An Individual Will

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About the author.

Chapter One.

He was young, handsome – foppishly so – and, most importantly, quite dead. A thin, long-limbed boy with curly dark – Roman? – hair and something of privilege and the public school about him. A nascent artist, an actor perhaps, the sort who might have fantasised or versified about his own death – though surely such Wertheresque musings would not have included an end such as this; for it was hardly a poetic or Romantic end, though it was distinctly possible it was a parody thereof. He had been cast adrift – on a boating lake, and not a very large one at that. The boat, a recreational rowing boat, had beached itself on an island of turf or sod that would just about have provided standing room for a single person or a small dog. Adrift and beached, indeed, without a scull or paddle. It was ten-fifteen or thereabouts on a sunny Wednesday morning in May.

He had – and we had to bring him back to shore to establish this – been tied in, into, a sitting position. Coloured scarves of a silk or satin material had been used to effect this. A black scarf had been tied to his right wrist, red to the left, and a longer mustard-yellow one had been looped around his neck; the other ends of the scarves had been secured to the oarlocks and prow respectively. I wondered at the significance of the colours. I was thinking of the German national flag. It was quite an elaborate arrangement. Care had been taken, effort made. Someone, or someones, had gone to a good deal of trouble. And to add insult to terminal injury, a white placard had been hung around his neck with the word "ARSE" painted on it in surprisingly neat black letters. Someone, again, had gone to the trouble. In the top stud-buttoned pocket of his shirt, we found a 16-25 rail-card identifying him as *Mr A. Mansfield*.

So a dead young man "sitting" on a boat with a placard about his neck declaring him an ARSE: what did it mean? Or represent? Or suggest? Murder with malice aforethought, or an elaborate prank gone horribly wrong? Something about the way his head was hanging – down but slightly to the side with the mouth open – made it seem as if he were chortling goofily, or chortling goofily had been his last act. He had, incidentally, also been reported missing – by someone prepared to go to some lengths to ensure that we, the police, took notice.

"Do you know who I am?" Well, no, not quite that. Nothing so straightforwardly crass. Desperation had played its part. What she had actually said was "I don't want to have to resort to who I am," and she was almost crying when she'd said it. Who she was, then, mattered in the sometimes tiresome business of getting things done, or so she hoped – the local MP's daughter, or so she claimed, a fact – assumed at first, and then confirmed – of sufficient interest to accelerate news of her arrival up the ranks.

It had, at the time, seemed like a disproportionate degree of worry for someone gone rather less than twenty-four hours. The desk sergeant had made the point, but she was adamant, and threatened to make a scene. She wasn't about to leave the station until she was sure something would be done. She didn't care if they locked her up. Her eye-liner was running again by this point, and it was already well-smudged. Her concern – misguided or not – was certainly genuine. Curious, though, that such a short absence should excite such extreme emotion.

Her name was Lisa Markham, and she was nine weeks short of her twentieth birthday. Darkly attractive, wavy hair worn long and untethered, there was something of the gypsy about her, though doubtless this was a look and mien carefully cultivated.

She said, "I want to see someone who matters." Imperiously, through tears.

"I like to think *I* matter, ma'am," the sergeant replied. He would have smiled had she not been so upset.

The obvious question or questions: Why are you so upset? What do you fear's happened to him?

The sergeant had asked the question – directly and in a roundabout way – the latter having to do with being sensible of and sensitive to her emotional state. And, it being an obvious and reasonable question, she had answered it after a fashion. He – the missing *he* – had stood her up, and he wouldn't do that. Not without ringing or sending a text, and he had done neither. Something had to be wrong. The sergeant was polite but unimpressed. Police officers come across lots of things people do that people who care about them are pitiably certain they wouldn't do, going missing being the least of it.

The sergeant asked another question, one that gets asked a lot: "Would you like a cup of tea, madam?" Since, in this case, it followed the impression, distinct if routine, that something was to be done, and done quite quickly, the answer, on the crest of a sigh, was "Yes – thank you."

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Waiting is inevitable in a police station – even when who someone is matters. An interview room with aforementioned cup of tea. When I walked in, she might have been forgiven for thinking – perhaps a little contemptuously – that her level of mattering was oiling the wheels, or perhaps she took me for a tea lady offering a top up.

"Ms Markham?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "Who are *you*?"

"Detective Chief Inspector Black. I understand you have some concerns over the whereabouts of Adrian Mansfield."

"Yes," she said.

It is at this juncture that I, like the Devil in the song, beg your indulgence to introduce myself. My name is Barbara Black. I was in my mid-forties at the time of the events under discussion, and, according to my few friends, hopelessly middle-aged. They liked to jest about nominating me for one or some of those television programmes where fashionable, bossy ladies, or gay gentlemen, pull you about and tell you how to make the best of your bosom and bottom. I'm wont to wear knee-length skirt suits, which I regard as smart and formal, but which have been less generously described as schoolmarmish and frumpy. My hair is shoulder-length and mousy and – outside the private domain – invariably worn tied or clipped back. I had been a, *the*, DCI in Amberton for two and half years, having briefly been a DI in the Met. Amberton has a population of eighty thousand or so souls and a slower pace of life than the capital. Friends and colleagues had correctly assumed that I had craved a quiet, or quieter, life. I had, indeed, begun to find London brittle and dispiriting.

I considered Ms Markham and wondered what to do. Would it really be quite decent or prudent to tell her he was dead? Was she not already emotionally over-wrought? Of course, the issue of her concern for his welfare was now very pressing.

"Can I ask you, Ms Markham, why you're so inordinately concerned about this young man? Do you have grounds to fear for his safety?"

Ms Markham tilted her head slightly to the right, as though trying to gain another perspective on me, or give me the benefit of nebulous doubt. She made much of eye-contact while doing this, and then, as though reaching an unsatisfactory conclusion for all concerned, said, "He's dead, isn't he?"

I paused, long enough to assure myself that she wasn't about to unravel on the spot, and said, "Yes, Ms Markham, he is." And then, in a vulgar political world, a vulgar political question: "Does your mother know you're here?"

She snorted with contempt. "No, of course she doesn't. And the first thing she'll do when she finds out is consult her PR advisor. Damage limitation, you understand. She'll want to be seen to be standing by me, of course. You can't be too obvious about ditching your family for the sake of your political ambitions."

Melinda Markham MP, recently appointed junior minister for something or other. Ambitious, as most of them tend to be, and generally considered to be "on the up". Frequently pictured in the local press on walkabouts with senior members of the government, and twice with the PM himself. Not forgetting the locals, the Chief Constable had got a look in, as had some *ordinary* people, including two *front-line* officers, both of whom had smiled gamely for the camera.

Lisa Markham said, "I suppose I'm a suspect now." Indifferently, as though it would all come out in the wash without too much damage to the delicate fabric. "How did he die?" A not unreasonable question.

"He was stabbed," I said, which was true. He was; but we didn't yet know if that's what had killed him. Raymond had his doubts. A deep stab wound to the chest. Raymond suspected it might have been inflicted post-mortem. So – and this was very early speculation – drugged and drunk, he had been set up as a fool – an *arse* – in the rowing boat, and then someone with a grudge had come along and, as it were, plunged the dagger deep. Plunged and removed and disposed of. Did the tableau allude to something, I wondered – a myth perhaps?

"Where?" Testily, suggesting – quite correctly – that I was being less than forthcoming with the details. Surely, I thought, a pardonable trait in a police detective.

"The boating lake," I said. "Any idea what he was doing there?"

"Boating, I suppose. It's the weather for it."

"On his own?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"People don't usually go boating on their own."

"He did. He liked the exercise, and he said it gave him time to think. He liked to be alone. He believed most people avoided being alone. Saw it as a modern human failing."

"Any idea why anyone would want to kill him?" I asked.

"No, of course not." Dismissively, as though the suggestion were absurd.

"You'll forgive me, Ms Markham," I said, "but I do have to wonder at your change of demeanour. You came into this station in a highly charged emotional state determined that we should do something about finding your missing friend. Indeed, *in extremis*, you flouted your connections to achieve this. You gave the distinct impression that you thought him in some peril."

She tilted her head to the right and fanned the curtain of her hair with her fingers. "Should I be thinking about asking for a lawyer, Chief Inspector?"

I watched her without speaking. What *had* prompted this change in mood? Definite news of disaster? Was she posturing in its debris? My silent scrutiny disconcerted her. She straightened up and asked, "Do his parents know yet?"

"Yes," I said. "I've just come from there."

"It'll probably push her totally over the edge," she said. "She's fragile. Adrian called her a broken sparrow. He said he'd never known her unbroken."

Chapter Two.

A broken sparrow. Mrs Mansfield – Anne – was somewhere in her forties, but she had the air of a flustered, spare old lady. She wore ill-fitting brown slacks and a blue floral blouse. Her hair was mousy and grey and tied up in a bun. "Yes," she'd said on answering the door. "Can I help you?" She sniffed the air suspiciously, like a rabbit scenting danger.

"Mrs Mansfield?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

I proffered my warrant card. "I'm Detective Chief Inspector Black, and this is Detective Sergeant Brightly. Could we come in for a moment, please?"

"My husband," she said, turning away. "I'll get my husband. Alan," she called – presumably her husband's name; "Alan, there are police officers at the door. Police officers, Alan. They want to come in." And she hurried away from us into the house.

"Police, Anne? Are you sure?" Alan – presumably – came out of a back room to meet her. "Calm down, Anne," he said soothingly. "Are you sure... " He stopped when he saw us, and said in a completely different tone: "Are you police?" Curt, as though we deserved rebuking for upsetting his wife.

"Yes, sir. I'm Detective Chief Inspector Black; and this is my colleague, Detective Sergeant Brightly. We'd like to have a word with you. I'm sorry we startled your wife."

Mrs Mansfield put her hands to her ears, and said, "They're bearers of bad news, Alan – bearers of bad news."

Alan said something quietly to her, and she disappeared into the back of the house. "I'm sorry about that," he said urbanely. "My wife's not very well." He had the air of a man taking – perforce – control of a difficult situation, though there was something lumpish and resigned about him. I could imagine him coming apart and laughing madly at the absurd part he'd been forced to play. He was wearing a dark blue shirt with white trousers. His hair was grey-black and worn brushed back despite a receding hairline. He said, "If you'd like to come in here," and escorted us into a dining room dominated by a rectangular oak dining table, around of which stood six matching dining chairs. A matching sideboard was adorned with blue-on-white floral display plates – at least, I assumed no-one had eaten off them. "Please," he said, "sit down. I'm assuming my wife is correct about the bad news."

I pulled out a chair and sat down, as did Simon – or, more formally, DS Brightly. I was rather disconcerted by the man's fatalistic readiness for bad news. He went to the sideboard and produced an unopened half-bottle of Scotch from one of the drawers and a tumbler from the cupboard underneath. He half-filled the tumbler, pulled a chair back from the table and sat down. He raised the glass and said, "I would offer, but no-one civilised drinks at this hour. It's just that I get the distinct impression that very shortly I'm not going to care overly much about social niceties." He took a sip of the Scotch. "Fire away," he said. "You have the floor."

I said, "Do you have a son called Adrian Mansfield, sir? Tall, long hair? About nineteen or twenty?"

Alan Mansfield chuckled dryly. "Is this the check-list you have to go through in case you accuse someone of rape who turns out to be backpacking in the Himalayas? Be terribly bad PR, that. All over the local press, I shouldn't wonder."

Simon said, "Is that a *yes*, sir?"

Mansfield took another sip of the Scotch. He turned to Simon and said, "What are you – the organ grinder's monkey?"

"Sir," I said. "Look at me, please, sir. Thank you." I paused. "Sir, we believe your son is dead. An Adrian Mansfield was found dead this morning in Amberton Park."

He stared at me over the tumbler, and then drank deeply from it. He got to his feet and returned to the sideboard, where he poured more Scotch. "You'll want me to identify the body? Isn't that the form? What a mess. How did he die?"

"We're still investigating that, sir," I said. "Would it be possible to look in his room?"

"Yes – whatever you want. Nothing matters now." He sounded brisk, dismissive even. "Do what you like. Take what you like. I don't mind. Seriously, I'm past caring. I need to make a phone call. Top of the stairs on the right. His name's on the door."

"Thank you, sir," I said, but he had already turned away.

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Adrian's Den, declared the plate on the door. Something of a misnomer that. Not so much a *den* as a well-appointed hotel room. Typical of a modern teenager's bedroom, I supposed, in that there was little need to leave it, though this one was a little on the plush side. A double-bed, a flat screen television. No hi-fi, but a set of speakers attached to the laptop. Modern music collections tend to be computer-based, much to the chagrin of the phonographic industry. A pair of headphones adorned a Styrofoam model of the human head, which also sported a pair of mirror sunglasses. I lifted the lid on the laptop and pushed the on button. I wanted to check something of which I was already fairly certain: that is, that Adrian Mansfield had private access to the internet. When the Windows operating system had finished loading – and it lacked the situation's sense of urgency – I opened the browser and accessed the BBC. The computer was, indeed, online.

We would want the computer, just as we would his mobile phone, which hadn't been found on his body. There was, I supposed, always the possibility, surely a very remote one, that he didn't have a mobile phone – one can *text* from a computer – but it would make him a very unusual young man; young people tend to be tediously interested in social networking, and its technological appurtenances.

Alan had made his phone-call; to someone called Martha. He wanted her to come round. "Something terrible's happened." Well, yes. I wondered how I might have put it in his place. What was it, though, about how he had put it that bothered me so much? The formality, I think. "Martha? Martha, something terrible's happened. Can you you come round? My wife..." Martha probably said something like, "Of course, Alan. Don't worry. I'm on my way." Martha understood. Martha was something like *a brick*. Martha had always *been there*. History. Of course, there was always history, and yet... what? A whiff of misfortune revisited. Martha had always needed to *be there* – that was her principle role in the Mansfields' drama. So – she was coming round. Of course she was. Straight away, no doubt.

Chapter Three.

"What?" This was Simon, laptop sealed in plastic under one arm, bothered by something: me, or my mien, to be more precise.

I smiled. "Sorry, Simon?" I said.

"Ma'am?" Suggesting a degree of disingenuousness on my part, or a minor economy with the actuality. Put prosaically, he was worried I might know something he didn't.

Simon knew the Hannah Lawrence story, as, it seems, does everyone else who has had even a passing working relationship with me. It's the first story that anyone tells about me. When questioned about it at the time, I attributed it to *a moment of heightened intuition*. Unfortunately, DI McBride, a craggy Glaswegian who died three years after the case, chose to describe it as *uncanny*. That's Scottish *uncanny*, you understand, which is far more dramatic than its English equivalent. Scottish *uncanny* has a mad, other-worldly glint in its eye, has Auld Nick perched on a winnock-bunker playing pipes, and a plesiosaur swimming about in a loch. "Aye," he said to all and sundry; "it was *uncanny*."

Fourteen-year-old Hannah Lawrence had been missing for two days, sparking an immediate and large-scale search. Another girl of the same age – Donna Jacobs – had gone missing a month earlier, and her body had subsequently been found, by a young man out jogging, in a wooded area near a local reservoir in Wood Hill Green, a leafy suburb in the north east of London. DI McBride, for want of something better to do, had joined in the house-to-house inquiries. He was two years short of retirement. He took with him a young WPC called Barbara Black, who was impossibly polite and looked about twelve years old. She rang the doorbells and showed the photo, and gently urged the cursory and curious alike to take a closer look.

At ten past two on a slate-grey Thursday in October, we knocked on the door of 17 Lonsdale Road, a recently painted semi with a bay window and an extension over the garage. It was answered by a man in his late-twenties or early-thirties dressed in jeans and a dirty white T-shirt. His hair was dark and close cropped. He had a thin nose and thick lips, and his blue eyes were dim and misty. He said, "Yes?"

McBride, not for the first time that day, said, "I'm Detective Inspector McBride and this is WPC Black. I wonder if you'd take a look at this picture and see if you can recall seeing her, sir."

The man looked at it briefly, very briefly, his eyes flicking up to McBride. He said, "Who is she?"

I explained and urged him to take a closer look. McBride emphasised the importance of the inquiry and mentioned the suffering of the girl's parents.

The man said, "Girls of that age go missing all time. She's probably run off with her boyfriend and is too scared to call her parents." His voice was nasal and repining.

McBride's face twitched with impatience. Speaking slowly, he said, "Sir, would you please just take a close look at the picture and tell us if you think you may have seen the girl?"

The man glanced at it again and said, "No, sorry, I haven't seen her."

"Thank you, sir," McBride said. "Sorry to have troubled you."

The interview over, the man closed the door. It was white panelled with a round window in the top half. It grew large in my sight, like a door closing in a dream. And then everything went black for a moment, and then I was in a box or an enclosed, windowless space. In a flash of light, like lightning in a forest, I saw a girl with terrified, pleading eyes, her mouth covered with black Gaffer tape. It played out in my mind in a second or two, and then I was back on the street with DI McBride, who was ready to move on to the next house.

I placed my hand on McBride's arm and said, "Sir, this is going to sound terribly silly, but I think that the girl is still alive, and that that man is holding her prisoner. I'm not sure where, sir, but it may be in the boot of a car or the back of a van."

McBride looked down at me. His face seemed to hold the wisdom of the ages – amiably aided and abetted by his country's national drink, but I didn't know that at the time. He said, "Aye, girl, silly," and turned back towards the door.

The man looked less than pleased to see us again. McBride said, "I wonder, sir, if it would be possible to have a look in your garage."

