showers, didn’t I...”

“Come on Craig,” said Crozier. “You didn’t drop your football kit in the showers...”

Craig looked at Sheena as if hoping she’d say something to get him out of having to answer, but so far, nothing Crozier had said could be construed as unreasonable. All Craig had to do was explain how his kit came to be wet, and then explain how it came to be in Michael Mundy’s locker.

Craig was clearly thinking exactly the same, for he suddenly blurted, “I lost my kit. I borrowed one. Somebody else had mine”

“Who?” said Crozier.

“I don’t know,” said Craig.

“Craig,” said Crozier, solemnly. “You didn’t borrow a kit. You wore your own. So why don’t you tell us how it came to be wet?”

When he realised the silence that followed wasn’t going to go away, Craig repeated, “I don’t know.”

“I do,” said Crozier. “You wore it during football practise, and then, instead of getting changed like all the other lads, you wore it going home.”

“I never...”

“Your kit was soaked through by the time you got back to school and for some reason you stuffed it in Michael Mundy’s locker.”

“I never did!”

Crozier said nothing further for a moment. He didn’t have to. Craig broke down. “I never...” he repeated.

“I think you should stop now,” said Sheena, but Crozier had only just started. “Somebody get him a drink,” he said, and the house mother disappeared to get him a glass of orange while Sheena did her best to calm him down.

By the time the house mother reappeared, Craig was all red eyes, but he'd stopped the crying, and when Crozier asked him again if he'd gone home at lunchtime the day of Becky's murder, he admitted it.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

He shrugged and said, "You'd want to know why I went home."

"Why *did* you go home?" said Crozier.

Craig replied that he'd been going to lag off in the afternoon and go down the Rec. "Mum would have done her nut if I'd ruined my uniform," he said, and Crozier found the fact that he'd called Anne 'Mum' touching, but disconcerting given that she and Graham had no intention of keeping him much longer. He also remembered Anne saying, *Mud all over his shoes...his trousers. I keep telling him not to...* and he suspected that this wouldn't have been the first time Craig had lagged off school to go down the Rec. He made a mental note to look into his attendance record and find out just how much of a habit lagging off school had become.

"You must have known Becky was at home."

"I didn't," said Craig, and Crozier realised that was probably true. Craig was first out of the house that morning and Anne and Graham hadn't agreed that Becky could take the day off school until after he left. He was probably prepared for the fact that Becky *might* be at home, but he wouldn't have known for sure that she would be.

"What would you have done if she was there?"

"I'd have gone back to school."

"Good plan," said Crozier. "But presumably, she *was* there..."

Craig was scrubbing at the floor with the toe of his shoe, but he didn't answer, and in the knowledge that he wouldn't have had a key, Crozier said, "How did you get in?"

He expected Craig to say that he'd used the key from the garage, but Craig said, "The back door was open."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah," said Craig. "Wide open. I could see it from the railway embankment."

Crozier was beginning to get a feeling about this...

"I take it you walked in?"

"Yeah," said Craig, and his voice sounded smaller, and suddenly, very afraid.

"Where was Becky?"

"Upstairs."

"How did you know?"

"She was talking to someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

Crozier tried a different line of approach.

"Was it a man's voice, or a woman's voice?"

"A man's," said Craig, and now his voice was a whisper."

"What were they talking about?"

"Dunno... I couldn't hear them proper could I?"

"Did you recognise the voice?"

"No. Why would I?"

Crozier would have accepted that if Craig hadn't given him such a look as to make him probe deeper. "I don't think you're being entirely honest with me Craig."

He looked a bit choked, and Crozier pressed the advantage. "Who was she talking to?"

"I don't know...."

"Did you hear what they were saying?"

“No...”

“Then why are you frightened?”

“I’m not.”

“I think you are...”

Craig began to cry again, but these weren’t the tears of a boy of 12. These were the tears of a very young child. “She was... she was saying... I’ve had enough of this... I’m telling mum.”

Sheena looked at Crozier as if to say she wanted the chance to talk to Craig before he said anything more, but Crozier took no notice.

“Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

“I didn’t want to get him into trouble,” said Craig.

“Who would you be getting into trouble?”

“Nobody...”

“Craig,” said Crozier. “Who would you be getting into trouble?”

Craig looked the picture of misery. “Uncle Graham.”

## 18

Ticky was one of the last kids out of the school gates. You'd think he'd be the first, but he never was. Anne suspected he could hardly bring himself to leave the security of the classroom for the reality of a world that might bring with it abandonment. And so, he put off the moment. Even when he finally came straggling out, it was as if he hardly dared look.

"Ticky," she called, and then he came running over.

"Hello love... had a good day?"

"I did a picture," said Ticky, and he held it up to show her. It took her a minute to work out what it was. It was a garden of sorts, but the sky above it was black, and stars made from glitter were scattered across it by the bucket load. In the garden below, children were carrying fluorescent flowers and riding wolves.

"My wolf's called Malcolm," said Ticky.

Anne could think of no better name for a wolf.

"He lives in the Antarctical."

Anne discovered a new-found wish to visit the Antarctical.

"Can he come and live with us?"

"Where would he sleep?" said Anne.

"He can sleep in my bedroom."

"I think he'd be too hot my love."

"We could open a window..."

Anne hadn't opened a window since she heard that her daughter's killer was about to be transferred the Arndale.

There was no sign of Kath. “Where’s Ryan?” she said.

“He went home with Baldy.”

Clearly, Baldy was no more keen on the teachers seeing Kath’s face than she was, thought Anne. “You shouldn’t call him Baldy.”

“Ryan does.”

“Well he shouldn’t...”

The weight of the bag she was carrying made her arm ache. As she shifted it from one hand to the other, Ticky said, “What’s in your bag?”

“Books, my love,” said Anne.

“Who are they for?”

“Aunty Maureen.”

“What are they about?”

“Women,” said Anne.

“What kind of women?”

Women who overcame poverty, class, and war to marry the man of their dreams or build a lipstick empire. And it was no use feminists arguing that books like these did more damage than good. Some women needed a bit of fantasy in their life. It wasn’t that they didn’t know the reality. It was more that they didn’t want to have to read about it as well as live it.

They passed the spot where she’d bought the model motorbike for Craig. Once it was a toyshop, but not anymore. When had it gone, that toyshop? When had the window been coated with something that made it impossible for anyone to see who, or what, was inside? Who had allowed the feller who bought it to advertise himself as *The Bookie with Balls*. The world was a different place, and authorities that sanctioned replacing the toyshops of the world with businesses that hid behind plate glass and sniggering names had done their part to change it for the worse.

\* \* \*

Maureen was still sitting in that chair. It was as if she hadn't moved, thought Anne, though of course, she must have at some point. The bandages were back round her ankles again, and when she saw Ticky, she couldn't quite remember who he was. "Hello Stephen, love." And then she saw the painting, and she reached for it, her hands like the roots of a tree. "Is that for me?"

"No... it's for Mummy Anne."

The wolf that was central to the picture was bigger than the rest. If not for the long thin nose and the tail that was unmistakably dog-like, he might have been a lion, for Ticky had given him a mane.

"He's a big dog," said Maureen.

"He isn't a dog, he's a wolf, and he lets me ride him."

"Aren't you frightened he'll eat you?"

"No. He's my friend. He's called Malcolm."

Maureen bit back a smile. "Do all the wolves have names?"

"No," said Ticky. "Just Malcolm."

"And who's the little boy on his own?"

"Ryan," said Ticky. "He's new..."

"He hasn't got a wolf," said Maureen.

"He's got an ice-cream instead."

"So he has," said Maureen.

She looked at the picture for a few moments more, and when she felt she'd made sufficient fuss of it, she told Ticky to put it somewhere where it wouldn't get crumpled.

Ticky just hung onto it as Maureen reached for a bag that she kept by the chair. They didn't make bags like they used to. This one was leather, and shaped like an oversized purse. It didn't have a strap, just an old clasp that had loosened over the years. The bag yawned open as

Maureen reached into it, and drew out a silver envelope. “I won’t see you tomorrow,” she said, “so I’d best give this to you now...” She held it out to Ticky, and before Anne could stop him, he’d taken it from her.

Ticky pulled out a birthday card. A one pound coin had been cellotaped into the centre, and even as he plucked it off the card, he looked puzzled. “Is tomorrow my birthday?”

“No love,” said Anne. “Aunty Maureen gets a bit confused, that’s all.”

Maureen was more than confused. If it wasn’t his birthday tomorrow... then whose was it? It was *somebody’s* birthday. Or was it an anniversary? If so, whose anniversary?

Anne didn’t want her upset, but it would be worse to lie – almost like defiling a sacred memory. “Becky died 15 years ago tomorrow...”

“Becky?” said Ticky.

“Just a little girl we knew...”

Maureen bowed her head. “I don’t know how you put up with me Anne...I really don’t.”

“There’s nothing to put up with...” But this sort of thing was happening more and more. *When will Becky be starting that new school?*

Becky would have been working by now. She would have been married with children. The minute she thought it, she stopped, for what was the use in torturing yourself?

Bumping into her friends. That was the worst. Most of them just pretended not to recognise her, but she was no different. Older, of course, but she hadn’t changed to the extent they had. They bore no resemblance to the gawky girls who had come to the house when Becky was alive. One by one, they’d all grown up. Some of them had children. She could sometimes get them to chat for a minute by asking

who they'd married, and where they were living. But she could see they weren't comfortable with it. *I don't know what to say to you Mrs. Slater...*

She did some soup for Maureen with a couple of slices of bread, and stayed with her while she ate it, then cleared the dishes. This was her life, and it would never change. There once was a time when she wanted it to. Now and again, she still did. A man would come along and show an interest. After all, she wasn't that old. She wasn't unattractive. But she had responsibilities. Self imposed, according to some. *She isn't even your mother, and nobody's forcing you to foster children. Get yourself out... and get yourself a life...*

It wasn't as simple as that. Once you'd shouldered the responsibility for looking after an elderly relative, you were on your own. Most men melted away. Besides, there were compensations. Ticky's face when she turned up at the school to take him home. The calls she got from kids she'd fostered years ago – all of them grown, and with families of their own. *Hello Mummy Anne.*

“Come on you,” she said to Ticky. “Time to get you home.”