The man said testily, "Have you got a search warrant?" The question turned an old man's willingness to indulge a young girl's intuition into a near-certainty that *something* was amiss.

"No, sir," McBride said. "Of course we don't. Why would we? I was just hoping you'd be kind enough to oblige us. It's possible that she was messing around, perhaps with a friend, and has got herself into some difficulty. Drugs perhaps?" This was lame, and McBride knew it, but he didn't care and it didn't matter. There would have to be a pretty compelling reason for the man *not* to open his garage.

The man considered, and then said, "Hold on. I'll get the keys."

He came out half a minute later and brushed passed us without making eye-contact. He unlocked the garage door and swung it up and open. The garage was more like a surrogate loft than a garage. There was no vehicle, but there were piles of old clothes and blankets; framed pictures; a broken office chair; a computer monitor; an old cot; and a pyramid built of paint pots. Tools and a stepladder hung off the side walls.

McBride said, "Do you not drive, sir?"

This was something that could easily be checked, so the man said, "Yes."

"A van, sir?" McBride said.

"I drive a van for my work," the man said. "Why?"

McBride said, "Can I ask you where it is now, sir – the van, I mean?"

"At the depot at work. We don't get to keep them for our private use."

McBride said, "I wonder if you'd be kind enough to tell us where you work, sir?"

"Bartons in Rainham. I do their deliveries."

I was listening to this while peering into an empty cardboard punnet sat atop the broken office chair. It was empty but for a balled up piece of paper. I lifted it out. It had been neatly done, as if for a game of office paper toss. I unfolded it, and had the sensation of my blood suddenly becoming very hot. In turquoise felt-tip pen, and in unsteady block capitals reminiscent of a small child's early crayoned attempts at printing, were the words: HELP ME. And below that in smaller letters with no space between them, the initials *HL*.

A trick of memory gives me a picture of the three of us frozen in time, two as yet unknowing, the other – me – holding ineffable significance in the shape of a scruffy piece of paper. I turned. Holding the piece of paper in both hands, like a child about to read to class, I said quite calmly, "Where is she?"

McBride turned to me inquiringly. The man said, "What?"

“Where is she?” I repeated. I waited a moment before passing the piece of paper to McBride.

The man snorted and said, “What is this? Am I being accused of something?”

McBride said, “Yes, sir, you are. You’re being accused of having knowledge of Hannah Lawrence. You’re being accused of having lied to us at the door. Why would you do that?”

“This is a stitch up,” the man said, but he didn't sound persuaded or persuasive.

“I want to search,” I said to McBride. “I want to find her.”

McBride simply nodded.

The man said, “You can’t do that. You have no right to search without a warrant. The *that* in question was my pulling open a side door that led into the house. I went into each and every room in the house and shouted her first name; then I stood in silence, waiting and hoping for a response. None came. Something about the man's mien – I still didn't know his name at this point – as I moved into the back garden caused a leap of hope in me. *Getting warm, Barbara*, I thought.

The man said, “You can’t do this. You have no right. I'm calling a lawyer.”

I was halfway across the lawn. I was finding him extraordinarily irritating, like a pettifogger insisting on adherence to procedure when the ship was sinking or the house burning. Of course, in his case, it had to do with desperation. With something of the air of a sulky teenager, I said, “I don't care what you do,” and, like a sulky teenager, meant it absolutely. There was a beech-coloured lean-to plastic shed at the end of the garden. The door was shut and padlocked. I asked for the key, but was already stooping for a stone to dash against the lock.

The man ran into the house, ostensibly to get the key, but I knew he was simply running. As did McBride, who went after him. It took me three attempts to break the padlock. I unhooked it and pulled open the door. The usual gardening tools: a rake, a lawn-mower, sheers, a hoe, a spade. And something, a box of some kind, covered with a grey blanket. I said, “Hannah?” Actually, and illogically, I whispered it, as though inviting her to share a secret. Repeating her name – this time aloud – I pulled the blanket off. Underneath was a battered old trunk, probably antique. As I knelt to find the means of opening it – the light was dreadful – I heard, or imagined I heard, a muffled thudding sound from within. The trunk was not padlocked, but the ornate hasp was secured instead with a metal tent peg. Crouching down, I pulled out the peg and pulled the hasp free of the staple. I straightened up to lift the lid. I struggled to do this, tearing the nail on the little finger of my left hand and drawing blood. A vision of myself, wine-glass in hand, complaining about this made me want to giggle. Fortified – or at least distracted – by this flight of whimsy, I lifted the lid.

Dark eyes found mine, it seemed, immediately. Questioning; imploring. Her mouth had been taped. She was lying on her side, facing front, towards me. Her wrists had been taped behind her back, and her legs, folded, had been similarly bound at the ankles. She was wearing blue jeans and a navy sweatshirt and white trainers.

I said something like, “Hannah, it’s okay. I'm a police officer. I'm going to pull the tape off your mouth – is that okay?”

She nodded, and I peeled the tape off her mouth. I did this quite slowly. Despite the notion that snatching it off, as it were, would have spared her discomfort, I thought it would be unpardonably discourteous. When I had successfully removed the tape, I simply dropped it into the trunk. I was not, I must confess, thinking at all about evidence at this juncture.

“Hannah, I'm going to try and get the tape off your ankles,” I said. I used a keyring penknife to cut or hack at the tape's edge – it had been wrapped around several times – and then tore it with brute force off her socks.

“Hannah, do you think you can stand up?”

She nodded shakily, and I thought: *How long have you been in there?* She was struggling to her feet with my support. Her hair was dark brown with dust and bits of dirt in it, her face red and blotchy from dried tears. We stepped out of the shed into a mizzly rain.

“Hannah,” I said gently. “If you turn round, I'll cut the tape off your wrists.”

She turned slowly, shuffling round on the spot. As I was cutting at the edge of the tape, I realized she was trembling; and as I tore the tape free of her wrists, the trembling got worse. I turned her round, intending to hug her, but she backed off and bent forward with her hands on her knees and started to heave like a cat coughing fur-balls. I realized she wanted to throw up, so allowed her space to do so. It came soon enough, mostly liquid – presumably she hadn't eaten in a while – and she hugged her stomach as though to expel more, though it probably had more to do with easing physical discomfort. I produced a clean tissue and offered it to her. She took it – snatched it rather – from my outstretched hand and used it to wipe her mouth and blow her nose. A sharp gust of wind sharpened the rain and rattled the wooden fences on either side of the garden. She shivered and I went to her and took her in my arms. She was still trembling. I heard a distant police siren, and wondered dimly if it had anything to do with us.

This incident turned out to be rather a mixed blessing for me. In a world where everyone’s desperately trying to get noticed – to the point where, incredibly, they’ll eat maggots, *et al*, on television – it got me noticed, though I was rather less than comfortable with the attention. I was rescued on the day by a senior officer and advised to go home. McBride was summoned to Superintendent Giles Barker’s office to be personally congratulated. Glancing at McBride’s report, Barker said, “I confess to being curious, Brian. What made you believe her?”

“She had a hunch, sir,” McBride said. “No reason not to follow it up.”

“I need hardly say, Brian, we’re all very happy you did.”

As McBride was leaving the office, Barker said, “Hell of a hunch, Brian.”

McBride paused in the doorway. “Aye, sir,” he said; “made my day. Don’t imagine she’ll be a PC for very long.”

It would be a lie to say I wasn’t flattered by all the subsequent attention and talk of a *career*, though I suffered for a while from what I came to think of as reverse anxiety dreams. Anxiety dreams express a fear of things that could happen – being unable to save a loved one from drowning, or a person you care about dying before you've had a chance to make peace with them. In my dreams, and there were several variations on the theme, I didn't open the piece of paper and we didn't rescue the girl. One ended with the muffled blackness of being trapped forever in the crate, another with a suffocating sense of shame as we walked away from the house. I always woke from these dreams with a rush of relief. Talk of a career was welcome, not least because my mother had expressed astonishment at my decision to join the police. I was, she opined, too sensitive and intelligent for the police force. My father countered this by saying that the police could do with a bit of intelligent sensitivity. I fear my mother rather imagined me an impecunious writer of Gothic prose.

It wasn’t until I became involved in a rather unpleasant piece of office politics that I began to think she might have had a point. I had just become a DS in the Met, which a couple of my male colleagues had failed to do. There was nothing remotely exceptional about this, and I didn’t give it a second thought, though there was some office banter about it, which turned out to be ill-

advised. Terry Knight, one of the DCs who had failed to get the promotion, said, "Not everyone has women's intuition to fall back on, Barbara." The next day I discovered that a female DC had made a formal complaint about this remark, and I was asked to join DI Linda Stanley in her office. She asked me if the remark had been made, to which I replied, "Yes, ma'am," because I didn't want to lie, and there were already several witnesses.

"Why didn't you make a complaint?" she asked.

"Because I didn't think there was anything to make a complaint about, ma'am."

"You don't think as women officers we should be complaining about sexism, then, Barbara?" She was sitting forward in her chair with her hands flat on the desk's surface.

"I didn't say that, ma'am," I replied.

"What *are* you saying, then, Barbara? That a remark about *women's intuition* isn't sexist?"

Since I was all at sea, I decided to take refuge in formality. "Ma'am, I'm not sure I should make any further comment on this incident until I've taken advice. You seem to be sufficiently exercised by it to have given this interview the air of a formal disciplinary investigation. I haven't made any complaint – formal or otherwise – and have no intention of doing so. And, as far as I'm aware, no complaint has been made against me. That being the case, I ask to be excused."

She considered for a moment, then said, "I think you're being rather naïve, Barbara. It matters; it matters a great deal. This is how we're undermined in the workplace." The hands remained flat on the desktop; a physical attempt to control her emotions. "We never win fair and square. We never win because we're better. We win because we have nice tits, or flash our thighs, or get by on *women's intuition*. Or perhaps we simply put out for the boss."

I said, "Ma'am, I don't understand. Are you asking me to make a formal complaint against DC Knight?"

She said, "You must do what you think is right, Barbara."

It didn't end there. Later that day at lunch, Ruth, my closest colleague, asked me "confidentially" if I'd made a complaint against Terry Knight. She at least had the decency to sound as though she thought the idea improbable. I told her frankly that I hadn't, but that someone else had, and by so doing had placed me in an invidious position. I related the substance of my interview with DI Stanley, and asked Ruth, as someone presumably less "naïve" than myself, what she made of it.

Ruth said, "Well, she obviously wants you to make a formal complaint."

"I gathered that, Ruth." I said. "But why? What's she got against Terry?"

"Nothing, as far as I know. She's just big on stamping out sexism and every other ism. I think there's a bit of history. She's had a few run-ins with male colleagues in the past, and she's represented a few female officers in preliminary disciplinary hearings. She's not afraid to put her head above the parapet. She makes people nervous, particularly her male superiors, who regard her as political."

"She made me nervous," I said. "You sound like you rather admire her."

"I do," she said. "We could do with a few more of her sort. No-one should feel bullied or undermined at work, Barbara. And it's not always obvious. It's often done so subtly that the person starts to wonder if maybe they've got it wrong, if maybe it's their fault, if maybe they're the problem. It can have a negative impact on your health – mental and physical."

"Ruth, are you saying I should complain?" I asked.

"I don't know, Barbara; I wasn't there. You clearly weren't bothered or offended by the remark; but how would you have felt if it had been directed at someone else? Me, for instance, or

a WPC who'd just passed their Sergeant's exam? We don't know who complained, so we don't know if there's more too it than an honest belief that the remark was out of order. So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. By which I mean I'm not going to complain – for the not very complicated reason that I didn't see anything to complain about at the time. Presumably they're free to act on the other person's complaint."

"Stays fairly trivial if you don't complain, though," Ruth said, "as I'm sure you know."

I said, "It was directed at me, Ruth. He addressed me by name. It referenced an incident in my past. Possibly it was gauche, but I don't believe it was malicious."

Ruth said, "Don't be *the right sort of girl*, Barbara."

"Sorry?" I must have sounded defensive.

"*The right sort of girl*, Barbara," Ruth repeated. "The right sort of girl knows when a chap's just kidding, when nothing's meant by *it – it* being anything from a suggestive remark in the canteen to a pat on the rear in the stationery cupboard or a full-on grope at the office party. The right sort of girl is discreet and doesn't go making a fuss about things; the right sort of girl understands that she shouldn't take things too seriously, or go telling tales out of school. Linda Stanley's very much *the wrong sort of girl.* All the boys are afraid of Linda Stanley. There's lots of room for manoeuvre in between, but don't ever be *the right sort of girl*." I must have looked sick because she added, "You can tell me to fuck off if you like, Barbara. Actually, it occurs to me I've never heard you swear."

I said, "Fuck off, Ruth."

She grinned. "Well done."

It rumbled on. Terry Knight sought me out for a word that afternoon. I hurried him into a small interview room and asked him what he wanted. He looked a bit shell-shocked. There had obviously been words. "I think I'm in trouble, Barbara. Someone's made a formal complaint against me."

"Well, you made an asinine remark in a roomful of people, one of whom complained. Well done: a lesson learned the hard way." He looked at me dolefully. "Oh, you want to know if it was me, Terry, don't you? You're simply trying to establish precisely how much hot water you're in. Gosh, and for a moment I thought you might be concerned that you'd caused me offence. Silly me."

"Barbara?" he pleaded.

"Don't' ever place me in a position like this again, Terry. If you do, I'll pursue the complaints procedure to the buffers and beyond. I don't know who complained, and I wouldn't tell you if I did." I opened the door. "I don't want to talk to you about this again."

The following day, I found out who had made the complaint, because she announced herself to me and requested a private word. Her name was Tania Clifford, and she was/is the type of person for whom manners oblige me to disguise my distaste. I think she was attractive, but she was so well-groomed it was difficult to tell. Nothing was left to chance. I thought she looked false and *over*-groomed. She even *power dressed*, and comported herself as though every moment of her time were filled with something vital. She was obviously and unashamedly ambitious. She said, "I'd like to discuss my complaint against DC Knight. Do you mind?"

"I'd really rather not," I said. I think I must have sounded pained.

"I understand you don't support it," she said.

"Do you?" I said. "I can't imagine where you'd have got such an understanding."

"I gather you won't be filing a complaint of your own," she persisted.

"Gathering as well as understanding." I felt myself slipping towards sarcasm, so I asked a direct question. "Tania, what is it you want?"

"I'd like to know why you don't support my complaint," she said.

"I wasn't aware that complaints were something for which you canvassed support, Tania. If you have a grievance, make a complaint; if you have a serious grievance, make it a formal complaint. Your complaint – formal or otherwise – actually has nothing to do with me."

She said, "Don't you think you're being rather naïve?" Ah, that word again. "You're *de facto* indicating that you think there's nothing to complain about. Since the remark was directed at you, they are unlikely to proceed if you don't at least indicate support for doing so. It's not just your own position you have to consider here, Barbara, but the position of every woman who comes into the police force."

I said, "Tania, your complaint is your prerogative. Where I stand is nothing to the point, and is, frankly, none of your business. I don't want to be rude, but I don't want you or anyone else telling me how I should think or act. In the interests of seemliness, can we leave the subject there?"

Tania said, "Think about it, Barbara. I'm not the only one who thinks this complaint should proceed." I took this to be a reference to DI Stanley.

I didn't complain, nor did I support Tania's complaint, and was thereafter troubled by the notion that I might have made the wrong decision. Perhaps I was being *naïve*.

Chapter Four.

Amberton police station has its address at 4 Piper Street on the east side of Amberton known as Abbey Green, mostly or wholly on account of the abbey surrounded by a green. It stands back off the street obscured from view by London Plane trees. Our senior burghers prefer not to overstate our community's need for law enforcement.

My office, or the office wherein I worked, was built for function rather than comfort, though the facilities manager had assured me that it met all workplace Health and Safety regulations. There were two desks, one of which you could sit behind and, as it were, interview or have a meeting with someone; the other was smaller and pushed against a side wall. Both desks accommodated a phone and a computer and a paper tray stack. There was a slide door cupboard, where you could hang your coat or dump your bag and/or brolly.

Simon was annoyed with me, or perhaps *displeased* would be a more accurate description, though he would doubtless have used a more pub-masculine expression like *pissed off*. He was – somewhat – *pissed off* with me. I had offended him by not speaking on the return journey. I do not, as some people do, enjoy speculating aloud or *brainstorming* in the very early stages of an investigation because so very much is possible then. The less you know about something, the more you can speculate about it. Knowledge, evidence, closes off certain avenues and areas of speculation. Indeed, an investigation can be deemed a success when there is no room left for reasonable speculation.

I did worry that I wasn't terribly good for Simon. He didn't much care for me. An impression to begin with – vague at first, and then sharply, regrettably, distinct. I had heard him disparagingly refer to DC Neil Taylor as a card-carrying member of the Barbara Black fan club. Neil, it seems, had openly disagreed with Simon's poor opinion of me.

"You don't much care for me, do you, Simon?" Framed as a question for politeness' sake. Something like it had to be said; it was not a trivial indulgence. We were alone in the office with other things to be getting on with.

He took a moment to shift gear, then said, "Whatever my feelings about you personally, ma'am, I hope I don't allow them to affect our professional relationship, or the way in which I do my job." Very formal, probably rehearsed.

"Can't be easy for you, though, Simon. Rather a strain I would have thought. It would be perfectly understandable if you felt moved to canvass your colleagues on the subject in the hope of finding some who shared your *feelings* – though obviously you'd want to be discreet about it."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. Bleached of feeling; he might have been responding to a request for a file.