\* \* \*

Kingsway North was alive with evening traffic. The worst of it had ebbed to a steady stream, the headlamps lighting their way.

“I forgot my picture...”

“We'll get it tomorrow,” said Anne.

“Tomorrow's Saturday. Mum'll be taking me out.”

Anne sincerely hoped so, not because she wanted a day to herself, but because Ticky's mum was in the habit of letting him down. “Nothing's going to happen to your picture. It'll still be there next time we go...”

“What if Aunty Maureen puts a tea pot on it?”

He had a point there.

The lights were on a timer. They were on by the she got home, but that was the way she liked it. She couldn't bring herself to walk into a dark house, and she checked the doors and windows to make sure none had been broken before she went in. She didn't know which would be more frightening – to find a window broken, or to find the windows intact, but the door unlocked. That would be a sign.

There would be other, more subtle signs. A curtain not quite drawn as it ought to have been. A mug that wasn't where she remembered leaving it. But today, the doors were locked and the windows reflected the houses opposite without fracturing them. The dishes from breakfast were still in the sink. The mug that Anne had left on the drainer was there.

“Off with your coat,” she said, and Ticky slipped out of his Parka.

“Can I watch telly?”

“Yes love... but only for an hour.”

There wasn't much on that was suitable for a lad his age at that time of the evening. Anne found him a video. *Thomas the Tank Engine* ought to have been too young for him, but he loved it, almost as though he was trying to catch up on all the things he'd missed from having a mother whose various boyfriends commandeered the telly for hours on end. If it wasn't football, it was the kind of film that men would have had to have bought under the counter at one time.

The living room was divided from the kitchen by a breakfast bar. A breakfast/diner, they called it. It had been the developer's way of getting around the fact that the houses were too small for a dining room. It was only a miracle there was hall. Some of the houses had doors that opened straight onto the front. Oddly enough, Anne wouldn't have minded one of those, but they'd all been sold by the

time she decided to move back to Warrington. There was something to be said for a house that made it difficult for somebody to hide behind a door.

Of all the domestic tasks, cooking was the one that she enjoyed. There was something creative about it. Even the simplest meal. You didn't need fancy ingredients. Just imagination. So when she put dinner on the table, the cauliflower was orange, and the mashed potato was purple courtesy of vegetable dye. It might have looked strange to some, but if the only food a child had ever eaten was crisps and burgers, you had to make a proper meal look fun before they'd even attempt it. Cutting the veg into interesting shapes and putting little plastic animals on the plate amused them, and it also made them think about where food came from.

"Knife and fork in the other hands," said Anne, and Ticky swapped them over. He struggled to use the knife, and she cut his chop into pieces so he could manage. Still, it wasn't that long since he would have used his fingers. His mother had never taught him how to use a knife and fork. Sitting at a table was another revelation. Meals had come in cartons, and the burgers and chips had been eaten in front of the telly. You wouldn't think that in this day and age, there were kids who'd never eaten a fresh vegetable or a piece of fruit in their life.

No sooner had they started to eat than somebody hammered on the door. There was something aggressive about the way they knocked, and Ticky put his cutlery down. He looked to Anne for reassurance, and she glanced through the living room window and saw Phil. "It's only Ryan's step-dad."

"Baldy?" said Ticky.

"You mustn't call him Baldy."

"Ryan does."

“Well he shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“It isn’t respectful,” said Anne, but then again, it wasn’t exactly respectful to break a child’s arm. Maybe, in the circumstances, Phil had got off lightly. Ryan would have been within his rights to call him a damn sight worse.

He caught her looking at him, and jerked his head towards the door as if to tell her to get on and open it. No sooner had she done so spat the words, “You’ve been onto Social about our Ryan.”

“No I haven’t.”

“Well somebody has.”

If somebody had got on to Social Services, it could only be the school, and if that was the case, then Anne thought she could guess what had happened. Mrs. Coakley must have asked Ryan where he was living. Ryan wasn’t what you’d call a reticent sort of child. Not only would he have told her he was living with his gran, but he would have told her why. *Baldy broke my arm.* Maybe he also told her his mum hadn’t wanted to meet her in case she saw what Baldy had done to her face.

“It wasn’t me,” said Anne, and she hated herself for being so afraid of him.

“If I find out it *was*...” he said, and he didn’t have to finish. Anne knew a threat when she heard one.

Ticky came to the door. He looked afraid, but that didn’t stop Phil from telling him to fuck off back inside. Ticky started crying, and Anne said, “See what you’ve done?”

“I ought to smack you in the mouth,” he said. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t?”

“I’d have you up in court,” said Anne, and she watched him working it out. The police might regard what he’d done to Kath as ‘a domestic’, but he wouldn’t get away with assaulting a neighbour.

“You’re not fucking worth it,” he told her.

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# 19

The station that Crozier was based at stood on the outskirts of Manchester – a monolith of steel and cement with cells beneath the building. But Crozier was up on the topmost floor, watching the lights come on all over the city. In another few months, he would walk out of this building for the last time, and he wasn't fooling himself that he'd be missed. There'd be a bit of a 'do', and people would wish him well. But the world would move on without him. Others would take responsibility for the cases he was working on prior to his retirement. With luck, none of them would relate to the death of a woman called Anne Slater.

Earlier in the day, he'd pulled some information relating to the case out of the archives. It had been some years since he last saw the photo that was taken of Becky as she played with the family dog. There'd also been a photograph of Graham that was used by the press when the police were appealing for anyone with information as to his whereabouts to come forward.

As a result of that photo, Bennet took a call came in from a woman called Freda. She'd been out of the country for a fortnight, visiting her daughter in Geneva. Now she was back, and she'd picked up a copy of *The Manchester Evening News* at the airport. She recognised Graham from his photograph, but his name wasn't Graham Slater – his name was Graham *Salter*. She'd thought it was a printing error at

first. And then she read the article, and she learned that his daughter, Becky, had been murdered.

Freda wasn't aware that Graham had a daughter. It was news to her. It said in the paper that he and his wife lived in Vermillion Crescent, and that was *also* news. If the Graham whose photo was on the front page of the paper was the same man she'd lived two doors away from for the past ten years, then he didn't live in Vermillion Crescent with a wife called Anne. He lived in Cross Street, Hale, with a wife called Dawn.

Slater and Salter were two very similar names, and Hale was close enough to Dunham Massey to be within a half hour walk of where Graham dumped the car. It might, of course, be coincidence, but it was enough of one to ensure that Crozier checked it out himself.

He took Bennet with him, and a short while later, they were standing in front of the door to a terraced house in Hale. The house had new sash windows – double glazed, he noticed. They would have cost a bob or two, and people only usually bothered if they were keen to return the house to its original period spec. But nothing could have prepared him for a room in which the desire to restore the house in its entirety had extended to curtains with tessellated pelmets. It wasn't to Crozier's taste, if he were honest, and neither was Freda. She wore a high-necked blouse, the topmost button hidden by a brooch in which a lock of plaited hair took pride of place. It belonged round the neck of a woman who was tall, thin and austere, and Freda was none of those things. Buxom was an old-fashioned word, but to Crozier's way of thinking, she was an old-fashioned woman. Observant, and particular. The type who spied on the neighbours on the grounds that what people did in real life was infinitely more interesting than anything that happened on Coronation Street.

“I understand you think one of your neighbours might be Graham Slater?”

“I don’t just *think* it,” said Freda. “He’s lived round here for years.”

“When you say he lives round here....”

“Two doors away.”

“She might be mistaken, thought Crozier. “What does he do?”

“He’s a rep.”

That was one coincidence too many for Crozier’s liking, and now came another: “What does he sell?”

“Double glazing.”

\* \* \*

The woman who lived two doors down from Freda looked as though she’d be more at home in Islington than Hale. She would have been about the same age as Anne. Perhaps a year or two older. But two more different women, Crozier couldn’t imagine. Anne was small and slightly overweight. Her clothes looked as though they’d been bought from the sort of catalogue that catered for the cheaper end of the market. This woman was taller, and slimmer, and although she wore jeans and a top, she somehow managed to make them look expensive.

When she saw Crozier and Bennet, she knew they were police, and in a way that suggested that she’d been expecting them, she said, “You’d better come in.”

They followed her into a living room that couldn’t have been more different from the room that Freda had shown them into. The house had been built to an identical design but here, the walls had been knocked through to such an extent that the living room resembled an

installation at the Tate Modern. No lintels, he noticed – not that he could see. And no Graham, either.

“You know why we’re here,” said Crozier.

“I can guess...”

“Where is he?”

She led them upstairs to room in which the light from the large bay window had been shut out by blinds. Crozier could barely make out the figure on the bed. He clicked the light on. The bulb was almost directly above Graham’s head and Graham closed his eyes against the intensity of it. When he opened them, Crozier standing over him.

“Get dressed,” he said.

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## 20

The argument with Phil had upset Ticky. He clung to her, and he wouldn't touch his food. The effort she'd gone to in cutting his vegetables into different shapes and dyeing them different colours was all for nothing. There was no chance now of persuading him to eat them.

She let him play for an hour, then ran him a bath. Ticky liked to be bathed. Not all kids did, but those who didn't often had good reason. They couldn't believe she wasn't about to hold them under freezing water as a punishment for something. Whatever else Cheryl's various boyfriends might have done, at least they'd stopped short of trying to kill him.

She always made sure there were bubbles. Kids went in grubby and came out clean without even knowing they'd been washed. But she used a flannel on their face. No soap. Just water. And careful around the eyes. Then she dressed him in a clean pair of pyjamas, then brushed his teeth, and combed his hair, but when she tried to get him into bed, he wouldn't go.

"Can I sleep with you tonight?"

It wasn't the first time he'd asked, but it had been a while, and she cursed Phil for setting him back a step.

"Just for tonight," she replied, because there were times when a kid needed to feel the kind of security that could only come from lying close to the person they depended on for safety. The night might be dark, and the room might be filled with inexplicable shapes, but so long

as they could bury their head under the arm of somebody who made them feel they were *safe*...

When was the last time *she* felt safe? When she was married to Graham, she supposed. There was something to be said for having a man in the house, for although she'd never deluded herself that he loved her, he was at least *there*. Provided she turned a blind eye, Graham had no reason to disturb the status quo. That was how she'd seen it. It was part of an unspoken deal, the sort of deal wives make when they don't have much option. So when Crozier had turned up at Grosvenor Road to tell her that Graham had been found with another woman, he hadn't got the outburst he expected.

"It isn't news, I take it?"

"Not exactly."

"You could have saved us a lot of trouble," said Crozier.

"I couldn't have told you who she was," said Anne. "I suspected there was someone, but I didn't know *who*. I didn't want to know."

"Do you want to know now?"

"Will it come out in the papers?"

Crozier didn't see how she or Graham could hope to keep something like that from the press. Illicit affairs were meat and drink to the tabloids. Crozier was only surprised the press hadn't found Graham before the he had.

"You'd best tell me then," said Anne, so he told her.

"Dawn."

She smiled.

"You know her then?"

"I wouldn't say I know her, but we've met."

"When?" said Crozier, and the years rolled back, and there she was, walking up Windmill Hill on the outskirts of Bedminster. It was bit of

a slog from the centre of Bristol – not the kind of area that students tended to rent in as a rule. Too far out for most of them. Students liked to be within walking distance of the main campus. You couldn't do that from Windmill Hill, but that was Dawn's choice, apparently. She liked it up there, with its view of the suspension bridge, and Graham had rented one of the rooms to be near her.

The house was nothing special – a mid-terraced, three bed house with bags of rubbish and bikes outside the downstairs bay window. The door needed stripping. Coats of gloss had peeled to reveal the multitude of colours it had been painted over the years – all of them bright. Red gave onto yellow, and the yellow gave onto lilac. No bell, so she knocked, and it was Dawn who opened the door. She wasn't remarkable looking. Not so as you'd notice. But she had a look of confidence about her.

“Does Graham live here?”

“Graham who?”

“Graham Slater.”

The look of confidence evaporated slightly. “Graham isn't in.”

“Can I wait?”

The girl at the door looked uncertain.

“Please,” said Anne. “I've come a long way,” and Dawn let her in. Anne had thought it was kind of her at the time. She wasn't to know that she had a particular reason for wanting to find out who she was and why she was there. “You could wait in my room,” she said, and of course, it wasn't long before she got it out of her as to why she was actually there. She was more shocked than Anne would have thought a girl like Dawn would be, but then, she had good reason. It wasn't just that Anne was expecting a baby out of wedlock, though even as

short a time ago as the late 1970s, that would have been enough in itself. It was the fact that Graham was the father.

“How did he react when you told him you were expecting?” said Crozier.

“Like something trapped,” she replied. “Like something that would chew its leg off rather than stay caught,” and looking back, she could well understand why a lad of 19 might feel like that. “He said he needed time to think things through, and I said, *What’s to think about?* Him *thinking* it about it wasn’t going to stop me from having a baby, was it?”

Tea that she’d made when Crozier arrived was turning from luke warm to cold. Anne gulped down what was left of it, and added, “He asked if I’d told my parents and I told him I hadn’t as yet...I good as begged him to be there when I did, and he said he would... but he said he couldn’t come back with me there and then...he had lectures to go to.”

“So when did he say he’d come back?”

“The following weekend.”

“And did he?”

“What do you think?”

Crozier didn’t tell her what he thought. He didn’t have to.

“I couldn’t phone him. He’d given me a number that didn’t exist. In the end, I wrote to him, but he never replied to the letter, so I went back to Bristol, but they’d moved by then. The students who were renting their rooms said they didn’t know where they’d gone.”

“What did you do?” said Crozier.

“What *could* I do?” said Anne. “I just hoped it would all go away... that’s what girls do when they’re frightened. And before I knew it, a month had gone by, then another...”

And then, one night, she'd walked into the house find her mother and father sitting there, waiting.

"Where have you been all day?"

"Work," she replied, and "Where else did they think she'd been? Wasn't it a week day, and hadn't she left the house at a quarter past eight? Wasn't she wearing the navy skirt and the crisp white blouse that marked her out as having a job at Broadbents?"

Her father said, "One of the men I work with said his wife keeps seeing you sitting in a bus shelter off Wilderspool Causeway."

"When?"

"During the day."

Anne had never quite got the knack of lying, but in a voice that was already beginning to shake, she did her best:

"Why would I be sitting in a bus shelter down Wilderspool Causeway when I ought to be at work?"

"That's what I was wondering, so I phoned Broadbents... and what do you think I was told?"

Anne knew very well what her dad had been told. *But surely you know... your daughter doesn't work here anymore...*

When her father continued, "They told me you left over a month ago," Anne started crying.

"What's going on?" said her father.

Her mother was less abrasive. "Anne, if you lost your job, you should have told us. The thought of you leaving the house of a morning all dressed up for work, and sitting in a bus stop so as to..."

"I didn't lose my job," she said. "I gave my notice."

"*You gave your notice?*"

"People do..."

"Not in this house they don't – not without good reason."

She had good reason, but she couldn't bring herself to tell them what it was.

"Anne," said her mother. "You're not in some sort of...*trouble*?"

She was sobbing now, and that was all it took for her parents to get a grasp of the situation. The rage he was in, she wouldn't have put it past her father to storm down to Bristol. As it was, he stormed down to Grosvenor Road with Anne and her mother in tow. Maureen saw them marching through the gate. She had the door open before her father had the chance to knock on it.

"What's all this?"

"Not on the doorstep," said her dad, and that was enough for Maureen. When a couple brought their daughter to the door and demanded to be allowed in so that the neighbours couldn't hear what was being said, it wasn't difficult to guess what it was about.

She took them into the parlour. "This baby," she said. "It's definitely Graham's?"

Anne had sworn to God, at which point, Maureen phoned him with Anne protesting that it wouldn't do any good – Graham had moved – but of course, he hadn't. And when he was brought to the phone, Maureen came straight out with it:

"Anne just turned up on the doorstep with her parents. I don't suppose you'd have any idea what they had to say to me?"

The silence at the other end spoke volumes. "You'd best come home," said Maureen, and the following day, he was standing in the parlour at Grosvenor Road.

"You'll marry her, Graham?"

"I can't..."

"Can't?" said Maureen. "*Can't*?"

"I don't love her."

Reg looked at Graham as if to say *You bloody fool*, and Graham mumbled something. Maureen didn't catch it.

“Come again?”

“I said I'll pay maintenance,” he repeated, and Anne had thought her dad was going to belt him. She wouldn't have put it past him. Graham was lucky to be standing in his own home with his father present. There wouldn't have been much left of him otherwise.

“If you think I'll stand back while you throw Anne a few bob a week thinking that makes up for leaving her to bring up a child on her own, you're very much mistaken...”

“He married me in church,” she said. “Maureen saw to that. But he never went near me. Our marriage was never... I don't know what the word is...”

“Consummated,” suggested Crozier, gently.

Anne gave a nod. “I love kids Mr. Crozier. I always wanted children. But what with the way things were, it was obvious we'd never have any more after Becky.”

“So you started to foster,” said Crozier.

“That's about the size of it,” she replied.

# 21

Crozier could remember a time when it took fifteen minutes to drive home from the station at Deansgate to the house he and Jean had lived in for over 20 years. Now it took him over forty minutes. Whatever else he missed when he reached retirement, it wouldn't be this – the long slow crawl through traffic at the end of the working day. He'd miss the job though. At least, he'd miss certain aspects of it. One of them was finding out what made people tick. Graham, for instance. He'd taken him back to Deansgate where he questioned him, and one of the first things he asked him was why a bloke who could have done much better for himself had settled for a job selling double glazing.

Crozier had expected a complex answer. In fact, it was simple enough. It was the only job he could think of that would enable him to spend large amounts of time away from home without raising too many eyebrows.

Having met Dawn, Crozier would have thought she could have done better for herself than to choose a man who had a wife and child to support. "You're lucky," he said. "Most women would have ended it when their boyfriend got another girl pregnant and married her."

Graham replied, "It took her a while to get over it, but it's not as though I had any sort of a relationship with Anne. She wore that skirt. I fancied her. I fucked her. She got pregnant. I was trapped."

Crozier replied, "Nobody can force a man to marry a woman he doesn't want to marry."

"You're obviously not a Catholic," said Graham.

“And I suppose you are...”

“It might have been the late 1970s,” said Graham, “But there was no question of me not being made to marry her.”

Difficult to imagine the pressure he would have been under to ‘do the right thing’. Plenty of men had been forced down the aisle in similar circumstances. “You didn’t have to stay married to her though...”

“I didn’t intend to, but I didn’t want to leave until Becky was older.”

“How much older?”

“She only had another four years to go before she went to university. I’d stuck it that long. As long as I had Dawn, I felt I could stick another four years of Anne.”

Magnanimous of you, thought Crozier, and then he felt he wasn’t being fair. What Graham had done was hardly commendable, but it was preferable to him leaving Anne and Becky in the sort of situation most wives and children found themselves in.

“What was the alternative?” said Graham. “To sell the house...force my daughter to live in a flat with her mother. It wasn’t as though I needed the money...”

Money was one thing Crozier would have thought Graham was short of.

“The house belongs to Dawn. I pay my share towards the bills, but essentially, it’s hers. We didn’t need to tear Becky’s life apart.”

“So you play the good husband and father, but essentially, you live with Dawn,” said Crozier.

“Put like that, then yes, I suppose I do.”

There was no ‘suppose’ about it. Crozier had noticed the books, the clothes, and the possessions that indicated whether a man was a

permanent fixture or not. None of those things had been found at Vermillion Crescent.

“Didn’t it occur to you that Anne must suspect?”

“I didn’t much care to be honest. I assumed she knew.”

“Yet she never confronted you.”

“She knew she’d lose me. What she didn’t know was that she was going to lose me anyway. It was just a matter of time.” He paused, then added, “Becky was everything to me. Once she was gone, there was nothing left to stay for.”

“If you don’t mind my saying so, you certainly picked your moment.”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” said Graham, “but after you broke the news, I realised that the fact of her death would make it impossible for me to leave. Not just then, but *ever*. I just couldn’t face having to stick around for the rest of my life, being supportive, and I couldn’t face telling Anne I was leaving, either.”