Was it my fault? I worried that perhaps it was – at least, partly. I had thought him faintly ridiculous. An initial impression, which I'd worked hard to mitigate. Ten years my junior, he had a taste for designer clothes, and was always sharply suited and booted, his silk tie neatly knotted in place. He styled his hair with gel; *made* it defy wind and gravity. Is it unfair to judge the apparently superficial superficially? Surely one should have more personality than one's clothes.

"Check up on the family, Simon. Find out their history. I'm particularly interested in Martha's perspective, since she seems to be the long-term support network."

"Martha who?" he said. He had screwed his face into the worried expression of a man who might have missed something, but didn't think so.

"Martha I-don't-know-her-surname-but-would-like-you-to-find-out-and-speak-to-her."

"Who is she? What's she got to do with anything?"

"She's the lady with the lamp, Simon, the shoulder to cry on, the stalwart presence, the dependable support network. He phoned her while we were there. She's probably on her way round as we speak. I'd like you to meet her."

"What's my reason for going back so soon?"

"Concern, Simon," I said, smiling. "You can do concern."

A moment after Simon had gone, Ron Turner, the desk sergeant, put his head round the door and said portentously, "A potentially delicate situation, I think, ma'am." I wondered if he'd watched Simon go before coming in. He had been with the police nearly forty years and was discreet to a fault.

The potentially delicate situation was Lisa Markham, and the situation had achieved, or surpassed, its potential: Lisa Markham had just reported a dead person missing.

Chapter Five.

Superintendent Wilson wanted to see me – or, rather, *requested the pleasure of my company in his office*, which meant he wanted to see me, but I appreciated the nicety of expression. I tapped on the door and waited for his "Come in," before entering. It came immediately and was less a command than an invitation. He was standing at the large, blinded window that looked down over Piper Street and the plane trees at the front of the station. He turned and smiled as I came in. He was a tall man with thinning dark hair and green eyes. He had the kind of straight up-and-down bearing that suited his uniform, though he never looked stiff or overly formal in it. He wore it, not it him.

"Sit down, Barbara. Thank you for coming so promptly. How's the Mansfield case going?" He had seated himself behind his desk, and was waiting benignly for my reply.

As well he might. Wasn't it just a teensy bit early to be asking the question? I said, "As well as can be expected, sir. We're still in the very early stages."

"I understand Lisa Markham's involved."

"Yes, sir," I said. Perhaps he had the whole station bugged. More likely, though, was that someone had felt the need to inform him. Perhaps he was disappointed I hadn't.

"Do you know who Lisa Markham is?" he asked.

"Daughter of the local MP apparently. I hadn't heard of her until today. Does it matter, sir? It's not like she's been arrested or accused of anything. She walked in here of her own volition and reported Adrian Mansfield missing. She was very upset, and very exercised that we should take her seriously. Obviously we're now just a bit interested in what she was so upset about."

He considered for a moment. "Barbara, there's rather more to young Ms Markham than meets the uncritical eye. She runs with what my mother would have called a fast crowd. Only she's been doing it in the digital age. There's rather a lot of her online, Barbara, most of it uploaded by her or her friends, and some of it is quite unseemly. Or perhaps *racy* would be a better word. I don't believe the young have the faintest notion of *unseemliness*."

"I'm not sure young people can be unseemly, sir," I said. "They can behave badly, but they can't be unseemly. Notions of seemliness, duty, responsibility, acting against one's own desires for a greater good, come with age and maturity."

"Yes," he agreed, and he sounded rather depressed about it. "You need to be aware that there will be a lot of media interest in this story, Barbara. I intend holding a press conference this afternoon, so I'd appreciate you keeping me up to date. I also expect you to attend, preferably looking happy and willing."

I must have sighed, probably from the effort of not doing so. Superintendent Wilson was a believer in openness – or *transparency*, as he liked to refer to it. More precisely, he was interested in the impression of openness and transparency. The press should never feel they were regarded as the enemy. On the contrary, they were to be treated as an important part of the community, who had a right – indeed, a duty – to report what was going on in that community. I thought this a tad sanctimonious. The press were, and are, and have always been, sensation-seekers driven by market forces. Reporters pursue stories to further their careers, and to make

money for their proprietors and themselves. This was not an attitude of mind of which Superintendent Wilson approved. At least, not officially, and certainly not publicly.

On this occasion, I merely raised a practical objection. "We won't have very much of substance to tell them, sir," I pointed out.

He smiled. "Always the best time to tell them everything, I find, Barbara. How do you want to approach young Ms Markham?"

"Straightforwardly, sir," I said. "I would like to find out what was so upsetting her when she reported Adrian Mansfield missing. She clearly thought him in some peril. Now she knows he's dead, she seems calm and composed. An extraordinary change in demeanour."

"How did she find out about his death?"

"She asked me and I told her," I said.

He frowned, but only slightly. "I'm sure you know what you're doing, Barbara," he said, meaning he'd have felt inclined to keep that particular detail from her. "Did you happen to ask her what she's doing in Amberton? It's hardly one of her usual haunts."

"Her mother, presumably," I said.

"They're estranged, Barbara. Not on speaking terms. Their relationship didn't survive the difficult teenage years, I understand."

"What about her father?"

"Very supportive of her mother's career."

"Siblings?"

"A twelve-year-old brother. At boarding school. She hasn't seen him for three years. She's at university in France, and prefers socialising in Italy and Switzerland to coming home. Can't say I blame her."

"How do you know all this, sir?" I asked.

"I know Melinda Markham *quite* well," he said. He said it somewhat self-consciously, as though fearful of appearing to name-drop. "And, as I say, there's rather a lot of young Ms Markham on the internet."

I smiled and said, "You're not friends, then?"

"Me? No, I don't move in such exalted circles, Barbara. Anyway, I'm not convinced politicians have room for friends; their social circle tends to be furnished with people who are potentially useful to them. It's all about reciprocity in the game of getting on."

"Can I assume Ms Markham MP will be getting a courtesy call sometime soon?" I asked.

He smiled. "You can be shockingly sniffy sometimes, Barbara – insultingly so." There was something of amusement in his tone, also a touch of rebuke. "No, she will not. Should there come a point when we need to interview her in connection with the investigation, then we will treat her with the same professionalism and courtesy that we would extend to any other member of the public. At the moment, we have no need or obligation to speak to her. And, for the record, Barbara, I don't make those sorts of *courtesy calls*."

I said nothing, though I tried to look apologetic. I had, I realized, inadvertently, and rather crassly, questioned his integrity. My general distaste for politics and how it works had clumsily translated into a particular and unpleasant suggestion that that's how it would work here, too. I had been thinking about her getting the – "Melinda, don't know if this might cause you political difficulties, but just thought..." – phone-call, and then consulting her PR advisor.

I took refuge in a question, a fairly urgent one, since she was sitting in an interview room. "What are we going to do about Ms Markham *fille*?"

He smiled again. “That’s up to you, Barbara. She’s your witness. But do bear in mind that she is a witness. She’s free to go whenever she wants.”

“She’s shown no particular inclination to do so,” I said.

“How very fortunate for you. Has she asked for a lawyer?”

“No,” I said; “she asked me if she ought to be asking for a lawyer – a subtle but important distinction. I think she was teasing me.”

“Go carefully, Barbara,” he said indulgently. “We wouldn’t want to offer excuses for unsuitable persons to mount high horses, now would we?”

Chapter Six.

"I'm going to be frank with you, Lisa," I said. "We – the police – are inclined to take an unsympathetic view of your change of demeanour. You were deeply concerned about Adrian while he was alive, but seem fairly sanguine about his death. One interpretation might be that he's no danger to you dead, but was while he was alive. Perhaps you're relieved. Sad, too – of course; you're not a monster – but nonetheless relieved, which would suggest to us that you're fairly sure he didn't get around to doing whatever it was you feared he was going to do."

She played with her hair and smiled, showing perfect white teeth; asked somewhat coyly, "Am I free to go, Chief Inspector?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course. In fact, I'm going, too. You can let yourself out." This was a course of action I knew would be frowned upon, or questioned, by some of my colleagues, but I could see no immediate purchase in detaining her. And I could easily argue that letting her go made sense politically. She had come in and emotionally reported a young man missing. The young man had turned up dead. So what? It wasn't, I would argue, grounds for holding her. Simon would assume I'd succumbed to political pressure; he'd understand and sympathise with that.

I went to find DC Neil Taylor, who was doing preliminary work on Adrian Mansfield's computer. Neil was a gangly, boyish-looking man with spiky brown hair. His light grey suit looked too big for him. I liked Neil, for the not very complicated reason that he liked me.

"What have you got, Neil? Anything useful?"

"You tell me, ma'am." He handed me three type-written sheets of paper with three different headings: *Contact List – Instant Messaging; Contact List – email; Bookmarks – browsers*. Neil was methodical and meticulous, and consciously fought a tendency to become bogged down in details at the expense of the bigger picture.

I scanned the lists. Lisa Markham, unsurprisingly, appeared on both the email and instant messaging contact lists. I said, "Can I take these, Neil? I'd like to make a start on these names straight away."

"Yes," he said. "I can always print out another one." Which meant: *though I'd rather you'd waited until I'd finished*.

"Anything that stands out?" I asked.

"Yes – he wasn't very security conscious. Obligingly allowed his browser to save all his passwords. Handy for us." Which meant he wanted to get on with it. He looked up. "I'll have everything given time, ma'am. Emails, blogs, social networking, the lot. This is a goldmine."

I left him to his goldmine and returned to the/my office, where I stood in the middle of the room and took a deep breath. Activity. I was avoiding, or stepping out of, activity. Activity is the enemy of thought. Activity is doing, and one usually does when one doesn't want to think. Paul, my partner, was fond of saying, "I have spent my whole life trying to reach a situation where I could comfortably do nothing, a situation most people work hard to avoid." People like activity. Even pointless activity is preferable to no activity at all. Young people get bored because they have nothing to *do*. They misbehave because they have nothing to *do*. Solution? Activity. Give

them something to do. Keep them occupied. Panic in the ranks? Answer: action, activity. *While we tended the injured, we didn't have time to reflect on our own plight. Our Commanding Officer always kept us busy*. Activity, the importance thereof. It is, however, regrettably or not, often an antidote to, or a substitute for, thinking. Action, any action, is better than indecision. We must do something, the assumption goes, with the something always assumed to be better than doing nothing. Small wonder, then, that people tend to define themselves and others by what they do. I once had a temporary clerical job, in which myself and three other temps found ourselves with nothing to do except pass the time. While I smiled inwardly and thought myself fortunate, the others, despite being paid, were bothered and bored, and complained about having nothing to *do* – or *dooo*. It has always made me wary – in myself and others – of doing for the sake of doing, or *not* doing.

Simon returned carrying a blue envelope folder and wearing a pleased with himself expression. One might almost have thought it had been his idea to return to the Mansfields'. Martha (Bottomley) had, indeed, been there, and had been able and willing to shed a good deal of light on the personal darkness of others. Supportive friend or death-watch beetle, it hardly mattered, for the facts she provided were stark and dark enough in themselves. Adrian Mansfield had had a sister, who four years ago at the age of fourteen had stood on a level crossing in the path of an inter-city train travelling at ninety miles an hour. Suicide? Certainly. No-one was in any doubt. She had left a note for her parents. *It's probably my fault*, she had written, *but I just can't bear it. I hate waking up in the morning. Every day hurts, and school is a torture. I'm sorry. Love, Emma*. It transpired that young Emma had been a member of an online group in which the – *dreary, dreadful, deathly* – dullness of the ordinary was discussed at length by sensitive, bright young things, who feared more than anything the prospect of a normal life. *Normal* was a word used disparagingly, as was *ordinary* and *respectable*. A young man called Anthony had written: *When I'm depressed, I sometimes wish I was more like my sister – so thick and happy and normal*. Unlike their *normal* peers, these young people concerned themselves with spelling and grammar, and, more subtly, mode of expression. Gemma, from Warwickshire, had written: *My mother's dead inside. She's obsessed with respectability, always has been. The moment my dad offered it to her, she respectably dropped her knickers*. And Jane, from Brighton: *I would rather die than be ordinary. What's the point of being alive if it just means a shit job, a boring relationship, and a photo album of dull events.* Sam, from Derby: *So far I've managed to avoid THE TALK – you know the one: about how the world doesn't owe you a living and you only get out what you put in. You know, the icing on the cake of parental betrayal*. And so it went on, young people railing against the "curse of being alive". Jeremy, from Norfolk: *They want to train us to be good little drones. The best you can be is something for someone else – a good student or employee, a good father or mother, a good wife or husband, a good son or daughter. And while you're busy being and doing all that, the bit of you that's really you – the bit that might have mattered to you – withers and dies unlamented*.

Martha confessed herself fascinated by this. She was, according to Simon, a weird, middle-aged woman. I assumed I could rely on the assessment of her age. She lived on her own in a bungalow – which she owned – in Upper Cotely, a village a mile or so north of Amberton. She had worked as a teacher and a social worker, though she had not been professionally involved with the Mansfields, and now wrote articles on philosophy and gave talks – "*not* lectures, sergeant; those are a professor's chore" – on writing. While condoling with the Mansfields on their daughter's suicide, the circumstances surrounding it, or the reasons for it, had pricked something like professional interest. She had found the youngsters online conversations

sufficiently compelling to download them to her computer's hard disk, since she had feared the content might be deleted or replaced. Simon asked if he could see it, and she invited him to follow her home.

She tore off at law-breaking speeds, and briefly drove on the wrong side of the road. She took the turning into her gravel driveway without dropping speed or gear. So abrupt was this manoeuvre that Simon shot past, and was forced to brake and back up before making the turning. She left her car and came up to him, apparently exhilarated. "Imagine if everyone did that?" she said in a clipped, fruity voice. "That would shake 'em up."

"Sorry?" Simon mistakenly assumed she was talking about the driving.

"Killed themselves because life wasn't good enough. Get away from the crappy creed of surviving at any cost. Once we lose the fear of death, we'll demand more of life. These kids are ahead of the evolutionary curve." She turned and led the way into the house. Simon followed her into what he assumed was her study. It was a large, square, plushly carpeted room with a high ceiling. Three of the walls had floor to ceiling bookcases filled with books and papers and ornaments. A shelf at waist height accommodated – somewhat oddly – an old black and white portable television. Simon remarked on it.

Martha smiled. "Yes, it's odd how old technology captures the attention. I think it's because it has an accelerated ageing process – it ages faster than the things around it, and strikes an incongruous note. When one sees an old television or radio, one has the sensation of meeting an old friend mostly forgotten and curiously unchanged. There is a shock of recognition followed by a sensation of nostalgia. Isn't there something – a joke perhaps – about seeing a boy or girl from school, only to remember that, of course, it couldn't possibly be them, for they, too, would have aged with the passing of time? Time and memory play havoc with the human soul. No other animal is so burdened."

She had started her computer, which sat atop a capacious mahogany antique desk with lion's paw feet and a bottle-green leather inlay. A laptop being used as a base unit, it was connected to a large flat screen monitor, a printer, and a keyboard and mouse. She sat down, hand on mouse, and stared intently at the screen. It might just have been concentration, but Simon thought he detected a fanatical gleam in her eye. She clicked the mouse and the printer whirred into life. She stood up abruptly and waited impatiently for the printer to finish printing. She waved the page in the air to aid the drying of the ink, and then handed it to Simon. "Bear in mind," she said, "that this was written by a fourteen-year-old girl. I'll put the rest on a pen drive for you."

Simon was looking at a short story, single-spaced, on a single page of A4. It was called *The Dead Commuter*. He settled himself in a nearby chair and read.

The daily awakening. Aching body, fuzzy, tired mind. The alarm, cruel and persistent. You move. You have to move to turn it off. Hit snooze. So tired. Please – another five minutes! Another five minutes of precious sleep! It sounds again, and you move again. Turn it off, properly this time. Sit up now, stand up now, move down the hall. Run a bath. Hot water, easing pain.

Dry. Stand in towels, brushing teeth. Dress. Don't speak. There are others to consider. Misery, at close quarters, is infectious. They don't want to hear it. You are ready, ready at the same time as you were ready yesterday, ready to leave the burrow, ready to do your living-making thing. You hang the card around your neck, the one that grants admission to your place of work. The card is a badge of belonging and ownership. You belong and they own. They take the card away if you leave or are thrown out.

Leave your home, drone, and walk to the station in all weathers. Bitter cold this morning, dawn's light coming grudgingly. Take your free paper and board the train. The train starts here and is empty. There's a faint, sour smell, the stink of the dirty, disinfected water used to clean it, and the cursory, sloppy nature of the job done. Sit, settle, read. You've made it this far.

What little peace you have won't last. The train will stop, others will board. They will talk – to each other or on phones. Coarse, loud, ignorant voices, the men's oafish and vulgar, the women's slack and twanging. "Yeah... Nah... Yeah... Nah... Know-wot-I-mean?... Innit..."

You put your coat on, shoulder your bag, and leave the now crowded train. You cross a platform. A lumbering tube train will take you the rest of the way. Again, you will get a seat. You always do, and you're grateful for it. Sit, read. People rarely talk on tube trains, and those who do can barely be heard over the roar of the train itself, as it grunts and wheezes its way from station to station. The train – with you on it – comes to the end of the line. You're reminded not to forget your belongings. You leave the train, and it hisses behind you like a tired beast. You have a fifteen-twenty minute walk to work. You walk briskly. You tell yourself the exercise does you good.

You arrive at the office building, and your card lets you in. A little green light tells you the door will open if you push it. There are six floors. You want the third. You could walk, but decide to take the lift. You leave the lift, and your card lets you into the work-floor. Rows and rows of computers. People staring at monitors, hands on mice. They are work units, these people, numbers on a spreadsheet.

As you approach your desk, you recognise people individually. You greet them, and they you. At your desk, you drop your bag and remove your coat. You sit down. You greet the people on nearby desks as they arrive. You log on to your computer and start work.

You will do this tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after, and the day after that...

When Simon looked up from the page, Martha said, "Emma Mansfield wrote that a week before she died. Don't you think it's rather magnificent?"

"Magnificent?" Simon was slightly bemused. "I'm not sure I'm qualified to judge. Would it even be interesting if she hadn't killed herself? It's well enough written – good for an A in English I'd have thought. You tell me, ma'am, would a teacher be disturbed if a student handed this in – maybe for an exercise called *Going to work*?"

"I'd certainly have been impressed. It speaks of discontent."

"A fairly common discontent," Simon said. "No-one likes getting up for work, and no-one likes commuting, especially if they have to put up with crowded trains. Grown-ups moan about it all the time. It's something a sensitive teenager would pick up on."

"Perhaps," she said testily. Simon's phlegmatic approach was irritating her. "I think the title speaks of a rejection of the adult world. Its promise – of freedom and control – is a lie. Children yearn to be grown-up, only to find themselves standing on a crowded slave train five days a week to keep the economy ticking over. Emma Mansfield saw the lie before she had to live it."

Simon said, "A young woman killed herself, ma'am; that can never be a good thing."

Martha handed him the pen drive. "Unless you choose to see it as a philosophical victory. I think that's how she'd have liked us to see it."

"Do you want this back, ma'am?"

"What? Oh, the pen drive. If you remember, Sergeant. I won't sue if you forget."

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"Sounds like an interesting lady, Simon," I said.

"Dangerous," Simon said.

"Dangerous, Simon? Why dangerous?"

"She thinks these kids are right," he said. "A retired teacher who thinks it's a good idea for teenagers to kill themselves because they don't want to be normal. Imagine if everyone thought like that."

I smiled. "Yes," I said. "Imagine. I think that's her point, don't you? Imagine if people in dull, boring jobs started dying of boredom. Who would we get to do the dull, boring jobs? Business leaders would be up in arms and their organisations would be urging governments to educate children to be more tolerant of boredom. Someone has to do the dull, unpleasant stuff, Simon. What would you have them do – smile and think themselves fortunate while they're doing it?"

"So you agree with her?" This was said huffily, as though I were taking an unreasonable position simply to annoy him.

"It's a point of view, Simon?" I said. "An interesting one, too. She isn't arguing that it's a good idea for teenagers to kill themselves; she's merely suggesting that there might be understandable reasons for them doing so, which I would have thought was obvious. Not to shock you, Simon, but I take the view that I have a right to take my own life in circumstances of my own choosing, and logically this is a right I extend to you and others. People who disagree with this view are claiming the right to decide how other people should live and die. There's little point discussing suicide if your starting point is that it's always wrong, and that people should always be stopped from doing it."

There was a knock on the door – a token one, for it was wide open. Sergeant Turner. He said, "Message for you, ma'am. There's a Mr Alan Mansfield wants to see you about his son. He's rather insistent and rather intoxicated. I've taken his car keys for his own good – informally, you understand – and put him in the small interview room with a cup of coffee and a sandwich."

I said, "Thanks, Ron." To Simon, I said, "Good work, Simon. Go through the pen drive and see what you make of it. It would be interesting to know if any of the other teenagers committed suicide."

"We know one did," Simon said. "Jeremy from Norfolk. Jeremy Collins; eighteen years old. Posted his suicide note on his blog and hanged himself from a tree in his local park. Made the front pages of the local press. Martha much admires his literary output as well."

Something to consider while I called Raymond – to confirm that now or soonish would be a convenient time to formally identify Adrian Mansfield's body. Raymond said he was – "as always" – at my disposal. So the grim but routine task of taking Alan Mansfield to the mortuary to identify his son's body. I often find myself worrying about routine things because I worry about the dangers of routines. Routines can be followed coldly and unthinkingly. I could simply have ordered a car and had Alan taken to the mortuary, but I worried about the state he was in, and wondered if it wouldn't be more seemly, more *feeling*, to take him myself.

I went into the interview room and found him sitting at the table with his hands folded on the surface. He had eaten the sandwich – the plate lay empty save for a few crumbs – and drained the coffee-mug. He looked up slowly and said, "Please thank Sergeant Turner for me; he was very kind. You will remember, won't you?" He sounded emotional, maudlin even.

"Of course," I said. It struck me for no very good reason that the sandwich had been made rather than bought. It seemed a rather poignant detail. "Do you not think it would be better to do this another time, sir?"

"No," he said. "Now's a very good time. Now's the best time." I assumed he was referring to his level of intoxication. The chair scraped back as he stood up.

Chapter Seven.

Amberton County Mortuary is attached to Amberton General Hospital, which is situated on the outskirts of Amberton on the south side, *en route* to Little Canley, a village less than half a mile distant. The hospital, a modern development, has its address and main entrance on South Cross Street, a main road running south east out of Amberton – residential on one side with lakes and forest on the other. The mortuary's main entrance is on a side street called Barn Gate Road, sometimes mistakenly rendered as Barngate Road.

Nothing was said on the journey. Alan Mansfield had got into the back of the car like a suspect and sat in the middle staring out the windscreen with his hands clasped between his knees. The day had clouded over, the sky moving hills of white and grey. I parked the car and turned off the engine. We sat for a moment without speaking. Finally, we made eye-contact in the rear-view mirror, and I turned round to do it properly. "In your own time, sir," I said softly.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Yes."

I got out of the car and opened the back door for him. He climbed out and smiled bleakly at me. For no very good reason, I took his arm and we walked into the mortuary together. Raymond – informed of our arrival by the reception nurse – had come up to meet us. He was wearing surgical greens, including a cap and mask. He said quietly by way of acknowledgement, "Barbara; Mr Mansfield." He did not introduce himself. "The bereaved aren't interested in who I am," he had explained. "Why should they be? I am a functionary with a grim function. No-one wants to hear, 'Hello, I'm Raymond Burton, your pathologist, and I'll be showing you your dead relative today. Thank you for coming.'"

Behind, or beyond, the surgical greens, Raymond was a quietly handsome if slightly unkempt man two years my senior. Had he troubled to shave and shampoo regularly, he'd have had matinee idol good looks. I liked him better for not caring, though. He could be grossly and humorously insensitive in the face of death, but in the presence of relatives became still and solid and self-effacing.

I stood beside Alan as Raymond folded the sheet down off Adrian Mansfield's face. There was no shock or physical reaction. He simply said, "Yes, that's Adrian Mansfield, my son."

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I drove him home and insisted on going in with him. He immediately poured himself another drink and swallowed it in a single gulp. He said, "Would you like a cup of tea? Or coffee? Perhaps you prefer coffee. The kettle's full. It's really no bother. I just have to switch it on."

I felt a sliver of unease. I said, "Your wife, Mr Mansfield?"

"Sleeping. Sedatives. She's not well. Hasn't been for many years. Not since Emma..." He raised the switch on the kettle and an orange light came on. He said, "Sorry. Do you mind?" – indicating the mugs – "I desperately need the loo. Excuse me."

I spooned instant coffee into two mugs and stood with my arms folded waiting for the kettle to boil. I was pouring hot water into the second mug when I heard, quite calmly and without

alarm, a crashing sound from upstairs, like a piece of furniture falling to the floor. I ran up the stairs to investigate. I ignored *Adrian's Den*, and entered what I assumed, correctly, was the master bedroom. The room was decorated in shades of cream and green. The curtains were closed. In the subdued light, I could see Anne Mansfield, dressed in pyjamas, lying atop an immaculately made king size bed with something protruding from her chest. I turned the light on, and had time to register a kitchen knife buried in her chest up to the hilt before being distracted by a scuffing noise from across the hall. I ran towards the source of the sound – into a spare bedroom or storeroom. The room was white and unfurnished save for a wardrobe and a thin pair of curtains. The floorboards were naked and speckled with paint. There was a black hole in the ceiling and the silhouette of a man dancing in mid-air, like a marionette with twisted strings. A metal stepladder lay folded on the floor.

Alan Mansfield had hanged himself, or was in the process of so doing. I ran to the kitchen for a knife with which to cut him down, but I was thinking: *Cut him down for what? To charge him with the murder of his wife? So he can spend time, lots of time, in prison or a mental institution reflecting on the destruction of his family? Better, surely, that he should die*. But I was also thinking: *Hanging's tricky. If you don't snap the neck, it's slow strangulation*. I ran back up the stairs, armed with a carving knife and a pair of kitchen scissors. Alan Mansfield was blue in the face and had stopped moving save for the occasional grotesque twitch. I put the stepladder up under him, so that his legs would be immediately supported to some extent. I climbed the ladder and attempted to cut the "rope" with the carving knife. It wasn't easy. He had used a plastic coated washing line or something similar and doubled it. Straining and leaning backwards, I sawed through it rather than cut it cleanly. It snapped and he slid down the front of my body onto the ladder, and then the floor. He lay there like a guy, its face painted purple. I descended the stepladder carefully, as though I were going down rickety stairs, moving forwards rather than backwards, and gingerly hopped over his body from the bottom step. I saw myself doing this – third person, as it were – and had an urge to giggle at the drunken daintiness of it.

I knelt down on the floor and used the kitchen scissors to cut both lines at the back of his neck, where they had been slip-knotted as one, and then used my mobile to call for assistance. My voice sounded oddly detached, like an echo in a tunnel. I left the room and went back into the master bedroom. It was like looking at or into a surrealist painting or a still from a horror film. The room was so neat it might have been a picture from a catalogue – except, of course, for the dead woman lying on the bed with a knife buried in her chest. Her eyes were closed, and her arms were at her sides. But for the knife, she might have been dozing. She had been dead a little while. I assumed Alan had killed her after Simon had left with Martha Bottomley, though it might have been done earlier, possibly after the departure of myself and Simon. I would have to find out if Martha had spoken to Anne Mansfield.

When the doorbell rang, it occurred to me – idly, I have to say – that I might have spent my time attempting to resuscitate Alan. I had cut him down, though, to relieve suffering, not to save his life; and though it wasn't uppermost in my mind – indeed, I don't think I was thinking about it at all – I would, if asked, have assumed he was now dead.

I opened the door and normalcy and procedure rushed in. It doubtless had to do with urgency, but there was nonetheless something unseemly about their eagerness to get in and on. I felt curiously invaded, trespassed upon, forced to spectate at a show of vulgar activity. It was an absurd and fleeting sensation, and had something to do with propriety by proxy.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" DC Neil Taylor, looking concerned. Understandably so, since the officer in charge was standing with her arms folded, gazing out the kitchen window; had

been so doing for the best part of five minutes – which is a good deal of *stillness* given what was going on around her. The window overlooked the rear garden, as neatly kept as the house. A stepping-stone path curved gently down the lawn to the bottom of the garden, where a green plastic compost bin stood in a bed of multi-coloured gravel shrouded by a tree.

I smiled, doubtless somewhat bleakly, and said quietly, "Thank you, Neil. Yes, I'm fine."

So an ugly, desperate dash for death in the end. When, I wondered, had he prepared the "scaffold"? The "noose" had been securely tied to a rafter in the loft and dropped through the trapdoor. He had climbed the ladder, put the noose around his neck, and then kicked the ladder away. He had been trapped into acting immediately, since he could not risk my discovering his wife's body. He would have assumed, not unreasonably, that I would have arrested him, thus thwarting his intended suicide. I had – unintentionally – done him a disservice. Had I known everything, I confess I would have allowed him to enter the house alone.

"Ma'am?" Concern tinged with urgency. Something about me was giving cause for concern, quite possibly *alarm*. I can only assume that my face had drained of colour and that my prolonged stillness seemed somewhat catatonic. Movement was the answer; they wanted to see me *do* something.

I smiled at Neil and went out into the hallway. Raymond, coming down the stairs, said, "Interesting day, Barbara. A first for me: don't usually get to meet them ante and post. I won't bore you with the cause or causes of death. The obvious can wait for its stating in the paperwork." This was the stage performer speaking for public consumption. Approaching me, however, he said quietly and privately, "Are you quite all right, Barbara? You look rather pale."

"Yes, I'm fine, Raymond. Nothing a breath of fresh air won't remedy." The door was ajar. I opened it and went out onto the porch. The sky had darkened to a slate grey, and it had started to rain. Paul and I enjoy walking in the rain, preferring days when, in Paul's words, the sun isn't naked in the sky. In his study, he uses curtains and blinds to ensure that no natural light penetrates when he dislikes the colour of the day.

I drove back to the station. *The obvious could wait for its stating in the paperwork*. Could it? Superintendent Wilson would want to know – if not immediately, then certainly prior to the press conference. He would not want to be *ambushed* by questions about a *House of Horrors* or *Death*, or some equally lurid press invention. *DCI Black, is it true you were actually in the house when Alan Mansfield hanged himself?* How could one reasonably reply to such a question without reasonably provoking further questions? *Yes, I was. It's amazing what you can do in a few minutes. There I was making coffee; and before you can say "milk and sugar", he's shot upstairs and jumped off a stepladder with a clothes line round his neck. I ask you. Well, yes, I cut him down – course I did. Who wouldn't? But... well, you know the rest. Dead. Like his wife, and his son, and his daughter. Killed his wife? Oh, yes. Putting her out of her misery, you might say. How do I feel? Well, I've had better days*. This train of thought probably put a smile on my face, though I didn't trouble to check in the mirror.

At my desk, I wrote a brief report for Superintendent Wilson and emailed it to him. Afterwards, I got up to make myself coffee in the little square kitchen not far from the office. I intended going through some of the information gleaned by DC Taylor from Adrian Mansfield's laptop. I was aware – in a vague, distracted way, like the echo of a dream – that my head was still in the Mansfield house, and was vaguely disturbed by my inability to shake the images or after-images from my mind. I came out of the kitchen – armed, as it were, with a mug of black coffee – and saw Ron Turner coming towards me – or, more precisely, moving in my direction, general or otherwise. A commonplace enough occurrence; something like it happened all the

time. But I blinked slowly, like a camera shutter on longish exposure. A significant mental nudge. Ron Turner: I had a message for him from a dead man.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

He'd heard. Of course he had.

"I'm fine, Ron," I told him. I put my hand on his arm to detain him. "Mr Mansfield wanted me to thank you for the kindness you showed him."

He nodded in a tight, masculine way. "Thank you, ma'am. It's good of you to remember under the circumstances." He reached into his pocket and produced a bunch of keys. "Mr Mansfield's car keys, ma'am," he explained.

"Yes," I said. "Thank you, Ron." I took them from him for no reason other than that's what he expected me to do. Since I said nothing further, he not unreasonably assumed we'd finished and continued on his interrupted journey. Something was troubling me, though: a plate with crumbs – a still life thereof. "Ron." To his back, and rather more loudly and sharply than intended; it had to do with fear of the moment passing. "The sandwich, Ron," I said; "did you make it?"

"Ma'am?" He seemed bemused. "Oh, I see. Yes, ma'am. Does it matter?"

"Yes, Ron," I said. "I rather think it does, don't you? There's not enough kindness in the world."

When I returned to the office, the phone was ringing. I picked it up. "Barbara," – Superintendent Wilson – "come up and see me, please."

Absurdly, I felt I was being summoned to account for some wrong-doing or lapse in judgement. Much occurred to me in the time it took me to reach his office and knock on the door, most of it wrong, and all of it infected with paranoia. When I'm in this sort of mood, I resolve to act and react as though the world loves me and has only my best interests at heart. As ridiculous as this sounds, it's far more useful than acting on the contrary assumption.

"Please – sit down, Barbara." He was sitting behind his desk, and had risen briefly in deference to my gender. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, sir," I replied.

"I'd fully understand if you wanted some time away. It wouldn't be a problem."

"No, sir; I'm fine – truly. I'll let you know if I wake up screaming tonight."

We were making light – or trying to make light – of a potentially serious situation: that is, the unfortunate tendency to soldier on regardless. Depending on what you do, this can have disastrous consequences. A tired doctor with a hangover and relationship worries would better serve the world and their profession by staying at home. The same – or something like it – is true of police officers; and it is sometimes necessary to take this decision *for* someone, though usually this will mean that they comply unwillingly, and will occasionally feel moved to challenge the decision. It is never a decision taken lightly, and generally means that gentle and less gentle suggestions to the effect that they take some time away have been stubbornly resisted or ignored. I am not someone wedded to my job, nor am I defined by it or the doing of it. If you become defined by your job to the point where you compulsively have to be doing it or can become undefined by not doing it or losing it, then there is surely something askew or amiss with the rest of your life.

I would have been appalled had I thought that Superintendent Wilson was doing anything other than extending a routine professional courtesy. I could, of course, have gone home – without career prejudice if not office gossip – but it didn't occur to me then or later that I ought to have done so. Did I later wake up screaming? No, I did not, though I did have an anxiety

dream two nights later, sufficiently over-powering as to provoke a strong sensation of relief on waking, in which I witnessed – with an uncomfortable feeling of ambivalence – a man hang himself. I always know or – to be more modest about it – think I know the wellspring of my dreams and what they signify, what hope or fear they're expressing to me. Certainly I believe myself better qualified than anyone else to interpret my dreams.