“So this brilliant idea of dumping the car and making out that you’d chucked yourself in the lake just popped into your head, did it?” said Crozier.

“I thought that in time...”

“What?” said Crozier. “What did you think would happen?”

“I don’t know... that Anne would declare me dead, I suppose... and there’s Life Insurance, she wouldn’t have wanted for anything.”

“And you thought you’d get away with that? Come on Graham – you don’t think insurance companies just pay out when people go missing. And what about the press? You must have read the papers. It can’t be lost on you that half the tabloids are making out you’ve committed suicide and the other half are making out you murdered

your daughter first. That kind of story doesn't just die down... you've only got to look at what happened to Lucan."

"I'm not Lord Lucan..."

"No, but you're a story, and you'd have carried on being a story till somebody found you. Or did you honestly believe you'd never be found?"

"I don't know," said Graham. "I don't really *know* what I thought. It seemed very simple at the time, except..."

"Pretending to be dead is right up there with robbing a bank," said Crozier. "I'm not sure which of them is harder to pull off, but on balance, I'd say you had more chance of walking out of Barclays with half a million stuffed in your back pocket."

Despite his situation, Graham smiled. "The state I was in... the way I was thinking... it didn't seem that difficult when I did it. Just walk away..."

Just walk away, thought Crozier. He wouldn't have been the first to try it. Adults went missing every day of the week. Some were never found and those who weren't were presumed to be dead after they'd been missing seven years. A fair percentage were living as somebody else. Their reasons for doing it varied. It wasn't all that long ago since a former MP had dumped his clothes on a beach in Miami and waded into the water. He was just that bit too famous to stand a reasonable chance of not being found, and Crozier, for one, would have loved to have been a fly on the wall when his wife turned up demanding an explanation. The explanation was simple enough – the prospect of a police investigation into fraudulent business dealings plus a desire to be rid of his wife so that he could marry his secretary had proved too much of a temptation for him.

Crozier took the photograph of Becky out of his pocket and placed it on the table. “Recognise this?”

Graham clearly did. He picked it up.

“Who took it?” said Crozier.

“Anne, I think.”

That was the last thing Crozier had expected and he wasn’t inclined to believe she did, to be frank. “Why would Anne stand on the embankment and take a photo of Becky?”

“It wasn’t Becky she was trying to photograph,” said Graham. “It was Spicer.”

“*Spicer?*”

“She wanted a photo for Craig to remember him by...”

“Is that what she said... that she wanted a photo of Spicer?”

“According to Craig, but I can’t be sure...”

“So how come it ended up in your jacket.”

“I wanted to get it enlarged,” said Graham.

Crozier didn’t know what to make of it. Either Graham was a bloody good actor, or he didn’t see anything sexual in that photograph of Becky. Or maybe he did, because now he was starting to look at that photo from Crozier’s point of view.

“You think I murdered her...”

“According to Craig, you were in the house at about the time that we know she was murdered. He claims he heard Becky threatening to tell her mother if you didn’t leave her alone.”

He expected an outburst from Graham. What he got was a mild observation, “I didn’t realise he hated me so much ...”

“Why would he hate you?”

“The dog,” said Graham. “I was the one who insisted we find him a home.”

Crozier recalled Anne telling him how Craig had behaved at the Renshaws. Anne had referred to it as a tantrum, but Crozier would have said it was more serious than that. He also recalled her telling him that Graham had dragged Craig out of the car. *If you ever call me a cunt again...*

“Aren’t you going to ask me where I was?”

“Is there any point?” said Crozier. “You’ll say you were with Dawn on the morning your daughter was murdered. Dawn will confirm it. A judge won’t believe it.”

A judge won’t have to,” said Graham. “I was with Charlie.”

“Charlie?”

“Charlie Reynolds,” said Graham.

The name was familiar to Crozier, though initially, he couldn’t recall where he’d heard it mentioned. Then he remembered Mulholland telling him that Charlie was one of his reps.

“What were you doing at Charlie’s?”

“He and his wife have just had a baby. I went round to drop a present off.”

“How long did you stay?”

“Most of the morning,” said Graham, and as if realising that seemed a long time to spend at somebody’s house when all you’d intended to do was drop a present off, he added, “Frankie asked if I’d like to stop for lunch.”

“What did you do the rest of the afternoon – and don’t say Newcastle – we already know you weren’t there.”

“I spent it with Dawn,” said Graham. “You’ll ask her,” he added. “She’ll confirm it. And this time, it won’t make any difference whether a Judge believes it or not, because Becky was dead by then.”

Crozier had been given Charlie's address by Mulholland. It would be easy enough to establish whether or not whether this was true.

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# 22

Charlie and Frankie lived in a terrace of cottages built from natural stone. It was less than an hour's drive from the centre of Manchester, yet the area was rural enough to be classed as countryside.

Charlie answered the door, and owing to the age of the cottage, his head almost touched the doorframe, though in fact, he was a good head shorter than Crozier, and half as wide again.

“Mr. Reynolds?”

“Yes.”

“I'm Detective Inspector Crozier.” As he produced his ID, he could hear the almost hysterical barking of a small dog and a crying baby in the background.

“This'll be about Graham?”

“Can I come in for a moment?”

These were miner's cottages, and Charlie might have been a similar height to the men they were built to house, but Crozier wasn't. He had to duck in order to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe. There was no hall. The front door led straight onto a single downstairs room with a kitchen off. The range was gone, but the old tin bath that would once have hung on a wall was serving as a make-do fish pond in a small, untidy garden where a Jack Russell Terrier was yapping its head off. There seemed to be no getting away from dogs these days.

Charlie banged on the window, which only served to drive the dog to a frenzy. “Knock it off!” he said. Then turning to Crozier he

added, "Sorry about the dog. He's not used to being stuck outside, but he growls at the baby, so Frankie won't let him in."

Very wise, thought Crozier. A dog that had been excluded as a result of the new arrival could be forgiven for being just that bit jealous. "Best to find him another home then," said Crozier.

"That's what Frankie says."

"He's more yours than hers, I take it?"

"I'm the one who feeds him."

"That makes him yours then."

The sound of the crying baby was coming from a room above their head. "Good pair of lungs," said Crozier.

"That's what they said at the hospital."

"Boy or girl?"

"Girl," said Charlie. "Charlotte."

Crozier refrained from commenting that she was almost bound to end up being called 'Charlie' like her dad. Maybe that was the idea.

"When was she born?"

"She's nearly three weeks..."

The sound of Frankie thundering down the stairs put a halt to the conversation. She stormed into the kitchen.

"That bloody dog of yours has woken Charlotte!"

"I know... I've got ears!"

"Get rid of it Charlie... you promised!" She ran her hand through hair that was as untidy as the garden, then clutched at a quilted dressing gown as if suddenly concerned that it had flapped open to reveal her nightdress. Given that it was late afternoon, Crozier felt she could have made an effort, baby or not. He introduced himself, and she became subdued.

"Have you found Graham?"

“Yes.”

“And is he...”

“He’s all right,” said Crozier.

“We were worried sick, weren’t we Charlie?”

Charlie didn’t answer, and Crozier drew his own conclusions for that. They would have followed the story in the press. They would have spoken to Mulholland. They would know that Graham went missing from the warehouse within minutes of being informed that his daughter was dead. Carefully, Charlie replied, “I won’t deny that when we heard his car had been found at Dunham, but what with the way things are looking...”

“How well do you know him?”

“We’ve worked together for a good few years.”

“You’re good mates then...”

“We go for a pint now and then.”

“How would you describe him?”

Charlie replied, “I don’t really know to be honest. He’s not an easy bloke to get to know.”

“When did you last see him?”

“That’s the awful thing,” said Frankie. “He was here, with us while his daughter...”

“Why was he here?” said Crozier.

“He came with a present for the baby,” said Charlie.

“Was he here long?”

“He stayed for lunch,” said Frankie. “Not that it was much of a lunch – beans on toast – that’s about my limit at the moment. Then he left.”

“What time would that have been?”

“About half one.”

They had no reason to lie, thought Crozier. What was Graham to them? But if Frankie and Charlie were telling the truth, then clearly, Craig was lying.

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## 23

The first time he'd questioned Craig, Crozier had bent the rules slightly in that he hadn't been entirely straight with Sheena. He ought to have warned her that this wasn't just an informal chat, that in fact, he intended to question him, and if he wanted to keep her on-side, he couldn't afford to bend the rules again. So this time, he phoned her, and briefed her. "Graham's been found," he explained. "We questioned him," said Crozier, "and it's left me in no doubt that he didn't return to the house the morning his daughter was murdered."

"Then why did Craig say Graham was in the house?"

"That's what I want to find out," said Crozier.

They met at Silver Street, and spoke briefly in the room with the lilac walls. Then Craig was brought into the room by the housemother. He seemed no less nervous of Crozier.

"Why are you back?"

Crozier replied, "I'm back because the last time I was here, you told me you heard Becky and her dad talking in her bedroom."

Craig made no reply to this, and Crozier added, "We now know that couldn't have been the case."

"You calling me a liar!" said Craig, and Crozier replied that yes, he supposed he was.

"Why would I lie?"

"You tell me," said Crozier.

Sheena stepped in. “Craig,” she said gently. “Nobody’s saying you lied to us on purpose. Maybe you just *thought* it was Graham. Could that have been it, do you think?”

For a short while, Craig said nothing. And then he mumbled something.

“Come again?” said Crozier.

“*I’m not really sure now,*” he answered, and Crozier said, “Look Craig, we all make mistakes, so let’s forget about that for a moment, shall we?”

Some of the tension went out of Craig at that point, but Crozier wasn’t finished with him yet. “Did you go back to the house?”

Craig gave a nod, and Crozier said, “Was there anyone there?”

Another nod.

“Who was it Craig?”

Craig just stared at the floor, and Crozier added, “If you don’t know, or you’re not sure, just say so.”

Craig looked at Sheena as if appealing to her to stop Crozier from asking him any more questions, and she put her arm around him. But she didn’t ask Crozier to leave him alone, which was what he’d hoped she might do, and when he realised she wasn’t going to rescue him, he started to cry.