Superintendent Wilson asked, "How do you intend handling this at the press conference?" The assumption being – not unreasonably – that I must have considered this. Someone was bound to ask how the parents were bearing up. It was an obvious question, and journalists like distraught/angry/devastated/anguished – delete as appropriate – parents. Those who take the news stoically are, journalistically speaking, "bearing up with dignity", though the press would prefer raw emotions vividly expressed. Stoicism – "bearing up with dignity" – is not playing the press game, and is rather a bore from their point of view. Ideally, the parents will be publicly devastated. They will cry on mike and/or camera. And, again ideally, will have issues, or come to have issues, with some agency of authority – usually the police or social services, or possibly hospital staff. This allows for "Let down by..." claims or headlines, and serves to keep the story going. None of which would be likely to apply in this case, unless there were relatives, potentially outraged, that we didn't know about. For no very good reason, other than her connection to the case, Martha Bottomley crossed my mind as someone who would be prepared to use the media to further her own agenda.

But to answer Superintendent Wilson, I said somewhat disingenuously, "I thought, sir, I might tell them the truth."

He smiled. "I'm sure you did, Barbara, and I wouldn't quibble with your good intentions. The issue is how. It has to be sensitively handled, and it doesn't hurt to be prepared in this respect."

"You mean *rehearsed*?" I said.

He leaned back and tented his fingers. Looking over my head, he said in a detached tone, barristerial rather than journalistic, "Chief Inspector Black, how are Adrian's parents coping with their loss?"

I said, "I regret to have to inform you that both his parents are dead. It seems they were unable to cope with the tragic loss of a second child. Their daughter sadly committed suicide four years ago."

"And now the parents have committed suicide – is that right?" The tone had sharpened a notch.

I said, "We're certain that Mr Mansfield did, indeed, take his own life, and we're not looking for anyone else in connection with Mrs Mansfield's death. Precise circumstances are still under investigation."

He smiled again and resumed eye-contact. "That's not bad on a sticky wicket, Barbara."

"Yes, well, the media expect and forgive formal phlegmatism from the police. I think it taps into traditional notions of procedural ploddery. And it's surely unreasonable for them to press for too much detail so soon after the event."

Superintendent Wilson asked the question he had asked me in all serious investigations: "Do we have anything to worry about, Barbara?" This covered a multitude of anxieties: *Had we missed anything obvious? Had anyone – on the investigating team – blundered or spoken inappropriately to the press or others? Were we, in short, as reasonably placed as could reasonably be expected at this stage of the investigation?*

"No, sir," I said; "I don't think we do. Unless..." The pause was simply an invitation to inquire.

"Unless what, Barbara?"

"Unless you think I could have handled Alan Mansfield rather better."

"I don't think you have anything whatever with which to reproach yourself, Barbara. The worst that can be said is that you unfortuitously denied him a leisurely suicide and put yourself through some considerable trauma in so doing. Better for all concerned if you'd just dropped him off."

Chapter Eight.

Senior police officers – those who have essentially moved into the politics of policing – are very exercised by/with the service's relationship with the media; it's a *service* now, never a *force*. They fret about public image and perception, and worry about their perceived relationship with certain sections of the community. They monitor press coverage and dream up community and PR initiatives to help it along and give it a positive slant. A picture of a friendly bobby with children and parents at a local supermarket – the latter being more than happy to get in on the positive publicity act – is perfect PR. Usually the officer in question will be part of a team/initiative offering advice on road safety and/or vehicle security with, perhaps, the opportunity for children to have their bikes stamped for free. In this context, press conferences are a delicate and rather distasteful dance with the devil, with absurd attention being paid to every detail. There are officers, at all levels of policing, regarded as *media-friendly* or *media-savvy*, and such a designation tends to be good for one's career. The bobby at the supermarket is *media-friendly*, as is the black policewoman with a winsome take on common sense. In an organisation sensitive about its pale-male image, ethnicity matters, as does gender. *Media-savvy* officers are usually more senior officers who can be relied upon to acquit themselves well under difficult questioning or scrutiny – usually when a high-profile investigation has become prolonged and complicated, or otherwise gone awry – such as, rather disastrously, having arrested the wrong person. It's not unusual for officers unblessed with the aura of media-friendliness to resent those who are – a common, and *mostly* unfair, sentiment being that some officers get by and *on* and *up* on little else.

Am I, then, media-friendly? I am, or was, or thought I was – when I did what I was doing without what it was I was doing being labelled or quantified. Someone was noticing, though, because I received a letter inviting me to a seminar entitled *Managing the Media* – a privilege, I was told, extended to only a few officers a year. The main talk was given by a trendyish – I use the term pejoratively – man in his fifties with a professional background in PR, who introduced himself as Graham. He wore a vertically striped shirt outside blue jeans and the kind of glasses that were rather more fashion statement than visual aid. His hair was a carefully composed denial of the fact he was balding. He was, however, compelling on the subject of the media, characterising it as a monster with dubious motives. When I said something about the importance of a free press, he sneered and said that we hadn't had a free press for a very long time. All the major news outlets could be traced back to a few large corporations with their own agenda and fairly obvious political connections. The media, he pointed out, doesn't report on, or investigate, itself unless some rival's already gleefully doing it for partisan reasons to do with market share.

Agenda Management is important, he told us, because the media has its own agenda, which has little to do with the truth. Choices about what stories to run, which issues to pursue, were, he said, all driven by agenda. "Take a look at your local newspaper," he said, "and you'll see that most of the stories are agenda-driven. What's the point of a story about an immigrant family living on benefits in a large council house? How is it, in any meaningful sense, a story? It only works in an agenda context, and we all know the agenda." He gave an example of a story

relevant to the police service. "Imagine," he said, "that someone goes out and shoots a shopkeeper while robbing the shop. The police are, of course, investigating, and are expected to report to the public via the media. At this stage, the incident is sufficiently grave, the investigation so obviously important, that the media doesn't need an agenda bias to report it. In the early, initial stages, reporting will be factual. That won't last. Agenda rapidly kicks in: the availability of guns in broken Britain; the effects of new and dangerous drugs; the gangsta rap gun culture amongst young black men. The media will find an agenda – or *agendum* – to fit the circumstances." He moved round the room handing out photocopies of a small news story accompanied by a picture of a police car parked outside a local takeaway. The picture was captioned "*One law for them...".* Two police officers had parked in a "No Parking" zone to quickly get themselves something with chips. "This was at the busiest time of day in a busy part of town where people were regularly clamped or ticketed, which is why, of course, the paper ran with the story. Parking was a sore point. There were lots of embittered former ticketees and clampees about, some of them gleefully taking pictures on their mobile phones, several of which conveniently found their way onto the computer of the local newspaper. Throw in an attentive hack and you have one agenda-driven story to go. What are the consequences of this? Two officers reprimanded or disciplined for something as trivial as nipping out for a takeaway, and a police service that understands the need for agenda management."

"The media isn't your friend," he declared when he'd returned to the front of the room. He said this as though we had previously assumed it was. "It doesn't serve you well as members of the public, nor does it serve you well as members of the police service." He held up two tabloid newspapers, one in either hand: one had a lurid headline about the sexual exploits of a celebrity with artificially large breasts caught cheating on her pop star husband with a "hunky" kick-boxer; the other declared the heartbreak of a footballer's wife after it transpired her husband had been texting photos of his private parts to several ladies he'd met in a nightclub. "If you think this is funny," – and it was fairly obvious most of us did – "bear in mind that these papers presume to tell you how to vote come election time. Politicians and senior officials in public life have been hounded out of office by these papers, police officers amongst them. You do not have the luxury of being sniffy. These are the papers that most people buy, and this is the level at which political debates and PR battles are won and lost." He dropped the papers onto a desk as though they were distasteful to handle. "These are prole newspapers," he said: "ignorant, vulgar, and boorishly simplistic. And, of course, dangerous – and not just for paediatricians and bibliophiles."

We laughed at this, but I worried about the implications. I said, "If the press can't be trusted at all, who protects the public from abuse by the institutions of the state?" This question sounds rather naïve to me now, and curiously pompous.

"That's a big question," he said, smiling. "To be honest, my issue with the state is that it isn't protecting me from the press – or, more specifically, the large transnational corporations that own it. The state, in the shape of the government of the day, is considerably more afraid of the press and its corporate masters than I am of the state. The press is a corporate tool to manipulate the public. In your dealings with it, you need to be sure that your message isn't skewed or agenda-managed against you. In short, you can't afford to make an enemy of the press."

"Doesn't this tend to assume that everyone's a bit... well, thick – ignorant, anyway?" This from a Welsh DI at the back – a bespectacled, studios-looking woman, whose tone suggested she didn't like the picture being painted of the public's intelligence.

Graham stood stock-still and regarded her with a deadpan expression until some of us laughed. She looked annoyed, so he decided to answer her question. He picked up the two tabloid newspapers and said, "Ask yourself this: would papers like these flourish amongst an intelligent, cultivated populace? If no-one bought these papers, they'd either have to fold or radically change what they do. They do what they do because people buy, and presumably like, what they do."

The Welsh DI said rather lugubriously, "I find that really very dispiriting."

Well, yes. As did I. Unfortunately, I also felt it was true. The public get the media they deserve. How are they, in their ignorance, to know that they're being condescended to and manipulated? They think they're getting what they want. The press has no duty to educate or ennoble, or even inform; it's only duty is to sell copy and please its paymasters; and in so doing, one can't help feeling that it debases itself and degrades its readership. The seminar featured sections on strategies on coping with the media, media intrusion – feeding frenzies, hounding, and crossing the line into witch-hunt territory – and a compelling hypothetical that featured the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl. So effective was his moderation of this that we were all imbued with a sense of urgency and even at one point, accused of neglecting to properly scrutinise the victim's family, of panic. However, the overriding message I took from the seminar was that the media was an amoral, unpredictable, predatory monster that required very careful handling.

Very careful handling, indeed – goodish advice for a press conference. Wouldn't want to drop the metaphorical ball – assumed to be slippery, of course, and hazardously in the air. That said, approaching it as if you have something to fear – or, worse, hide – is surely according the press too much respect and halfway to doing what you want to avoid – allowing them to set the agenda. The conference started promptly enough, though with no very great sense of drama or urgency. Present were myself, DS Brightly, and, from uniform, Inspector Metcalfe. Metcalfe was privately a bit grumpy at being there, since he felt it was entirely a CID issue, and that he'd just been drafted in as a PR exercise – a fairly accurate assessment of the situation. Superintendent Wilson did not attend because his presence might have risked indicating that there was something unusually important about the case. We were sitting on a dais behind three tables arranged as a long single desk with a microphone for each speaker. White boards were stapled or pinned to the front of the tables bearing the constabulary logo and slogan, which served to advertise the service as well as, more importantly, shield our legs from view.

I formally thanked the members of the press for attending – all five of them, though I didn't allude to this at the time – and outlined in broad terms the circumstances of Adrian Mansfield's death. I did not mention the scarves, nor the placard about his neck. I made the usual appeal for witnesses because it *might* be useful, and because not making such an appeal would have been *un*usual. The appeal, as with most appeals, assumed that someone must know something, and in so knowing ought to tell. Following the statement, we invited, or waited for or on, questions.

Roland Merry, *Amberton Evening News*: "Apologies if I missed this in your statement, Chief Inspector, but this *is* a murder investigation, is it? Can we be clear about that?" Roland Merry was in his late-fifties, and spoke in a fruity, "Test Match Special" voice. He had once told me that journalism had not turned out to be the high calling he had hoped for, adding that he should have stuck to law, "though doubtless that, too, would have led to cynicism and disillusionment in the twilight years, and I don't suppose I can entirely blame my fondness for fine wines on my profession, though it does rather facilitate it – in more ways than one."

The question was a slightly awkward one. We had rather hoped that the press would get the impression, and take it away with them unchallenged and unclarified, that this was, indeed, a murder inquiry, which it was to all and intents and purposes. We were trying to locate the person who had stabbed Adrian Mansfield. The trouble was – the minor fly in the oily murder ointment – was that we weren't yet sure that Adrian Mansfield had been murdered. This was the trouble with going to the press too early, though doubtless Superintendent Wilson would have been happy to argue its benefits.

I said, "The investigation is proceeding on the assumption that Adrian Mansfield was murdered – so, yes, Roland."

There was a pause. It was a tribute to Roland that the others waited for his follow-up. "The assumption? Yes, the assumption. Are you suggesting he might have been stabbed post-mortem?"

I said, "That's a possibility that can't be ruled out at this point, Roland. We're in the very early stages of the investigation." I tried to make it sound improbable – vaguely ridiculous – in an effort to discourage them from pursuing the point.

Kelly Draper, local BBC radio: "Have you found the knife that *might* have committed the murder, then?"

The others laughed at this.

Metcalfe said stiffly, "A search is ongoing for the weapon, yes."

"Or no." She smiled at Metcalfe and conspicuously made a note. Metcalfe looked bemused. She explained, "If there's an ongoing search, Inspector, the answer to my question is no – you haven't found the knife." Kelly Draper was a youthful thirty-something with shiny jet black hair, which she wore tied back in a ponytail. She was dressed in a white blouse and black jeans. At first glance, one might have assumed that she went without make-up, but in fact it was lightly and subtly applied. I had met her on a previous investigation when I requested the full recording of an interview she had done for radio news. She had surprised me by supplying it without quibble, and made me feel rather stiff and ungracious in so doing. When I announced I was going – "Thank you, Ms Draper. You've been very helpful." – she said, "Oh, are you going? So soon? I was going to offer coffee." I said, "That's kind of you, but I have an appointment. Good day, Ms Draper." She said, "Chief Inspector," interrupting my exit; I had turned at the door: "it wouldn't hurt to call me Kelly. I'd prefer it if you did. Of course, *I'd* still call you Chief Inspector." This remark made me feel uncomfortable – rather as if I'd been caught standing on ceremony for no very good reason. I said, "Another day, Ms Draper," – tenuously sticking to something like my formal guns – "perhaps over coffee."

Roger Ball, *Amberton Evening Echo*: "Can I ask about the parents, Chief Inspector? How are they coping?"

Here it was, then. I said, "I regret to have to inform you that both Adrian's parents are now dead. It seems they were unable to cope with the tragic loss of a second child, their daughter having sadly committed suicide four years ago."

Edward Lang, Independent Television: "To be clear, Chief Inspector, you're saying the Mansfields have taken their own lives?"

I said, "We're sure that Mr Mansfield did, indeed, take his own life, and we're not looking for anyone else in connection with Mrs Mansfield's death. The precise circumstances form part of the current investigation."

Lang smirked, or perhaps it would be more charitable to say he smiled without humour. He said, "He killed her, didn't he, and then he topped himself? You don't have to be quite so

delicate, Chief Inspector – we're all adults here with strong stomachs." Edward Lang was a bald, brawny man in his early fifties, who would not have looked out of place manning the door on an insalubrious nightclub. He had plied his trade on the tackier, tabloid side of the journalistic tracks, taking advantage of the more down-market aspects of radio and television news to further his career. We had met – briefly – once before. He had disliked me on sight, and presumably sound, and I hadn't much cared for him.

I said ill-advisedly, "Notwithstanding the strength of your stomach, Mr Lang, I hope some notion of taste would be offended if I started using colloquialisms like *topped*." I managed to smile at the end of this – to pass it off as banter – though actually I was furious.

DS Simon Brightly: "What you describe, Ed," – "Ed"! – "is the most probable scenario, but we're not yet in a position to confirm that officially." This was meant to mollify Lang, but I thought it was going a bit far. Simon was cultivating a reputation for having the *common touch*.

Edward Lang: "So how did Mr Mansfield – excuse me –" nodding at me, "*take his own life*?" The question was addressed pointedly to Simon.

Simon turned to me, and made a deferential over-to-you gesture. The implication was clear, though: *I'd like to be frank with you, Ed, but it's not down to me*.

Jennifer Collins, Independent Local Radio: "He hanged himself, Ed. Does it matter? Can we move on?" To me, she said, "Is this one of those polite press conferences where you have very little to tell us, but go ahead and tell us it anyway?" Jennifer Collins was in her mid-forties and had something of a retro-seventies look about her. She had long, frizzy grey-black hair, swept back over her shoulders, and wore thick-rimmed almond-shaped spectacles. She was, by her own admission, jaded, and continued in her current occupation because she couldn't be bothered finding another. "There's nothing good about journalism," she had told me once. "It's parasitical and cheap and rarely does any good. Most of the time, the public would be better off ignorant. Ramming a cheating MP down their throat just makes them outraged about something they don't really understand, and panders to a feeling that there's a class of people for whom the dreary rules of making ends meet don't apply. Since it's obviously not them, they might as well be bitter and self-righteous, and enjoy the chump served up by the media for their derision and delectation." Which was some of why she'd left print media for local radio. To get ahead in print media, she maintained, one either had to be impossibly idealistic, believing the press to be a force for good notwithstanding its ugly warts, or corrosively cynical – approaching the world with a poisonous belief in the venality of everything.

I said, "I think we'd be heavily criticized, Ms Collins, if we waited until we could tell you *everything* before holding a press conference – though we'd doubtless hold considerably less of them." I thought of Superintendent Wilson and added, "It's a dialogue, Jennifer, not an announcement." I accompanied this with a you-and-I gesture.

She was gracious enough – or amused enough – to smile at this.

Roger Ball, rather as if he were putting the conference's first question, asked, "Are you likely to be making an arrest soon, Chief Inspector? " Roger Ball was in his sixties and devoted much of his journalistic efforts to saving Amberton's non-league football club from closure, with which it seemed to be perennially threatened. Talk of merging the team and ground with that of a another town's in similar trouble had prompted protests in both camps and campaigns in their respective local newspapers.

His question, though, rather summed up the conference. An obvious question to which the short answer – ungiven – was "No". The official, longer answer – given – had to do with still being in the early stages of the investigation and pursuing various lines of inquiry. In other words

– unuttered – we'd just started and thought we'd let them know before they ran away with the idea we were keeping things from them, which, of course, we were.

Since this wasn't a critical press conference – no-one was clamouring for it, and our backs were a long way from the disaster wall – there was no formal debriefing. Nonetheless, and notwithstanding, Superintendent Wilson "joined us" afterwards for an informal meeting to offer comments and pointers. Inspector Metcalfe had a good physical presence, he averred, which we had under-utilised. We should not underestimate the positive effect on public perception of a senior uniformed officer answering questions in a detailed, matter-of-fact way. On the plus side, we had succeeded in creating a collegial, inclusive atmosphere that made the press feel part of the process. Superintendent Wilson had rather liked the fact that Edward Lang had ultimately been silenced by another member of the press – and was apparently unconcerned how she might have come by the ammunition to do so.

After all and which, I needed some coffee – a mugful at a minimum – and some apolitical company. I found both in the shape of DC Taylor, who was making himself coffee in the kitchen, and cheerfully added me to the order.

I asked him if he'd found anything of interest. This can – under pressure, at least – be interpreted, or misinterpreted, as a leading question. What have you got for me? What's your assessment of what you've been looking at? Is there anything worth my immediate attention? To which a not unreasonable reply might be, "That depends what else is going on – and if you haven't already found out what I've got."

"I'm not sure, ma'am," he said. "There's lots of information, but I don't know how significant it is."

"Don't hedge, Neil," I said; "just tell me what you think."

"I think he fancied this girl called Caroline Meadows. Not sure if it was reciprocated. She argues with him all the time in a light-hearted way – almost as if she's mocking his seriousness. And he was very serious – routinely talked about suicide and the pointlessness of being alive. They set up an exclusive blog together – just the two of them – where they discussed meaning-of-life type questions. He says things like 'I was blissfully unaware before I was born, and expect to be blissfully unaware when I'm dead.' And she replies with things like, 'Between my infinities of blissful unawareness, I thought I might amuse myself and have a good time. If you don't think you can do that, then you might be right in wanting to hasten your return to oblivion, since your time in the light is obviously a cosmic mistake.' Something like that. I've printed some of it out. There's a lot of it."

"I don't suppose you know where she lives," I said.

"I think I do, ma'am," he said, smiling. "I also think I know how old she is, and where she goes to school. The trouble with the internet is that others can be indiscreet on your behalf – intentionally or otherwise."

"Okay. Where?"

"Here in Amberton. I've written the address down. She goes to St Mary's Grammar School for Girls. She's in the fifth year, and regarded as one of their best students." He put a mug of coffee down on the work-surface for me – a white mug with a smiling green frog on both sides.

"How do you know all this, Neil?" I was impressed and amused.

"Various virtual clues cross-referenced with the real, or non-virtual, world. It's amazing how much people are willing to give away on the net. Caroline Meadows exists; she lives in Amberton; she attends St Mary's Grammar School, and I'm fairly certain she's the same girl who argued with Adrian Mansfield online."

I was thinking: *What's the likelihood of three people from the same family independently committing suicide?* I said, "Good work, Neil. I'll go and see her tomorrow when she's in school. I'd like to read their blog exchange in the meantime, and anything else between them."

"Why tomorrow, ma'am – if you don't mind my asking?"

"Parents, Neil," I said. "They can have a very inhibiting effect on their teenage offspring." I noticed a spider's web in a corner of the ceiling. Missed by the cleaner. A spider had built its home there, but had since abandoned it. I pitied its wasted endeavour.

"How did the press conference go, ma'am?"

"Oh! – remarkably well, Neil, considering we had nothing to tell them. I'm told the press are happier to be summoned and told we have nothing to tell them than to be told nothing at all. Notwithstanding the waste of time and resources, Superintendent Wilson believes we should keep them informed of our lack of information." This was behaving badly with a junior colleague, talking inappropriately about our relations with the press, which is doubtless why I was doing it.

Neil smiled and said, "I'm sure *summoned* isn't quite the right word, ma'am."

"No, Neil," I conceded drily; "I'm sure it isn't."

I thought I heard the phone ringing in the office.

Chapter Nine.

Phones ring – are ringing – all the time. I was, however, momentarily exercised – or over-exercised – by the need to answer it, like a dream-phone – ringing and ringing and ringing – you can't quite reach.

"DCI Black." Neil had followed me in, carrying both coffees.

"Ma'am," – Ron Turner – "we have a call from Ms *Lisa* Markham." I assumed the emphasis on the first name came on instruction from the lady herself.

"Thanks, Ron," I said, sitting down. "Put her through." Dead air while the line transferred. "DCI Black." Police officers become accustomed to announcing themselves.

"Barbara!" A bright, showbizzy greeting for an old friend. "Join me for a late tea – or supper, if you prefer. Say you will. I'm staying at the Plaza. It's really rather good."

I did a mental quick-step – away from the formal rebuke I was about to make: something to do with the non-trivial matter of being engaged in the investigation of someone's death. Instead, I said, "Actually, that sounds like rather a charming end to a busy day. I'll see you there, Ms Markham." I hung up before she had a chance to ask me to call her "Lisa".

Okay. Elongated, dubious *okaay*. So was this a good idea – or even just a do-no-harm neutral one? I was quite certain Ms Markham would prove to be involved in the investigation – perhaps deeply involved – but I doubted her involvement would ultimately prove to be criminal. What, then, did she want – assuming, that is, that she wanted something of substance, and wasn't motivated merely by mischief or curiosity? Perhaps – fearing the searchlight of the investigation – she was just eager to impart what she felt sure I'd soon find out for myself anyway. That would, I thought, make for rather a tedious meeting.

The Amberton Plaza is a four star hotel with forty rooms just west of the town centre. Despite its Edwardian magnificence – it was once a private manor house – it's very easy to visit the town and miss it. Leaving the centre of town to the west, the road dips down sharply before beginning a steep climb to the outlying villages. In this dip, set at an angle to the road, stands a tall green gate that opens onto a driveway that turns sharply to the right before taking a more gentle and longer turn to the left. A wide, gravel driveway curves between tall, immaculately trimmed hedgerows before opening quite suddenly onto a wide, open space – wider than the building itself – flanked by lawns and well-established oak trees. In the shifting slate-silver light of the fading day, the hotel seemed to rise from the ground like a white palace reaching for the lowering giant clouds.

At reception, I produced my warrant card and asked for Ms Lisa Markham. The young black woman said stiffly, "Yes, ma'am; she *is* expecting you," rather as if I'd committed some unpardonable *faux pas*. Of course, I could – and, indeed, it did cross my mind as perhaps the right thing to do – have asked for Ms Markham *without* announcing myself as a police officer, but I was concerned that that might make my behaviour appear furtive or surreptitious at some future date. *If your visit to Ms Markham was, as you claim, Chief Inspector, part of the ongoing investigation, then why, may I ask, did you not formally announce yourself at the hotel's*

reception? Into the phone, the receptionist announced me as *Ms* Black. She put the phone down, and said pleasantly enough, "Ms Markham is on her way down."

And so she was – must so have been – for she arrived in the foyer in a matter of seconds and greeted me effusively. "Barbara! I'm so glad you came!" The use of my first name – on the phone and now – on so short an acquaintance was disconcerting. I wondered if this were some kind of strategy or campaign on her part. Why else would she be doing it? Unless, of course, she wanted to judge its effect on me. I am not given to effusiveness myself, but do not usually mind those who are. My problem with Ms Markham was that I thought her motives might prove to be questionable, even rather Machiavellian.

She had transformed her appearance from our first meeting – the windswept gypsyish look traded for something rather more formal: a rather smart black button-down dress with a high, open collar worn with medium-healed court shoes of the same colour. Her hair had been tied back in a ponytail, though this was not severely done, and wisps of hair gently touched her cheeks and veiled her forehead, and her complexion had been darkened by skilfully applied foundation. She looked fresh and charming, even a little pert. A casual observer would not have known her for the same woman.

I said, for I had to say something, "You seemed rather eager to see me, Ms Markham."

She did a small, girlish skip towards me, and said, "That's because I like you, and I knew you'd be curious. Please call me Lisa." Then, with a little moue: "Or do you feel that that would compromise you in some way?"

She was bored, I realized – profoundly, life bored, as against locally, situationally bored – which meant boredom had to be factored in as a possible explanation for anything and everything she did. Granted the freedom and means to indulge herself, she had nothing to chafe against except her own temperament. And this perhaps in the most charming and exotic of settings. One could imagine her shrieking, without a trace of humour or self-awareness – in, say, a hotel room in Rome: *I'm sooo bored! I want to be amused!* Which rather explained my invitation to supper, and maybe even the earlier excursion into the police station. Bravery and confidence – and, at the margins, madness – are often nothing more than boredom in fancy dress. Boredom can kill – though, of course, it depends on the extent of the affliction. Boredom – being bored – is a passing ache for most of us, or a routine pain we come to live with; but, for others, it's a sickness, a chronic, enervating malady involving endless and ongoing treatment of symptoms without ever addressing the cause or core of the disease.

So what was I doing here – why I had I come? I rather had the sense that I had blundered the initial meeting with her at the police station, and I suppose I wanted to rectify the situation somewhat – all-what, indeed. Curiosity also, no doubt, played its part, though I was – professionally speaking – keen to avoid its epigrammatic effect on cats. More immediately, there was something not a little patronising about the suggestion that I might feel that using her first name would be personally, or professionally, compromising – a presumption or understanding that a public servant – emphasis on *servant* – might be hidebound by stuffy rules and regulations.

And so I didn't know quite what to say, how to continue, so I simply asked a question for which I wanted an answer: "How did you come to know Adrian Mansfield?"

She smiled. "I will tell you that," she said, "*and* what brought me to your delightful little police station. I just know you can't wait to find out, but let's sit down and have some supper first. I'm gasping for a glass of wine." She looked over her shoulder and gestured. A waiter – a handsome, immaculately coiffured young man – appeared, materialised, as though he'd spent the whole evening waiting for just this signal, and escorted us to our table. I wondered – idly, for it

really didn't matter – if this were done to impress me, or was simply par for the, or *her*, course – the level of service Ms Markham and her ilk had come to take for granted.

Whatever, the table turned out to be mutely lit from within and without, the without being the carefully modulated restaurant lighting, and the within being a floating candle or night-light in the centre of the table. The young man handed me a menu, but not Lisa. She smiled and said, "He knows what I'm having." I opted for the selection of French cheeses with crackers and a glass of the house red. I enjoy wine, but would have to make do with the single glass, until I got home at any rate, since I would be driving back to the *delightful little* police station.

The wine arrived first – in slightly different glasses, I noted with amusement. Lisa had opted for white, and the hotel presumably had glasses for each, though I wondered how many people would really notice or – if they did – care about the distinction. Lisa gulped at hers, and the waiter, bowing slightly, said, "Shall I bring the bottle with your supper, ma'am?"

Lisa smiled and said, "Mmm – yes, please do."

He bowed towards me also – but cursorily, as though he already knew or suspected the answer; and, of course, I declined – regretfully but firmly.

There we were, then. I had taken a tiny sip of my wine, and she had gulped half of hers. I asked, "So what brought you into the police station in such a state?"

She held her glass with thumb and middle-finger and pensively swirled the contents, her eyes examining the motion of the liquid. At length, she looked up – over the rim of her glass – and said, "I was weak – and selfish. I wanted to save him for myself – or rather be his saviour." Her eyes glistened with emotion. "He wanted to die, and I'm glad now he succeeded. I was fond of him – in a maternal sort of way. He thought I understood, and I did. It was just a moment of weakness. No harm done really – except to my pride. Not important. I apologise for wasting your time. I made a mistake."

Right. So she thought he had committed suicide. Had – in a moment of weakness – wanted to stop him from so doing. Had I not told her he'd been stabbed? Did she think he'd stabbed himself? Perhaps she did. "You wanted to save his life," I said; "that doesn't sound unreasonable to me – and certainly justifies your trip to the police station."

"Thank you. Does that mean I have nothing to worry about? That should make Mummy very happy." She was smiling when she said this.

"Where did you meet him?" I asked. The waiter briefly forestalled her answer by returning with our meals, which he discreetly placed in front of us. Indeed, one got the impression that he'd happily have accomplished the task invisibly had such a feat been within his power. Lisa immediately topped up her glass from the bottle of white wine, which had come with, and in, a bucket of ice.

"Paris," she replied at length. "He was doing part of his course in French. Not terribly well to be honest, but then what's the point of mastering another language when you don't want to go on living?"

"When did you last see him?" I asked.

"Last night," she said. "We spent the night together. He left in the middle of the night. I was still half-asleep. He kissed me goodbye, and said *I'm going out now; I may be some time*. And, yes, I do know the reference; and, no, it wasn't the first time he'd said it."

"So what happened? What was it that made you fear for his safety?"

"It was more what didn't happen. He didn't respond to any of my texts; and when I tried phoning him, I kept getting the *phone you're trying to reach is unavailable* message, which usually means it's switched off or out of signal range. I tried phoning him at home, which is a bit

risky at that time of the morning – likely to cause panic, I mean. So when his mother answered, I pretended I'd got a wrong number and apologised for the unsocial hour. Adrian often talked of suicide, and I always knew it was a possibility, but he promised to let me know when he was going to do it. Maybe I missed something. I've been trying to remember every detail of that morning. I even looked for a note."

"Sorry, Lisa," I said; "I need to be clear about this: you and he were in a relationship?"

"No, we were just friends. Sometimes we messed around sexually – occasionally we fucked – but I wouldn't read too much into it. Sex was – *is* – just another way of staving off the boredom, of living in the now. The past is gone, and the future's uncertain, so we might as well frolic in the present. Isn't that why everyone seeks entertainment of one sort or another?"

"Are you unhappy, Lisa?" I asked. "I'm sorry if that sounds rather trite, but I'm getting a distinct, if rather bleak, impression of a group of very disenchanted young people, some of whom have committed suicide."

"Ah, you mustn't take too seriously what you read on the internet. A lot of it has to do with adolescent posturing." She reached over and gently placed her hand on mine. "And don't worry, Chief Inspector," she said, smiling; "this isn't going to be my last supper."

I withdrew my hand sharply, and said rather more censoriously than intended, "Surely suicide isn't a pose?"

"No, it isn't," she said seriously. "Unless that is you want to be tedious and regard everything as a pose. Suicide is, actually, the ultimate expression of individual will, which is why it offends society so much. Society is appalled by the notion that people should choose the time and place of their own deaths, particularly when there are no over-riding health issues involved. Suicide as a philosophical choice, as a means of escape, is positively outrageous, an unspeakable affront – especially appalling among the young, who are expected to express appreciation and gratitude for their choiceless existence. What are we? Children, I mean. If we're planned, and not just a regrettable bi-product of copulation, we're the product of someone else's vanity project – but inevitably we're a faulty, messed-up product; not what was envisioned at all. The smiles in the photo-albums are always false. Suicide is an act of rebellion. If significant numbers of people started doing it, it would change the world. Luckily for those who would exploit us, most of us will scrabble in the dirt for a crust of bread – slavery couldn't have happened otherwise. That's our primordial heritage, the biological curse most of us struggle to transcend. Touch the cape of angels, however, and you demand charm or you opt out."

I remember thinking something like: *Oh, so she's part of it*. The *it* in question having to do with the idea of a group of articulate young people, tenuously, or *virtually*, connected, with some species of anti-life philosophy that had something to do with the death of Adrian Mansfield (probably), his sister (possibly), and Jeremy Collins (certainly). Or was I just another older person being seduced by the notion of the power of the internet amongst the young? The credulity trap? Another – the latest – reason for moral panic. No, I was not. It simply isn't and wasn't a credible position. Anyone taking such a position is either shockingly naïve or, more likely, striking a journalistic or political pose. In journalese, what you don't understand you should be – hysterically – afraid of; it sells newspapers. And in politics, riding a lurid bandwagon can do wonders for your short-term career prospects. I was, however, concerned about being seduced down – for reasons, perhaps, of intellectual curiosity – the wrong investigative path.

"You don't approve?" She practically rolled her eyes as she poured herself more wine. "Adrian hated existence," she said defiantly, "and he opted out. Simple."

Yes, I thought, and then someone stabbed him, tied him into a boat, and hung a sign around his neck declaring him an *arse*. Not so simple.

"Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt him?" I asked.

"There were plenty of people who didn't like him. He was free with his opinions – and they're not exactly the sort of opinions that endear you to people. They haven't exactly endeared him to you, have they, Barbara? Why do you ask?"

"He was stabbed, Lisa," I said. "I believe I told you that. Can you think of anyone sufficiently unendeared to want to do such a thing?"

"Maybe he did it himself," she said. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"Wouldn't you?" I must have sounded impatient. "May I ask why not?"

"A last dramatic gesture; an attempt to feel *in extremis*. Why not?" She finished the wine in her glass and poured more. "Am I not being very helpful? Are you disappointed? Would you like to hear some scandalous speculation?"

"Yes, I would," I said; "though I'd prefer scandal to speculation – for fairly obvious occupational reasons."