“It’s okay,” said Sheena. “All you have to do is tell us... who was in the house?”

Crozier got no pleasure out of seeing Craig in tears, but when he made no answer, he decided he wasn’t leaving until he’d got it out of him. “Was it a man, or a woman?”

“A man.”

“Who was it?”

“I can’t tell you...”

“Come on,” said Sheena. “Just say it... then it’s over...”

“He told me if I said anything, he’d kill me.”

“Who said that to you Craig?”

“You don’t know what he’s like...”

“Craig,” said Sheena, “Just say who it was, and then we can deal with him.”

Craig wasn’t having any of that. Crozier couldn’t blame him. Kids in care had very little reason to trust the authorities, and it was a good few moments before Sheena managed to get it out of him: “My dad.”

\* \* \*

Sheena spent some time with Craig alone. When she felt he was settled enough, she left him. She’d parked her car on the road outside the home, and when she came out of Silver Street, she discovered that Crozier was parked up behind it. Crozier got out of the car when he saw her approaching.

“How is he?”

“Scared.”

“Does he have reason to be?”

“You tell me,” said Sheena.

Crozier recalled Anne telling him that Craig’s biological father had turned up on the doorstep not that long ago. He’d demanded to be allowed to talk to Craig. Anne had thought the best way to get rid of him would be to give him what he wanted. According to Anne, that was the last they’d seen of him.

“Tell me about his dad,” said Crozier, and Sheena replied, “I don’t know much about him other than that he’s been in and out of nick since he was Craig’s age.”

“What’s his speciality?”

“Breaking into houses... stealing cars...”

“No sexual offences then?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

The majority of sex offenders came to police attention at some point. But some of them didn’t. It was even possible that that most of them went to their graves never having collected so much as a parking ticket.

“If his dad’s been in prison for the past four years, Craig must hardly know him.”

“He hasn’t got much reason to be loyal to him,” Sheena agreed.

“Do you think he’s lying?”

“It’s possible. Let’s face it, he lied about Graham.”

“Anne said something about him trying to get access.”

“That was just the start,” said Sheena. “What he really wanted was full custody.”

“He wanted Craig *living* with him?”

“That’s my understanding.”

“He hasn’t even seen him since he was eight. Why would he want him now?”

“Meal ticket,” said Sheena. “Once he got custody of Craig, the Local Authority would have to house him.”

“And you wouldn’t try to stand in the way of that happening?”

“I’d rather he lived with Anne,” admitted Sheena. “But that isn’t going to happen, is it.”

“No,” said Crozier.

Sheena got in her car. As she turned the ignition, Crozier said, “Where’s Brannah living?”

“A hostel,” said Sheena. “I’ll fax you the address.”

Crozier walked back to his car. As he did so, he glanced over a hedge that was supplemented by the kind of mesh fencing he would have expected to see surrounding a kennel. Children as young as

three were playing in an area that was cordoned off from some of the bigger boys and Craig was standing at the far side of the fence. He kept himself apart from the others, but that was hardly surprising, given what he'd been through.

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# 24

The window to Gilbolton's office was too high to facilitate the possibility that one of his patients might try to jump out of it. In order to open it, he had to stand on a chair, grab a short cord, and pull. Even then, it opened less than a couple of inches, but that was sufficient to allow the sound of evening traffic into the room.

Normally, he would already have joined the steady stream of cars that were crawling out of Salford to leafier suburbs, but not tonight, for moments ago, he had taken a call from a senior member of staff whose timorous voice had a tendency to lull some of the inmates into the mistaken belief that he was weak. "I think we might have a problem," he said.

Problems were an everyday occurrence at the Arndale. Gilbolton saw no immediate cause for alarm. His complacency evaporated when he was told that Becky Slater's killer had missed his curfew by over an hour.

Gilbolton wasn't endowed with much imagination. If he'd ever had one, it had long ago ceased to attempt to compete with the reality of his work. An hour wasn't long, but it was long enough, and besides, the length of time by which he'd exceeded the curfew wasn't the point. Before an inmate was allowed out of the unit unescorted, it was impressed upon him that he had to return by a given time. Failure to do so would set him back considerably. It might be many months before it

was felt he could be trusted again. It may be the case that he would never be given a second chance.

Gilbolton ordered that every available member of staff should be sent out to look for the man that a succession of Home Secretaries had done their level best to keep behind bars. Speaking of Home Secretaries, he supposed he ought to advise the present incumbent immediately, but he was somewhat reluctant. It might result in him being asked to 'consider his position', which was Civil Service-speak for 'resign, or be fired'. Better to keep it quiet in the hope that by morning, the situation would be resolved. But although he wasn't prepared to inform the Home Secretary at this early stage, he did in fact consider informing the police. Not Crozier, personally, but the police, generally. Given that Crozier had phoned him earlier in the day, he ought to have informed him of this new and unwelcome development, but he couldn't face the somewhat uncomfortable exchange that he knew would ensue. It was only to be expected. People like Crozier went to considerable lengths to get some of the most dangerous individuals in society off the streets, and they regarded people such as himself as 'one of the fucking idiots' who made it their life's work to put them back, but at the end of the day, thought Gilbolton, I was just doing my job. I'm not the one who decides whether or not an inmate should be allowed of the unit unescorted. I just follow orders. Therefore, I can hardly be held accountable if one of the inmates breaks his curfew. Provided I follow the rules, *my back is covered*.

The rules stipulated that he should inform the police, so that was what he did. He put a call through to the police, and he played things down. The missing inmate wasn't regarded dangerous. It was very likely he would be found. If the police could kindly keep an eye out, that would be helpful, but there was no need for panic.

After he'd made this call, Gilbolton reconsidered as to whether or not he ought to contact Crozier. And that annoyed him. He thought he'd already satisfied himself that there was no need to do so, yet the thought that perhaps he should if only to be on the safe side kept niggling away. And when he analysed why he felt as he did, he realised it was because he couldn't get it out of his mind that on the day he was sentenced, Becky Slater's killer had threatened Becky's mother from the dock.

The psychologists who evaluated him prior to his transfer from Wakefield were of the considered opinion that the threat was just one of those things that people said in the wake of sentencing. And if he'd spent the first nine years of that sentence insisting he meant every word, then at least he'd spent the last six years insisting he didn't. He'd learned his lesson. He was reformed. He hadn't found God, thank goodness – prisoners who claimed a religious conversion put themselves at something of a disadvantage if they did but know it – he merely stated that the treatment he'd received whilst at Wakefield had enabled him to put things into perspective.

The psychologists at Wakefield were convinced, and so was Gilbolton, for during his time at the Arndale, Becky Slater's killer had shown no sign of psychosis. Not that Gilbolton would have expected him to. He wasn't psychotic. He was, however, missing, and Gilbolton wasn't altogether sure what to do about it. He felt he should do *something*, but he, personally, had no idea how to contact Anne Slater, whereas Crozier did.

Crozier would be in a position to consider whether it would be wise to inform her of this development. Gilbolton's only way of doing that would have been to tell the police he thought she might be in danger, and how could he achieve it if, on the one hand, he was saying the

missing inmate posed no danger, but on the other, was asking the police to ensure that the mother of one of his victims was informed that he'd absconded? But *had* he absconded. At this early stage, Gilbolton couldn't be sure. Today would have been his first taste of real freedom in a very long time. The prospect of returning to prison at the end of this glorious day probably hadn't appealed to him. Maybe he'd just wanted to push the boundaries. Maybe, at any moment, he'd return to the unit with a sort of 'sorry I'm late' attitude. If not, then he would most certainly be found, for somewhere in a world that Gilbolton couldn't see, rain was falling softly on houses that had seen better days. He would be trying his best to shelter from that rain, and he would discover that without money, his options were somewhat limited, for it was a great deal more difficult for someone to melt into the city than people realised. He had no money, so he would be forced to steal if only to feed himself, for needs such as these were basic, and had to be met before other needs could be attended to. The thought of what those other needs might be turned Gilbolton cold, but his first concern was to keep the whole thing quiet.

# 25

Night was drawing in. Curtains were being drawn. Lamps were being lit in Vermilion Crescent. He pulled the blinds down in the kitchen, stuck a jacket potato in the oven, then rummaged around in the kitchen drawers in search of something in particular. Not finding what he wanted, and not wanting to risk being seen by looking for it in the garage, he opened the door that led to a storage space under the stairs. Out came the Hoover, and out came a box that contained a Tupperware container. He could see tools inside. Nothing extravagant. A couple of screwdrivers in different sizes. Wall plugs, and... yes... some glue.

He took the glue to the kitchen, then spread a piece of newspaper out onto the floor. The bin was a small, stainless steel affair, and he tipped it out onto the newspaper. Most of what came out was the remains of food that Margery and Gerald had eaten at lunchtime. These he returned to the bin, but the broken bits of china that were all that remained of the dog now lay on the newspaper. Some of the pieces were splinter small. He rinsed them under the tap, then laid them out on fresh newspaper which he'd spread on the kitchen table. He then wrote a note for the milkman. *No milk today thank you*, taking care to turn the light off in the hall before he opened the door and put the note outside with a couple of empty bottles, freshly washed.

The risk of being seen was minimised by the fact that there were no houses opposite Vermilion Crescent, just a wide strip of grass and

beyond it, wooden fencing dividing the crescent from a dual carriageway. He closed the front door, but ignored the array of locks and bolts that Gerald had fitted as a security measure, and returned to the kitchen where he made a pot of tea *Margery* fashion, warming the pot, then leaving the tea to brew.

He poured a cup for Margery, took it into the living room, then placed it on an occasional table. “Nice cup of tea for you Margery.” And then he turned to Gerald. “I expect you’d prefer a whisky, am I right?”

He ambled across to what was quite obviously a drinks cabinet and fished a bottle of malt out along with a crystal tumbler. “Can’t imagine you’re the type to ruin it with water,” he said, and he poured a generous measure.

Gerald wouldn’t take it, so he prized his fingers open, placed the glass in them, and propped his arm in such a way as to ensure that Gerald wouldn’t spill it the minute he left him to drink it by himself. “Forgive me if I don’t join you,” he said. “Things to do old boy.”

He returned to the kitchen, but finding that the fragments of broken china were not yet dry, he went upstairs into what was once Craig’s bedroom. The poster of Slippery Sam that used to be on the walls had been replaced by a map of the Falklands, and walls that were once mid blue were now a functional green. In place of the table on which Craig used to make his models was a desk of some dark, heavy wood. The shopping list that Gerald had recently written as if an excursion to Tesco were a military operation lay on its embossed leather surface.

Eggs. One dozen. Brown.

Tea. Twinings. Loose.

Prunes. Tins. Four.

Butter. Irish. Unsalted.

Bacon. Danish. Smoked.

Given that this was the smallest bedroom and that most of it had been taken up by the desk, there was barely room for Craig's bed, but it pleased him to see that it still occupied its former position against the furthest wall. A frond of something silky was poking from underneath it, and the muffled yip that came when he bent to stroke it was stifled by Craig saying "*Quiet Spicer...*"

Craig was sitting on the bed. He looked at him with worried eyes and said, "You won't tell?"

"Not me," he said. "Why would I?"

Spicer now did a three point turn so that his tail disappeared and his nose poked out from under the bed. Craig stroked his head. "I'm not supposed to have him in the house, but sometimes, at night – especially if it's raining – I think of him in that hole, and I sneak him in."

"Can't be easy... He must leave a trail of mud..."

"I bring him in through the front," said Craig. "You can't see the dirt on the carpet. I just bring him straight to my bedroom. And then I have him out again before anybody's up."

"Aren't you worried he'll bark?"

"Nah," said Craig. "He's dead good, aren't you Spicer." He smiled at the dog as he added, "He never barks nor nothing."

Spicer wasn't accustomed to being inside, and although the room was cool, he was panting rapidly. "He's thirsty..."

"Yeah," said Craig. "But he'll have to wait. I can't go down 'till everyone's in bed."

"No, but I can. I'll bring him some water..."

He left the room and went downstairs, checking on Gerald and Margery before he returned to the kitchen. Margery hadn't touched her tea. "If you'd rather a drop more milk, it's no bother," he said,

and he tipped a few drops from the jug into her cup. “Don’t let it go cold, now. It would be a shame to waste a lovely cup of tea – especially when it’s been made the way you like it.”

Gerald had spilled his drink, and he suspected that he’d done it on purpose so that people would assume that the large wet stain on his trousers was whisky. The hand that held the tumbler had flopped down onto the carpet. He picked it up and repositioned it on Gerald’s lap. He then returned to the kitchen, and settled down at the table with the fragments of broken china.

The difficult bits were going to be the splinters. Some were glazed, and it was easy to recognise which part of the ornament they came from, but others belonged to parts that wouldn’t have been visible when it was whole. Without them, the structure of the ornament would be weakened.

Sticking things together was right up his street. The trick lay in making sure the surfaces to be bonded were clean, dry, and free from loose debris. Just a dab of glue – not too much – then all you had to do was sit back and wait until the glue was slightly tacky before attempting to stick them.

With pieces as small as these, tweezers came in handy, but he didn’t have any tweezers, so he had to rely on a good steady hand. Some of the pieces were so small, he had to rest them on a fingertip and dab them into place. You needed to keep your fingertips clean for this, especially if you were using Superglue, otherwise you ended up with fragments stuck to your fingers. Getting them off without damaging them was murder, but that was typical of fingers.

Depending on the glue, you sometimes had to wait hours for one piece to dry before you could even attempt to stick the next. You didn’t get that problem with Superglue, but the downside was that it

was unforgiving. One small mistake could result in a piece not sitting quite as it should, so it was swings and roundabouts really.

Another problem with Superglue was that it encouraged people to throw things together quickly. Something got broken, and they wanted it mended, but instead of taking the necessary care that a more traditional glue would have demanded, they plonked the pieces together and hoped for the best. Gerald would have had that dog put back together in less than a couple of minutes. He, on the other hand, took a good hour over it, but even then, it was obvious it had been broken at some point. Still, although it would never be as it once was, it was at least whole, and he took it through to Margery.

“I’ve brought you a present,” he said, and he pressed it into her hand.

Her fingers curled around it with none of the reluctance that Gerald’s had shown, and he could have sworn he caught the ghost of a smile. “It isn’t as good as it was,” he admitted. “But I’ve done my best.”

He stayed with her for a moment, just to make sure that she didn’t drop the dog. Having gone to so much trouble to mend it, the last thing he wanted was for Margery to let it slip through her fingers. Besides, he wanted to ask her something:

“Margery,” he said. “Remember me asking you whether you knew where Anne moved to? Well, I’ve given it some thought... I could go to Grosvenor Road and find out whether Maureen is still alive. If she is, then it would only be a matter of time before Anne paid her a visit. The trouble is, time is something I don’t have.”

He glanced at Margery as if hoping she might make a useful contribution to the conversation, but Margery remained silent with regard to his current dilemma, and he continued:

“But one way or another, I’ve got to find out where Anne is living, and what with tomorrow being the anniversary of Becky’s death, chances are, she’ll visit Becky’s grave. What do you think?”

Whatever Margery thought, she kept to herself.

“There’s only one gate at Warrington Cemetery, and it’s almost directly opposite a pub. If I get to the pub at opening time I’ll stand a good chance of getting a table at one of the windows that looks out onto the gates. I can keep an eye on who comes and goes from there...”

The milk in Margery’s tea had formed a skin on the surface. It didn’t look drinkable now, but he decided against making her another cup. Margery would just have to learn to show a little more appreciation. Still, at least she’d held onto the ornament, and now that he was satisfied that it would be safe in her hands, he went back into the kitchen and took the jacket potato out of the oven. He used the knife that had formed part of Gerald’s collection in order to cut it open, dropped a knob of butter on it, ate it, then rummaged around in a cupboard for a cereal bowl.

He took the bowl upstairs and filled it with water from a tap in the bathroom, then carried it into Craig’s bedroom. Craig was still sitting on the bed, but there was no sign of Spicer. “Where is he?” he said.

Craig’s face was streaming with tears. “He was barkin’, and they found him, and they took him...”

“Took him where?”

“They made me give him away...to some people called Renshaw.”

“Where do they live?”

“Statham.”

Statham must have seemed a million miles away to a lad of 12.

“I’ll never see him again...”

He put an arm around him. “I’ll get him back,” he promised.  
“Nobody’s going to take Spicer away from you. I won’t let them...”

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**NOTE:**

It was not possible for me to include the entire novel with this critical piece. However, from this point on, I have included chapters that occur later in the hope that they will illustrate how the story develops, and concludes.

# 29

John Loftus had been born in this very cottage. With its wood burning stove and its stone flagged floors, it didn't offer the comforts most people were used to, but you couldn't have everything. At least the windows looked out onto fields. He'd rather that than have full central heating and be left to stare at some new town development.

The cottage was one of several on the estate. There was talk of selling it off at one point, but that was a good ten years ago when Death Duties wrenched Dunham Massey out of the hands of the family it belonged to. Rumour had it that the old hall would be sold to an American. Then it was a property tycoon. In the end, it passed to the National Trust. Not that it was a comfort at the time. Loftus presumed he'd lose his job and with it, the home he'd lived in man and boy, but as his new employers pointed out, there were still deer in the park, and it didn't make sense to throw him out only to have to employ someone else to look after them. He'd been doing it all his life, hadn't he? Well then, why not let him carry on doing it!

Some things had changed. It was only to be expected. The various descendants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Warrington had liked their hunting for a start. That didn't happen any more, and Loftus, for one, didn't miss it. Not that he had a particular liking for foxes, but he had even less of a liking for the people who hunted them. Nor were game birds raised for the shooting season. But the biggest change of all was that the

estate was opened to the public. Not that many came at this time of year.

The wife came into the kitchen dressed for work. The light cotton skirt and short-sleeved blouse seemed better suited to Summer than to Winter, but standing behind a counter serving customers all day was hot work whatever the weather, and slaving away in a baker's shop was hotter work than most. A *patisserie*, the owners liked to call it, but Loftus had always known it as Dodsons. The wife didn't care what the owners called it so long as the money was good. The money *wasn't* good, but it was more than he could put on the table. Then again, the job at the *patisserie* didn't come with a cottage. The wife couldn't argue with that, but the wife couldn't argue with anything. He wasn't the type to let a woman draw him into arguments about things that couldn't be changed. She was lonely up here with the birds and the deer and a husband who seemed to prefer both to her. It wasn't just the money she worked for, it was the company.

She left him to make his own breakfast, and then she was off down the track. It led to a gate that was built into the wall around the estate and came out onto a road with a bus stop opposite. Altrincham wasn't more than a couple of miles away. She could have walked, and sometimes did, depending on the weather. This morning, she took her brolly and some loose change for the bus.

After she'd gone, Loftus left the cottage. It stood on a rise of ground and was almost obscured by trees, which was one of the things he liked about it most. If the notice on the gate didn't discourage people from wandering through his garden, then the German Shepherd bitch who had free run of it when he and the wife were out did the trick.

He let her out of the pen, made a bit of a fuss of her, then sensed her disappointment when he closed the gate behind him and shut her in. She could have jumped over the fence, but she wouldn't have dared. She knew her place, just as he knew his, for despite that there was no longer an Earl of Warrington to defer to, there was still Thornkdyke with his public school accent and some degree or other from an agricultural college.

As he walked through the trees, the Hall came into view. A plain, almost barrack-like building, it wasn't what you'd call a crowd-puller, but the stables and coach house more than made up for it. From here, he could see the moat that ran to the back of them and the ornamental lake.

It was rumoured the stables were going to be converted into a café and a gift shop, but there was little sign of it happening, and in the meantime, Thorndyke had set up an office in there. So that morning, as on every other morning, Loftus reported to Thorndyke in what, to all intents and purposes, was still a loose box. With its lime-washed walls and a hay rack still fixed to one of them, it gave the impression that someone had dumped an unwanted desk, chair and telephone in there until such time as they could be disposed of.

Thorndyke was sitting at the desk. He made no effort to greet Loftus as such. He merely gave him his orders for the day.