"Well," she said, smiling, "rumour has it that he was seeing a girl from the wrong side of the tracks." She had adopted a gossipy, busybody tone. "And I do mean the very wrong side of the tracks. I heard tell that she was living off benefits and supplemented her handouts by begging in the High Street. Can you imagine? I don't know what he was thinking of."

"Is this true?" I asked.

"That he consorted to a greater or lesser extent with a young beggar girl? Yes, it is. Do I know who she is? No, I don't, though I think her name might be something common like Sharon or Tracy. Not sure if that's snobbery on my part, or I picked it up from somewhere. Probably a bit of both."

"Did you disapprove?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, smiling; "I did, but not in the way you might think. I was afraid for her. I worried that she might find him intoxicating and would be corrupted by him. If you really want to know, I'm rather afraid she might be dead."

"Sorry?"

"Well, that was Adrian's speciality, wasn't it? The futility of life, I mean. How seductive would that have sounded to a broken young woman with no family and very little prospects. She had – perhaps still has – a room in a shitty lodging house, one of those places where the rent is paid straight to the landlord by the council. Adrian sincerely believed life wasn't worth living for most people, and could be very persuasive. Dangerously so."

"Are you saying he might have persuaded her to kill herself?"

"I'm not sure. No. I don't think that would have been his agenda."

"Did he think *your* life was worth living?"

"That's a good question." She smiled ruefully. "Yes, he did. He thought I was in a privileged position. I was, he said, in a position where I'd never have to sell my labour. Indeed, it would be absurd and perverse of me to do so, and he thought that made my life worth living because it allows me to devote my time to my own interests. My freedom has been bought for me – why spurn such a gift? He believed that the necessity to work for most people is just a disguised form of slavery. That is, they're slaves, but delude themselves that they're free, that they have a choice. They're forced to work, to make a living – they have no choice about it – and yet they go on believing they're free. It's a good point. Who really would *choose* to work in a

fast-food restaurant or a supermarket? All that's really changed are the rules on the treatment of slaves."

"It would really help if I had an address for Sharon or Tracy," I told her.

"Yes, I'm sure it would," she said. "I have been flogging my brains, but that's all I can remember about her. How many grotty lodging houses are there in Amberton? Can't be that many, and surely the council would have a list of landlords taking from its purse."

"Why did you like him?" I asked; "Adrian, I mean. He sounds rather a toxic young man."

"Not to me," she said. "I found him attractive physically, and stimulating intellectually. I don't, however, think it's a good idea to go among the lower orders with the message that their lives aren't worth living, do you? It's not quite the thing, and we do have to get our cleaners from somewhere."

I think I might have tutted, and probably rolled my eyes."That's a joke, is it, Lisa?"

"About the cleaners," she said, smiling, "yes, it is – isn't that why we expanded the EU? As for the other: is it unreasonable to expect him to have exercised some sense of *noblesse oblige*? Perhaps it is. Perhaps you think I'm being patronising. She's just as likely to be intellectual as ingénue I suppose. We mustn't draw too many conclusions from her indigent circumstances. What's the matter?"

I had got to my feet and finished the wine in my glass, which was most of it. I had decided I needed to find Sharon or Tracy, or whatever her name was, that night. If she were dead, then there was nothing I could do about it, and we might as well find out sooner as later; but if I found her dead tomorrow, and it turned out she'd died in the night, I'd blame my own tardiness and laziness because I *did* so want to call it a day and go home. "I'm sorry," I said; "I have to go. Thank you for supper."

I hurried to the car and called the station. I spoke to Ron Turner and asked him if he knew of lodging houses in the area where the tenants' rents were paid straight to the landlord by the council. He said, "Yes, ma'am. That'll be 50 Princes Street. Nine tenants, all on benefit, though you'll find quite a few of them have guests sleeping on their floors. The landlord lives in Oxford, and doesn't care what goes on there so long as he gets his rent. We're out there practically every weekend. Allegations of drug dealing and complaints about noise. If the neighbours had their way, we'd evict everyone and bulldoze the house. Should I text you a list of the tenants, ma'am?"

I suppressed an urge to giggle. "Yes, Ron," I said; "that would be very useful. Thank you."

"Doing it now, ma'am."

Chapter Ten.

50 Princes Street was, and is, an end-of-terrace house with a narrow muddy footpath and railway line running by it, a tall metal fence topped with barbed wire forbidding access to the latter. A hedge had been planted on the track side to mitigate the fence's aesthetic ugliness, or simply to obscure the view of the track, and weeds and wild-plants had – presumably later – joined the cause. The house, itself, was incongruously large – rather looked as if it had been lifted from its own grounds elsewhere; ostracised by its neighbours, perhaps, for going to seed and dumped on the end of this residential terrace. The side of the house, I discovered later, had been defaced with graffiti.

The front door was answered by a short man with a shaved head dressed in jeans and a vest. He wore a ring through the left side of his nose, and his shoulders and arms were festooned with tattoos.

I said, "I'm looking for Sharon Hall." One of the names on Ron's list.

"Never heard of her," he said. He was lying; it was obvious. It was probably just a default position – the give-nothing-away response if not necessarily the lying.

I said, "And have you otherwise heard of everyone who resides in this house?"

"Sorry?"

"Flat 4," I said. "Do you know the person who lives in Flat 4?"

"Who wants to know?"

I smiled. "I want to know," I said; "that's why I'm asking. If you have no objection, I'm going to come in and knock on the door of Flat 4."

He obviously did have an objection, for he pushed the door to and used his body to impede my attempt to enter. I produced my ID and formally introduced myself. He stepped back immediately and rather dramatically – hands up in surrender – and said, "I ain't done nothing."

"I don't recall suggesting you had," I said, stepping into the hallway. "Where's Flat 4, or should I just look for it myself?"

"Upstairs on the right," he said, pointing in the general direction.

I climbed the stairs – the diamond-patterned carpet was discoloured and threadbare – and tapped on a magnolia door with a black number "4" on it. I heard a door close downstairs, presumably the tattooed man returning to his room. The hallway was without any source of natural light, and was dimly lit by a low-wattage eco-friendly bulb designed for a smaller space. Behind me, to my right, a door was ajar and I could just discern part of a mirror and a sink and a light-pull cord – presumably the/a communal bathroom.

No answer from number 4, so I tapped again – harder this time. Almost immediately, a door opened behind me and a female voice said, "She ain't in." I turned and saw a pale-faced young woman with oily black hair peering at me through the gap allowed by a door-chain.

"Do you know where she is?" I asked.

"No. And if I did, I probably wouldn't tell you."

"When did you last see her, then?" The casual, appended *then* hopefully suggesting there could be no harm in telling me that much.

"Couple of days ago. Can't remember for sure. Who are you anyway?"

I showed her my ID, which she scrutinised carefully.

"Can I come in and speak to you?"

She pushed the door to, undid the chain, and opened the door to allow me ingress. As soon as I was in, she closed the door behind me and refastened the chain. I wondered about unwelcome visitors. Though the main light was on, she had not closed the curtains. The sash-window – dirty and without nets – looked out upon a fire-escape zig-zagging down the back of the peeling white building opposite. There was no bed in the room, only a narrow mattress placed directly on the faded bottle-green carpet and pushed against the far wall, the quilt thrown aside to reveal a patterned top sheet that matched the pillowslip but not the quilt cover. Along the same wall, in a recess, stood a Victorian-style mahogany wardrobe with a mirror in the door and a holdall on top of it. Against the near wall stood a chest of drawers, which didn't match the wardrobe and had probably come at a different time. On top of this sat a portable television, on with the sound down, and a tray with two mugs and a kettle and the bits and pieces necessary for making coffee and tea. By the window was a small table with a single kitchen/dining-room chair. The only other place to sit was on a large, multi-coloured beanbag, its newness and brightness suggesting it had been acquired by the tenant. Next to the head of the bed, or mattress, was a radio/cassette/CD player and a half-empty half-bottle of Scotch. Apart from the window, the room was otherwise clean and tidy.

She said, "Well, go on, then. Ask your questions. We don't usually get anyone as important as you round here. Usually they just send PC Plod and Thicko, who come round and nick your drugs for themselves." She was wearing jeans and a baggy opal-green pullover with sleeves that extended down to her finger-nails.

"How well did you know Sharon?" I asked. I had mistakenly used the past tense. I was, I realized, procrastinating in some rather awful personal way – seeking justification rather than information. Justification for what? For breaking into Sharon's room – which was, after all, what I'd come here to do.

"Has something happened to her?" She looked mildly alarmed, or it could just have been rising emotion at the prospect of some new excitement.

"Do you have a key for her room?" I asked. "Lorraine, is it?" This guess/assumption from Ron's list.

"No," she said. Her eyes darted from me to the window and back. "Why would I? You're scaring me."

"Do you know of someone who might?"

There was a knock at the door – firm but not aggressive. I waited. She hesitated. She opened the door furtively, like a hostage forced to deal with the postman, or someone more persistent, someone who won't go away. She mouthed something – "Police", I think – and tried to shoo the visitor away. I heard a man's voice say, "Cat told me we had the police again. What're you worried about, Rain? They're always coming here. Maybe they like your company."

She looked at me, unfastened the chain, and opened the door. A tall man with a short Mohican hairstyle and a body-builder's physique stepped into the room. He was wearing a tight yellow cap-sleeved T-shirt, black jogging-pants, and black trainers. His skin was talcum-powder white. *Rain* said, "This is Ken." She seemed at a loss when it came to me, so I said, "Chief Inspector Black."

He smiled. "Not your usual, common-or-garden fuzz. Have you been moving up in the criminal world, Rain?" His accent hailed from somewhere west of the Pennines – Manchester probably.

Rain – presumably Lorraine – said, "Fuck off, Ken."

Ken, noticing me noticing him, said, "Seeing something you like, Chief Inspector?"

I – playing along as it were – said, "Yes, a big strong man, who wouldn't have any difficulty kicking in the door of Flat 4."

Silence laden with suspicion.

Finally, and seriously: "Now why would you want me to do a thing like that?"

I said, "Because I'm worried about Sharon."

He considered – made much of so doing – and then said, "Okay." To Lorraine, he said, "Remember, she asked."

I followed him out into the hallway. He stood back, lifted his right foot, and forcibly planted the sole of his trainer against the barrel of the Yale lock. The door jarred in, bending the jamb back and the strike-plate with it. It took me a second or less to confirm that Sharon was dead, for it was horribly obvious, and that she had taken her own life. She had hanged herself from a hook on the back of the wardrobe using a silk scarf. The wardrobe door was open and it rather looked as if she, or a purple-faced doll, had slid out of it onto the floor. I picked up an unlined piece of white paper, which lay next to her. Three handwritten sentences in three lines, all ending in exclamation marks: *Didn't ask to be here! Not enjoying the trip! Bye!*

Chapter Eleven.

"I appreciate you're tired, Barbara," he said; "but I need to have this straight. I can't have the press knowing more than me about this." *He* being Superintendent Wilson, looking rather ragged. He was wearing an evening suit rather than his uniform – had been attending some civic function when the bad news – or developments in the investigation – had reached his ears and spoiled his evening's enjoyment. We were in his office, where I had most definitely been summoned. DS Brightly had been left in charge of the scene. Not a crime scene, as he later testily pointed out; hardly even a potential one. I desperately wanted to go home. I wanted to see my partner and have a drink – not necessarily in that order.

"My report, sir," I said. I handed him two hastily typed – or word-processed – pages, detailing my supper invitation from Lisa Markham and my subsequent visit to 50 Princes Street. He read through it, and then handed it back to me with a pained expression.

"I can't go with this, Barbara," he said. "You must see that."

"Should I care, sir?" I replied. "Aren't the politics your problem?"

He swivelled in his chair – turning his back on me – to face the window and the night. "Yes, you're right. Go home, Barbara. Sleep." He turned back to me as I was in the process of leaving. "Well done, incidentally."

*

Castle Black lies approximately three-quarters of a mile distant from the police station, and I generally make the journey on foot. Leaving the police station, you turn left on Piper Street, which runs out after about seventy yards, where it's traversed by Victoria Road. If you turn left into Victoria Road, you will be walking down a slight incline until you reach Amberton town centre. Turn right, and you'll be walking up and out of Amberton to the outlying villages. Cross Victoria Road, which I did, and do, and you'll cross into Heather Drive. There's a little triangle of grass on one side of the junction with a bench, where you can sit and rest. On the other side is a modern, single-storey cream building, which houses the veterinary surgery; I say *the* because Barney, Maggie, and Midnight are on their books. There are, I believe, two or three other veterinary practices in the town.

Walk along Heather Drive, which has a parade of shops halfway down – a newsagent; a grocer-cum-off-licence; a Chinese takeaway; and a Fish and Chip shop – and at the end turn left into Rook Lane. The houses are larger here, and some stand in their own grounds. If you walk the length of Rook Lane – which essentially runs parallel to Victoria Road, though it gently arcs towards town from its starting point on Heather Drive – you will find yourself at the public library, a grand old building, which was the subject of much protest and local press coverage in our first year here when the council toyed with the idea of shutting it down.

A small crescent runs off and on Rook Lane – unsurprisingly called Rook Crescent – which comprises four largish, three-storey houses, five bedrooms plus, standing in their own grounds, one of which is Castle Black. Castle Black is not a castle, nor is it black. It acquired the soubriquet as a result of a visit from one of my colleagues, a DI who lives in a three-bedroomed

semi with his wife and three children. He wondered aloud why a childless couple would have need of such a large house. My mentioning that we had three cats didn't strike him as sufficient justification.

Of course, we don't *need* such a large house. It's an indulgence, one which I'm happy to blame on my partner, his name is Paul, who was brought up in cheap rented accommodation and social housing, where neighbours' noise – inconsiderate or otherwise – is something with which you're obliged to come to terms. A week after we moved in, the skies darkened and the air crackled with electricity. We opened the front door and sat on the bottom step in the hall to watch the storm. As the lightning flashed and the rain poured, Paul put his arm around me and said, "I've never been happier than I am at this moment." I confess a small lump came to my throat; I may even have shed a tear.

I enjoy being at home, but not nearly as much as Paul does. It never occurs to him that perhaps – just occasionally – we ought to go out. It *does* occur to him to suggest it *occasionally*, but only because we'll have discussed it sometime in the recent past. Rather as if he's come up with a slightly odd idea that nonetheless might meet with approval, he'll say tentatively, "Perhaps we should go out this weekend." I know I should appreciate his making the effort, but I find it amusing, and have, on more than one occasion, responded with gentle – I hope it's gentle – sarcasm. "Oh my god, Paul. All this social whirl. I mean, *really*, don't you *ever* feel like a quiet weekend at home?" Paul has a very good repertoire of wounded expressions, and will wander off looking crushed.

We bought Castle Black, or 1 Rook Crescent, on our arrival in Amberton. Paul wrote and writes articles for computer magazines and had just published his first book, an eccentric, tongue-in-cheek computer help manual, which wryly condescended to the reader and recommended and explained things it wouldn't ordinarily occur to them they'd want or need to do. *Obviously, your first task when you get your new computer home is to wipe the hard disk clean, thus rendering the computer temporarily useless to you, as well as clearing it of a lot of unasked for and unwanted junk in the process. You'll then want to partition and format your hard disk and install the operating system and programs of your choice. Yes, there is a choice; indeed – don't be frightened! – there are choices. In this way, you'll be prepared and know what to do should disaster strike. A computer should come to you naked and unsullied, eager and willing to be clothed in the scrim and samite software of your choice. A computer should dress to please.* When I began expressing discontent about living and working in London, he told me that he was happy to live wherever my job took me; and when I later got the opportunity to apply for the DCI position in Amberton, I reminded him of this. "Were you serious about moving with me?" I asked. "If I got a job in Scotland, you'd go with me?"

He said, "Yes. I don't really mind where I live. I've no sense of attachment to place. Why? Are we moving?"

Amberton? Practically up the road.

Not a problem.

*

The following morning, I was summoned to hear Superintendent Wilson outline the official position regarding the death of Sharon Hall. In short, the two deaths were unconnected. Or, in officialese: *No connection has been established between the two deaths, though we're not ruling anything out at this early stage of the investigation. Preliminary findings indicate that Sharon Hall sadly took her own life*. None of which we'd say unless we had to. I said, "What do I tell them if they ask what took me to Princes Street in the first place?"

Superintendent Wilson looked amused. Perhaps it was the naivety of the question. "What you don't tell them, Barbara, is that you had supper with our local MP's daughter, who suggested that Adrian Mansfield talked Ms Hall into committing suicide."

I grinned. "So not the truth, then, sir? Shall I tell them I visited Princes Street on an unrelated matter, sir – I mean, we *are* there quite a lot, sir – and found Sharon as a result of her friends' concern about her? What do you think, sir?" I had adopted a girlish, ingenuous tone.

"Yes; thank you, Barbara." He was trying not to laugh. "Our dealings with the press are not a trivial matter – as you well know."

"No, indeed, sir," I said, smothering a smile.

*

St Mary's Grammar School for Girls lies on the north east side of Amberton and caters for a thousand plus students. It was, and still is, the highest achieving school academically in the area, and parents go to considerable lengths to get their children admitted. Not being a parent myself, I'm not entirely sympathetic to the various manoeuvres parents employ to get their children places in certain schools whilst avoiding others. After a particularly glowing Ofsted report, the deputy headteacher alluded to this problem, joking that middle-class parents in Amberton were having their sons castrated in order to qualify for admission to St Mary's. To my knowledge, no-one's ever gone quite that far, though it does serve to illustrate the point.