“A member of the public reported they could smell something dead in the deer park.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Somewhere near the old stone barn.”

“The public aren't allowed up there...”

“Well be that as it may, that’s where they were, so be so kind as to deal with it, and after you’ve done so, take a look round the mill. One of the roof tiles looks loose to me.”

It wasn’t a request. It was an order, and Loftus went to investigate. Heaven forbid that a member of the public should stumble across something unpleasant. That wasn’t what they came to Dunham for. They came to walk their dogs, or to jog a few pounds off, or to give the kids a place to let off steam. Mostly, they stuck to the tracks that radiated out from the house and stables. Some, however, liked to venture deeper into the deer park, and Thorndyke didn’t want their tranquillity disturbed by the fact of death.

The barn was in a part of the park that was out of bounds to the public but it didn’t surprise Loftus that someone had encroached on it. People paid no more attention to notices asking them to keep out than they did to notices asking them not to feed the deer, speaking of which, there seemed to be none around. But when he caught the scent of decomposing flesh, he understood why. Predators were drawn to the scent of death. Animals that were preyed upon tended to steer well clear.

He left the track, and followed the scent until it became a stench, then he looked for a belly protruding from the undergrowth. That was what you always saw – the belly of the deer. Sometimes the antlers if it was a stag. But when he couldn’t find the carcass, he came to the conclusion that the animal had to be small. A fox, or a bird perhaps. And yet, it seemed odd that something so small could put out such a stink.

He stuck a cigarette in his mouth, and leaned with his back to a tree as he cupped his hand to shield the match that lit it. He blew the match, then let it fall, and as he dragged the smoke into his lungs, he

placed his hand against the trunk of the tree. It came into contact with a length of baling twine. During the winter, the barn was used for storing hay. The twine that bound it was sometimes left lying around so Loftus knew where it was likely to have come from. What he didn't know was why somebody would tie lengths of it together, and loop them round a tree.

He followed the line of it as it rose high into the branches, and there, a good twenty feet above his head, hung the body of a dog. Its coat was deep rust in colour, but the white around its throat marked it out as a Collie, and it reminded him of the working dogs of his childhood. Seeing it hanging there angered him, and he spoke to it softly, *What bastard did this to you mate?*

He reported back to Thorndyke expecting to be told to cut the dog down and bury it, but Thorndyke said, "We ought to inform the police."

"The police won't be interested," said Loftus, but Thorndyke phoned them anyway, and Loftus couldn't help but feel gratified when he turned out to be right. Greater Manchester Police had more important things to worry about than a dead dog, even if it *had* been hanged, but they did suggest that Thorndyke should inform the RSPCA in case somebody had reported their dog missing. Thorndyke replied that in view of what had become of it, whoever owned it would probably be better off not knowing, but nevertheless, he phoned the local branch.

A short while later, a dog van drew up in the yard that fronted onto the stables. Thomas Blacklock got out of it. He was much the same age as Thorndyke but as different in type as it was possible for two men to be. There was nothing smart about his waxed cotton jacket, and his boots were more Dubbin than polish.

Thorndyke came out of the stables. He gave Blacklock the gist of the situation then introduced him to Loftus and said, "This chap here will show you where it is." With that, he as good as dismissed them to get on with it.

The expression on Blacklock's face would have done credit to a Tolpuddle Martyr, and Loftus took to him on account of it. "You'd best follow me," he said, and a short while later, they were standing beneath the tree where the dog was hanging. When he saw it, Blacklock said, "There are some sick bastards around."

Loftus could only agree with him, and between them, they cut the dog down. It wasn't wearing a collar, but the ruff around its neck showed signs of it having worn one when alive, so Blacklock's guess was that it had slipped its collar and some nutter had got his hands on it. He offered to take the body away to be incinerated, but something about the manner of its death made Loftus feel that the least it was owed was a decent burial. So after Blacklock had made a few notes for some report or other then gone on his way, Loftus nipped back to the cottage and took a spade from the shed. He then returned to the deer park where he buried the poor bloody animal, not for one minute imagining that within a matter of hours, he'd be watching somebody dig it up again.

What with one thing and another, the morning was half over by the time he got round to checking the mill. It stood less than four hundred yards from the stable block, and with its rickety doors and its diamond patterned windows, it looked like something out of a book of fairy tales. The illusion was spoiled by a metal grill that was set into the brickwork in front of the water wheel. It was the size and shape of an average garden gate, but it put him in mind of the gateway to a dungeon.

Before going in, he circled the mill so as to get a good view of the roof. None of the tiles looked dodgy, but he wouldn't know for sure until he was up in the eaves, so he let himself in, then mounted the wooden stairs that led to them. Once up there, he checked for signs that one of the tiles had slipped. Even the slightest gap would have resulted in shards of light breaking up the darkness, but there was nothing to disturb the gloom and dust. And when he was certain that Thorndyke had simply been making unnecessary work for him, he went back down to the level on which the saw was situated.

The metal frame that housed it gave it the appearance of a guillotine, but instead of the blade hanging horizontally, it hung vertically. There once was a time when entire tree trunks were moved towards that blade on a gigantic conveyor belt, but not any more, though the machinery was still in working order.

The waterwheel that drove it was large enough to occupy both the basement and first floor, and the stream that turned the wheel passed under the mill. First, however, it passed through the black metal grill. The bars that comprised it looked as though they were embedded in the stream, but when the water was low, there was clearance of around 18 inches between the silt and the spikes. Debris sometimes drifted under the spikes and part of his job entailed keeping the wheel clear of it. Therefore, when Loftus saw what he thought was a bundle of rags washing against the paddles, it didn't strike him as anything unusual.

He stuck a boat hook into them and dragged them out. It wasn't a bundle of rags. It was a coat. He let it drop on the concrete floor, then used the end of the boat hook to spread it out a bit. It was dark grey, and waterproof, the interior quilted. A zip at the collar suggested that a hood could be attached to it if necessary. It wasn't what you'd call the height of fashion. More a functional garment.

Now that he could see what he was looking at, he felt more comfortable about handling it. He crouched down next to the coat, turned it over, and noticed a badge with a crest and a motto. The name of a school, *Wilfred Pickering*, was embroidered onto it. Loftus didn't recognise it. It wasn't local. A name tag had been machine sewn onto the collar and he didn't recognise that, either. But then again, why should he? *Craig Brannah*. It meant nothing to him.

He let the coat drop back onto the concrete, picked up the boat hook, and used it to poke around under the waterwheel. Sometimes, branches big enough to cause a problem, but too small to be immediately obvious, lodged under the paddles. There was something under there. He hooked into it, pulled, and brought out a shoe.

A coat was one thing. A shoe was another. He suddenly felt uneasy, largely because it occurred to him that there might be a connection between the two, but after a moment, he resumed the fishing around with his boat hook. This time, it hooked into something solid. Using the end of the hook in much the way that a shepherd might use a crook, he hauled at the object, but couldn't get it to budge.

Loftus gave it up and thought for a moment. When not in use, the wheel was held firm by a braking mechanism. If he deactivated it, the flow of the water might move the wheel, and that in turn might dislodge whatever was jammed underneath it.

The lever was set into the wheel. Grabbing it with one hand above the other, he pulled, but the bugger wouldn't shift. He tried again, this time taking his weight on the balls of his feet. He bent his knees, then leaned back, and slowly, reluctantly, the lever came towards him. The wheel began to turn, and he made for the far side of it as a fully clothed body exploded onto the surface.

Loftus was too well acquainted with all manner of dead things to be entirely shocked by it, but that was before it rolled over. Water could do some terrible things to a body, and this one had been dragged along the bottom of the mill race, but it wasn't so much the state of it as the fact that it was a kid. Not a child, thank God, but young enough. Truants sometimes hung around the estate and the machinery in the saw mill acted like a magnet. Whenever he'd come across them, he'd sent them on their way. Not this one though.

Poor bastard, he thought. He must have slipped and hit his head or something. He could think of no other reason why a lad this age would drown in shallow water. None that he *wanted* to think of, put it that way.

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# 33

Becky Slater's killer has gained access to the house next door to Anne's.' He is watching Ticky playing in Anne's garden.

The kitchen window looked out onto an oblong of dirt. A blackened circle at its centre intimated a bonfire that hadn't gone too well. Much of what the occupants had tried to burn lay blackened, but otherwise the wood they'd used was as useless, as damp as the house. The garden to the left belonged to Anne. It wasn't about to win any prizes, but it looked like paradise by comparison.

A boy of 7 or 8 was playing in the garden. He wondered who he was. It was possible he was a grandchild. Anne was 31 when she lost Becky. She might have had more children, but he doubted it. If she had, it would have been reported. Nothing in the lives of the parents of high-profile murder victims ever escaped the press. Theirs was a life sentence of public scrutiny. He couldn't detect a physical resemblance though, so maybe this kid was foster child? He wouldn't have put it past her to carry on fostering children. Whoever he was, it didn't much matter, though he would have preferred him to be related. To lose a foster child was one thing. To lose a grandchild was another, especially for a woman who'd already lost her daughter to someone such as himself.

He stood in the kitchen doorway and watched him for a moment. The boy saw him, but he didn't come over. Now and again, he glanced at him, and every time that happened, he smiled at the boy

and, eventually, he came closer to the fence. At that point, he spoke to him. "What've you got there?"

"A beetle," said Ticky.

"Can I see?"

The boy opened his cupped hands, and showed it to him.

"Can I hold it?"

The boy let him hold the beetle, and he dutifully passed it back, unharmed.

"I've called him Blackie."

"That's good name for a beetle."

"I want to keep him in my bedroom, but Mummy Anne said no."

"Beetles don't like houses," he said, though that was far from true. Certain types of beetle liked nothing better. "This one would be happier in the garden."

"That's what Mummy Anne said."

"Never mind, eh?" And then, "Tell you what... you let the beetle go, and I'll let you in on a secret."

"A secret?"

"A secret," he repeated, for there was no point asking a child if he wanted a sweetie. These days, children were so drilled not to accept sweets from strangers that to offer them one would flag up a warning, but children loved secrets, and by telling them you had a secret, they were less inclined to suspect you meant them harm.

"What kind of secret?"

"A present for Mummy Anne."

Ticky glanced round as if expecting to see her at the window.

"Why have you got a present for Mummy Anne?"

"I wanted to thank her for looking after Ryan."

"When?"

He was sharp, this kid. He was going to have to watch how he played it with him.

“Ages ago...”

The boy seemed reassured. If he knew Mummy Anne, then it must be all right to talk to him.

“What kind of present?”

“I’ll show you if you like.”

For one brief moment, Ticky looked interested. Then he frowned and ran off down the garden. At some point, he dropped the beetle, and after he failed to find it, he went back to the fence again. By this time, the grown-up he was talking to a moment ago was winding a water pipe round a metal frame. “Guess what I just did,” said Ticky.

“What did you do?”

“Dropped my beetle.”

“How did that happen?”

“He wriggled through my fingers.”

“Never mind... there’ll always be another.”

He made as if to go inside the house, and almost as an afterthought, turned when he reached the doorway. “Sure you don’t want to see what I bought Mummy Anne?”

The boy looked unsure, and then he made his mind up. “All right,” he replied.

“Hold your arms out, I’ll lift you over the fence.”

Hesitantly at first, and then with greater confidence when the man smiled and added, “Go on... it’s okay...” Ticky did as he suggested.

The man reached over, picked him up, and lifted him over the fence. Then he gently set him down, which reassured him.

“Where’s this present?” said Ticky.

The man smiled the kindest of smiles. “*In the house,*” he replied.

\* \* \*

The kitchen was filled with the smell of a Sunday Roast. Veg that had been boiling for longer than it should had misted up the windows, and Anne couldn't see the garden anymore. She grabbed the tea towel and used it to clear a patch of glass, then she glanced out the kitchen window, but she couldn't see Ticky.

She walked out into the garden. "Ticky," she called. "Ticky..."

It wasn't much of a garden when all was said and done. There wasn't a part of it that couldn't be seen at a glance, so she knew instantly that he wasn't there. She ran through the house and out the front, for although this was a quiet road, you did get traffic. There were no cars, but there was no Ticky either, and the strips of lawn so carefully tended save for the one next door were desolate for want of human form. There were just the trees, not *proper* trees, but ornamental cherries, whose leaves had turned, and had fallen to lie at her feet.

She ran out into the street. "Ticky," she shouted. And then, more frantically. "T.i.c.k.eee!"

Not a sign.

She knocked on the door to Kath's. There was nobody in. She knocked on the doors to all the neighbouring houses. *Have you seen Ticky?*

She ran to the top of the road, and scanned both right and left. A couple of kids were skateboarding towards her. "Have you seen a little lad about this big." She held her hand to just below chest height. "He's only 7..."

No, they hadn't seen him. And don't ask her how, but she knew, she *knew* he was gone.

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## 37

Anne has now been confronted by Craig who has gained access to the house.

Oddly enough, she wasn't afraid anymore. Tired, perhaps, but not afraid, as such. The ordinariness of her response surprised even her.

"How did you get in?"

"Through the roof."

He was dressed in clothes she recognised. She'd seen Phil wearing them yesterday when she called next door to check that Kath was okay.

*"What have you done to Ticky?"*

He picked up *The Velveteen Rabbit* from Ticky's bedside table.

"You used to read this to me," he said. And he smiled at the recollection. "How does it go..." and he flicked through the book. "Oh yeah... here it is. *'When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.'*" He smiled to himself. "I used to love this story."

*"Tell me you haven't killed that little boy..."*

"I used to think it was true, that one day, somebody would come along and really love *me*... and then I'd be real."

The words flapped around in her mouth before making their escape.

*"I loved you...."*

"Of course you did. You loved me so much, you gave my dog away."

He turned a page, as Anne got up from the bed.

“We gave you a home...you were with us four years...we treated you as our own...*what more did you want from us?*”

“You could have made me family.”

“You *were* family...”

“Was I?” He still had that book in his hand. She got the impression that even as he was talking to her, he was reading it, *reminding* himself of certain things about it. “Tell me something... if you’d come home from work that day and I was the one you’d found dead, what would have happened to Becky?”

They both knew the answer. Becky would have gone to Grosvenor Road.

“I don’t know...”

“You *do* know,” said Craig.

“I don’t... I...”

“Don’t lie to me Anne.”

Suddenly, she was angry. Desperate. Frightened. But angry: “*What did you expect?*”

“I expected you to carry on looking after me...”

She thought he meant that he expected to be allowed to live with her after it was known that he’d murdered Becky. But what was the point in telling him that *nobody* would have kept him. He wasn’t insane. That much had been established before the trial. But neither was he normal. His mind didn’t work like the mind of the average person. But then, he hadn’t had the kind of childhood that would have given his mind the chance to develop in what most people regarded a normal way. “You murdered my daughter... you murdered that boy – the one you shared a room with at Silver Street.”

“He murdered Spicer!”

Spicer, thought Anne. “*He was a dog,*” she said softly. “*Just a dog...*”

“He was more than *just a dog* to me,” said Craig. “I loved him.” And then, “Do you know how it felt to have to give him away?”

She couldn’t answer.

“He was the only living thing on the face of this earth that wanted me, needed me, maybe even loved me.”

She didn’t want to hear about the dog, or about his reasons for murdering Kenny. She wanted to know why he’d murdered her daughter. In all these years, nobody had been able to coax an explanation out of him. The psychiatrists who evaluated him prior to sentencing assumed the murder was sexually motivated. But Anne had always had her doubts about that. Craig had shown no interest in girls while he was with her and Graham. And yet, he’d taken that photograph – the one that appeared on the cover of the book. “That photo of Becky...”

“It wasn’t of Becky,” said Craig. “It was a photo of Spicer. Becky just happened to be in the way, that’s all. And I know this is stupid,” he added, “but I thought, if she was gone, you wouldn’t have any reason not to carry on fostering me. You wouldn’t need to be paid by Social Services because you wouldn’t have to save up to pay for Becky’s future education.”

On seeing the look on her face, he added, “Don’t deny it Anne. I heard you and Graham arguing about Spicer – whether or not to keep him, only, it wasn’t really Spicer you were arguing about. It was me.”

“Oh Craig...”

“What was it, Anne? Wasn’t I cute enough anymore? That’s what happens to puppies isn’t it. They grow out of the cute stage, and people kick them out. That’s what happened to Spicer. He’d left that

little puppy stage, but he wasn't an adult dog. He couldn't fend for himself. Whoever had bought him for Christmas had kicked him out. Maybe they got the kids another puppy? That's what people do. Kids grow out of the cute stage, and then they get traded in for something a bit more loveable, a bit less trouble, that doesn't cost as much to keep, that they get *paid* to keep..."

She was ashamed, because there was some truth to what he'd said, but as she'd explained to Crozier, it wasn't as simple as that. "Is that why you tried to lay the blame on Graham... to punish him?"

"I thought that if he was out of the way as well as Becky, I could live with you, and we could get Spicer back."

It was so twisted, but at the end of the day, he was a child at the time, and what was it Crozier had said – that children didn't have the moral sensibilities of an adult. Craig could appreciate that what he had done was wrong, but he didn't fully appreciate just how wrong it was. So far as he was concerned, he'd done what he had to do. As a result, Becky would never come back. Naturally, Mummy Anne would feel sad about that, but she'd get over it, and once she did, it would all be all right again. He'd pictured her taking him home to Vermilion Crescent. In no time at all, he'd be nipping through the hedge and over the embankment and going to school as usual. The only difference would be that there was no Becky. And no Graham either. Craig continued:

"But when it became obvious that Graham had an alibi, I had to blame somebody else..."

"You blamed your father..."

"He was no father to me, not so's you'd notice."

"At least he wanted you."

"He wanted a house and benefits..."

How could she argue with that? “But Graham was the one who wouldn’t let you keep Spicer, and Graham was the one who said you’d have to move on, so why come after me?”

For some reason, that seemed to anger him. “Why come after *you*? I’ll tell you why... Graham didn’t do me any harm... but women like you — you *play* with children’s lives. You give them a glimpse of paradise, and then you take it away.”

She recalled Crozier showing her into an interview room at the station. Craig had looked so small, so utterly physically incapable of committing the crimes he stood accused of that a part of her had wanted to shout, *there’s been a mistake*. At just what point had the child become a monster? That cheeky little twist to his mouth. Was it really cheeky, or was it evil? As Crozier was later to say in words she could never have found, sometimes our knowledge of what a person has done can colour our perception. And so, in her mind, she’d come to believe that he’d always had a way of looking at people as if seeing something behind them all the time.

“You cut me out of your life from the minute I was arrested...”

“What did you expect?”

“You never wrote to me...never came to see me. It was as though I’d ceased to exist...”

If only that were true. If only he *didn’t* exist. But he was there. In her every waking thought, her every action, from opening her eyes in the morning, to imagining that the shadow in the corner of the bedroom might be him, to checking around the outside of the house before she entered, to thinking every phone call might be someone telling her he’d escaped, to dreading the post in case there was a letter to inform her that somebody somewhere had granted him parole.

He waved the book in her face and said, “*I am sawdust*, do you realise that? I am sawdust inside!” And as he said it, he produced a knife. She didn’t know where it came from. One minute, he was waving a book in her face. The next, the book had somehow become an object of terror.

“Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll let you live, if you can prove you loved me... but you don’t get long to prove it.”

Anne was backing away from him as he continued:

“I’ll give you one second for every year that I was put away for. That gives you 15 seconds ... think you’ll manage it?”

“I don’t... don’t know what you mean... what you want me to do?”

Craig tried to pass her the knife. She wouldn’t take it, so he pressed it into her hand, and wrapped her fingers around it, then wrapped his hand around her own. “You say you loved me... I doubt it... but you can love me now...”

She struggled to free her hand from both him and the knife, but couldn’t manage either. Her back was against the door, and suddenly, he was shouting: “*You wouldn’t do to an animal what you do to kids like me. You say you have our best interests at heart, but if you did, you’d put us out of our fucking misery!*” He leaned against the tip of the blade. “Go on, Mummy Anne... Here’s your chance to prove you really love me.”