I presented myself at the school office and was escorted to the headteacher's office by a pony-tailed young Asian woman in a cream trouser-suit, who introduced herself simply as "Rita". She didn't offer a surname, and I didn't insist on one. She invited me to sit down on a bench, or banquette, with black vinyl covered cushions while she checked that Ms Brampton was ready to see me. I sat; she made a point of watching me do so. Then she knocked on the door, was summoned, and went in, taking care to close the door behind her. Somewhat amused, I wondered if this were attributable to protocol or simply secretarial punctiliousness. The door re-opened in a matter of a few seconds, and Rita informed me that Ms Brampton would see me now. She left the office door ajar and walked off in the direction we'd come.

I went in, the open door implying that that's what I ought to do. Ms Brampton was standing behind her desk. She said, "Welcome, Chief Inspector. We've met before – briefly. Please, sit down."

Emily Brampton was a tall, slender, middle-aged black woman, who wore her hair cut short. She was wearing a charcoal dress buttoned up to the neckline, and a pair of half-moon, silver-rimmed spectacles hung from a black-beaded chain about her neck. We *had* met – very briefly – at a civic do at which we were both reluctant attendees. We were introduced to a bearded academic, a professor of politics or something, who said that it was "a pleasure to meet two such charming instruments of the state". He had clearly wanted to make an impression, though not necessarily a good one. No doubt he meant to be provocative. There's always someone who enjoys steering the conversation into choppy waters. It's just a matter of identifying and, optionally, avoiding them. Such people are not easily rebuffed and our non-committal smiles were duly interpreted as an invitation to continue. Perhaps he thought we were flattered. He explained that it was the role of the education system to prepare young people for the needs of society, and the role of the police to pick up the pieces when it, the education system, failed in this duty. Academics, like adolescents, impart their wisdom as though they're offering something fresh and vital to the world. Adolescents believe it; with academics, it's probably a performance issue.

Ms Brampton said, "You don't think the family has some role to play, professor?"

"Families provide the raw material, Ms Brampton, on which your institution must work. The less the family has to do with the process the better. Government pays lip service to the family while systematically working to circumscribe the role it plays in the upbringing of children. Good parents, from the state's point of view, are those who work with the education system; bad parents, either through ignorance or intent, are those who work against it. Consider the National Curriculum, or laws on child welfare and discipline. One of the first things one is obliged to do with one's new child is to give it a label and register it with the state. It's not too fanciful to regard parents as state employees charged with the task of producing and *helping* to bring up tomorrow's workforce."

"Can I take it you don't have any children of your own, professor?" I asked.

"No, I do, Chief Inspector," he said, as though admitting something vaguely shameful. "Two daughters, now at university: doubtless a credit to me *and* the state."

Ms Brampton smiled and said, "Professor, if the state were that much of a problem, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

The professor smiled thinly, and said quietly, "There are other conversations we're not having, Ms Brampton."

I sat down now in one of two seats available. A large side window with Venetian blinds, fully opened, looked out over the deserted playground. The day had darkened somewhat, and it had started to rain. Ms Brampton sat down and said, "How can I help you, Chief Inspector?"

"I'd like to speak to one of your students," I said: "Caroline Meadows."

"Caroline?" The note of surprise suggested Caroline was highly regarded and not the sort of young lady who got into trouble with the police.

I said, "I'm investigating a death, Ms Brampton. I'm hoping that she can help me. This isn't about Caroline being in trouble."

"No, of course it isn't," she said. She stood up and checked her watch. "I believe we'll find Caroline in Mr Larsson's class. If you'll follow me." She led the way out of the office and turned towards reception, and I followed as per request or injunction. We left the building before reaching reception – Ms Brampton pushing the bar on a fire door, a privilege presumably denied the pupils – and crossed a grey playground dotted with patches of green. Schools tend to be architecturally depressing places; no-one but a building inspector would welcome a tour round an empty school. We crossed from the Victorian building, wherein Ms Brampton had her office, to a squarish, modern building that probably dated back less than twenty years. The building had a corridor that was entirely windowed on one side, overlooking the playground, with the other side offering, at intervals, the doors to the classrooms, which were themselves windowed. I wondered if this design were deliberate, turning space wherever possible, and within certain seemly constraints, into communal, *public* space.

We turned left on entering the new building and walked past two classrooms. At the third, Ms Brampton stopped and tapped on the glass with the knuckle of her middle finger. A blond, bespectacled man turned towards the door and smiled. Ms Brampton opened it and went in, pushing the door to behind her without closing it. There then ensued a brief confabulation, mute to me and doubtless inaudible to the class, after which Mr Larsson addressed one of the students in the middle of the class. She smiled uncertainly and walked to the front, where Ms Brampton escorted her to the door. She was a tall, coltish girl, her blonde hair worn in a thick single braid down her back.

Ms Brampton said quietly, as though she were speaking in a library, "Caroline, this is Chief Inspector Black; she'd like to ask you one or two questions."

Caroline smiled at me and said, "Hello."

I wanted to speak to her alone and, as it were, off the record; that is, I simply wanted to have a chat with her. I was hoping – indeed, rather taking for granted – that Ms Brampton would raise no objection to this. Other than to offer to accompany her, or have her accompanied by another teacher, presumably one of Caroline's choosing, she did not, and Caroline expressed herself content to take her chances with me unchaperoned.

The rain had started to fall quite heavily, so I suggested a dash to the car, since walking a schoolgirl around in heavy rain while questioning her might be open to ungenerous construance.

Caroline climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door. She was slightly flushed from the dash, and there was an air of contained excitement about her. She smiled and clasped her hands between her knees.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak to me like this, Caroline," I said. "I do appreciate it." But Caroline appeared to be deeply interested in something going on in the rear-view mirror. I followed her gaze: nothing but the front of the school, some over-pruned hedges, and the parking area shrouded in grey. I was, I think, about to express my bemusement when she said somewhat wistfully, "It's hard to see rain in a mirror."

I smiled and said, "Torch in the dark."

"Sorry?"

"Torch in the dark," I repeated. "Best way to see the rain. On a beach preferably. Of course, it does have to be raining."

Caroline lowered the window and put her hand out, palm up. The sensation must have pleased her, for she relaxed back in the seat and said, "Can we go for a drive?"

I smiled and started the car, mentioning in passing – or pulling away – that it might not be a terribly good idea to leave her hand out the window like that. For the sake of the scenery, I drove out of Amberton towards some of the outlying villages to the north. I asked Caroline a question to which I already knew the answer: *Did she know Adrian Mansfield?* Yes, she did. She had. Why?

"You know he's dead?"

"Yes, it was inevitable. He was always talking about it. He believed life was a curse."

"Did you meet him?" This sounded slightly absurd, as though I were suggesting it might be something of a privilege.

"Yes, once. In the shopping centre. I think it made him rather nervous. When I told him my age, he laughed and said he'd probably be accused of grooming me. I said I hoped he didn't regret deciding to meet me."

"How did you communicate before that?" I asked.

"On the internet," she said. She sounded surprised – perhaps at the stupidity of the question. "You probably already knew that, or you wouldn't be here."

"What did you discuss?" Another question to which – at least partially – I knew the answer.

"Lots of things; but the big thing – and his obsession – was death as a life choice. He was always going on about how powerful we'd be as individuals if we could just turn ourselves off – easily and without the risk of pain or injury."

"Did you agree with him?" I asked.

"Well, yes – that part's obvious," she said. "Most people live shit lives. What would we do if we couldn't get them to go on living them? If they turned themselves off because they didn't

like the shittiness, how would we get the shit stuff done? We'd have to make their lives less shitty – shittiless enough so they wouldn't turn themselves off. It's not just humans," she added. "Imagine two cats: one gets to live its life as a much-loved pampered pet, while the other ends up being poked, prodded and shocked by white-coated freaks in a laboratory. It's just the luck of the draw – but wouldn't it be better if the unlucky one could just turn itself off? Because then there wouldn't be any more unlucky ones."

I said, "I don't want to misunderstand you, Caroline, but are you saying that people in unfortunate circumstances should commit suicide?" This was a teensy bit disingenuous, since I was fairly certain that this wasn't what she – or they – were saying – or, at any rate, *intending* to say.

"No, I'm not." Sharply, as though she had heard this argument before and knew where it was going. "It's not about that. Who's to say what's unfortunate anyway? I'm not interested in passing judgement on the quality of someone else's life – that's up to them. It's about me. I don't want my life limited by the idea that I have to go on living whatever. I don't want to go to school most days, but I go. I don't want to wear this uniform, but I wear it. School work bores me, but I do it. Ditto exams. I do it to please my parents and my teachers and to help my school's Ofsted rating. Last year, the local newspaper came round to celebrate the school's success. They wanted me to appear in the press photo, but I refused. The school and my parents *understood* – I was shy about my appearance apparently. I think they call that *spin* on the news. Imagine how terribly disappointed they'd all be if I switched myself off."

"That's not funny, Caroline," I said. The rain was sheeting down now, and misting. I dropped my speed and pulled into a patch of gravel and grass that passed for a lay-by. An HGV lumbered by, a loose patch of tarpaulin flapping in the wind and rain. I turned off the engine.

"I didn't say it was," she said. "My aunt's an office manager; and part of her job is disciplining staff who turn up late. That's the word they use: *disciplining*. It's just like being at school. You get taken into a room and told off. Not a big deal – unless you do it again. Then you get a more serious talking to, and told if you do it again you'll be in serious trouble. If you keep doing it, you'll be dismissed. This happens to adults – *grown-ups* – routinely. Something to look forward to. I don't suppose that's funny either."

I asked – *retreated* to – a factual question. "Do you know anyone who might have wanted to hurt Adrian?"

"Yes," she said, laughing. "Everyone who disagreed with him. He said whatever he was thinking, and pissed a lot people off. He thought that the people who wanted to beat him up were just threatened by his ideas. I think it flattered him. Why – did someone kill him?... Oh, don't look so appalled. For Adrian, it would just have been another way to die. You couldn't meet Adrian without being convinced that he was very serious about wanting to switch off."

"Anyone in particular?" For a second, I had the queasy sensation of being out of my depth with a teenager – something to do with her knowing more and caring less about the nature of Adrian's death.

She was openly amused. "What are you trying to find out, Chief Inspector?"

"Adrian was stabbed by someone," I told her. "I was wondering who that someone might have been."

"No-one I know," she said; and then, drawing a fine distinction: "or no-one I know I know." She turned away from me and gazed out the half-open window. In so doing, she distanced – or *absented* – herself from me. So effective was this that I had the disconcerting sensation of being alone in the car. Indeed, I was staring at her profile unselfconsciously – as though she couldn't

possibly be aware of my scrutiny – and imagined I saw adumbrated the young woman she would become. Her ear had been pierced, though she wore no ear-ring – possibly another school rule. When she turned to me at last, she was smiling bleakly. She said, "Oh, please don't look so worried. I'll still be here tomorrow. I mean, gee, tomorrow's my favourite lesson, and we've got ice-cream for dinner."

"Did you like Adrian?" I asked. "He sounds rather an unpleasant young man to me." I'm sure I must have sounded rather dispirited and disapproving.

"Oh, dear," she said; "you're making me feel guilty. I should be full of the joys of life, and here I am, instead, making my elders and betters feel bad. Yes, I liked Adrian. He was stimulating. His sister's suicide changed his life. It happened out of the blue; there were no signs or warnings. She wasn't wayward; she didn't self-mutilate. She was a good student and a dutiful daughter. After her death, Adrian became obsessed with her writings, which he said were amazing. When we met, he told me I reminded him of her, which made me feel a bit uncomfortable but was obviously meant as a compliment. Emma was *resigned*, he said, not *rebellious* – because she felt there was no point in rebelling. And it's true; there isn't. If you wear the wrong coloured blouse to school, you get sent home. If you keep doing it, you'll be excluded. So sigh and put on the right coloured blouse. Easy. It's not about you, after all; it's about the needs of the community and – what's the phrase? – *equipping young people for the world of work*. Well, I don't want to be *equipped* for the world of work; if I can possibly manage it, I'd rather not have to work at all. I know you don't approve, but it's not a bad message: if life becomes too tiresome, simply end it. You can't be exploited then."

I was thinking of Sharon Hall – the ugly little room; the wretched end – and fought a surge of anger. "Do your parents know you think like this?" How absurd I must have sounded: a police officer – a servant of the state – lightly quivering with middle-aged disapproval.

"No, of course not," she said. She sounded amused. "It would depress them terribly." She added, presumably in response to my expression: "Oh, I'm afraid you're paid to be depressed – and you did ask. My parents aren't that silly."

There was very little left to say. I thanked her and drove her back to school. As she took her leave, she must have seen some equivocation in me, for she smiled and said, "I think you know I can be trusted not to play *hookie*."

I said, "You will let Ms Brampton know you're back in school?"

"Of course," she said. "It was nice to have met you."

I watched her walk back into the school building. It was still raining.

Chapter Twelve.

The phone rang while I was driving back to the station. It was Raymond. I knew what he was going to tell me. "It'll be in the report, of course, Barbara, but I thought you'd appreciate advance warning: Adrian Mansfield was dead before he was stabbed. Toxic poisoning. Rather fashionably, a cocktail of drugs and drink? He died in the boat."

"So he wasn't murdered?"

"Well, no – not if we assume he wasn't forced to ingest the alcohol and drugs. You can't murder a corpse, though it's fairly obvious that whoever stabbed him intended to kill him."

"Is it?" I asked.

"Oh, dear. Have I over-stepped the mark? I think I'm trying to say that the person who stabbed him thought they were killing him. Are you telling me I'm wrong?"

I said, "Maybe they were trying to make a suicide look like a murder."

"Yes, of course," he said immediately. "Sorry, Barbara, enlighten me – why would anyone want to do such a thing?"

"I just told you, Raymond: to make a suicide look like a murder; to mortify the suicide's philosophical vanity. Whoever did this wanted to rob Adrian of grandiosity. That explains the placard round his neck."

"Yes, all right, Barbara. I'll take your word for it. You do sound quite appallingly sure of yourself."

"Do we know when he died?" I asked. "Roughly."

"Around five in the in the morning, I would say, Barbara. Perhaps he wanted to go out to the sound of the dawn chorus."

I said, "That would certainly fit with the Romantic tableau he tried to leave of himself. Thanks, Raymond."

He said, "You are, as always, very welcome, Barbara."

*

Superintendent Wilson said, "I can't go public with this, Barbara."

I blinked, histrionically. "I'm sorry, sir; I didn't realize my job was to bring you news with which you could comfortably go public."

He sighed heavily and looked at my report. "Who tied him into the boat?"

"We don't know that yet. I'm fairly sure he did it himself, though. Probably thought the tableau would make a good subject for an oil painting. Whoever stabbed him and put the placard round his neck deliberately defaced the portrait Adrian wanted to leave of himself."

"Do we have any idea who might have done that?" he asked. "The placard suggests some measure of premeditation, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir," I agreed; "it does. I think it must be someone who hated his philosophy and the influence it was having on those around him. I've spoken to two people who knew Adrian, and neither seemed surprised at his death, so perhaps he had a stalker."

"Who walked around with a placard on the off chance. Really? Don't you think this is getting a bit fanciful? *Generation Death: suicide as a life choice in an age of nihilism*. Enormous fun for the press, Barbara, as I'm sure you'll appreciate."

"Sir," I said, exasperated, "you have all the facts I do. Give me an *unfanciful* explanation."

Superintendent Wilson folded his hands, tented his forefingers, and appeared to consider the ceiling. The mind-wheels whirred – or glided – round. Finally, he said, "How do we know he committed suicide?"

A good question.

"We don't," I said. "Not for certain. We do know – from Raymond's report – that he died on the boat. He wasn't killed elsewhere and moved afterwards. If we go with a murder scenario, he would have to have been forced to take the drugs and drink before being tied into the boat and set adrift. That would mean that either the murderer or someone else came along later – after Adrian had died – and stabbed him in the chest. Since the placard covered the stab wound, it's not unreasonable to assume that this must have been hung round his neck following the stabbing – but perhaps not. Perhaps the placard was already in place, and the stabber simply lifted it in order to inflict the wound. Why, though? Why would anyone do that? Suicide *is* an assumption, but quite a reasonable one – and one, frankly, to which I subscribe. I believe that Adrian took his own life, arranged the tableau in the boat for posterity, and later had it defaced by someone who stabbed him and hung the placard round his neck. That person almost certainly knew he was already dead, and that he'd planned to take his own life."

"Sharon Hall?" he said.

Meaning: *Who was she? What do we know about her?*

"Well," I said breezily; "on the plus side, sir, there are no telegenic middle-class parents to worry about."

Sharon Hall had lived on the margins of society and no-one had come to her rescue – I wonder if she ever dreamt that anyone might. She was well-known to the social services and acquainted with the police. She had never known her father and had lived mostly with her alcoholic mother during her primary school years, except for – not infrequent – periods when she was placed in foster care, ostensibly to give her mother space and time to sort herself out. A younger brother had been fostered – and then adopted – when she was five, by which time adoption would have been but a distant hope for her, since potential adopters would have assumed she was *troubled* or *disturbed*. Her mother dropped out of the picture when she was eleven; she had died following a drunken swim in the sea at Southend in the early hours of Christmas Day. That left Sharon in the over-extended hands of the social services. She would be placed with foster parents and run away, be brought back and placed with other foster parents, from whom she'd quickly run away again. Finally, she ran away at an age when the authorities stopped being all that interested.

More immediately – and importantly from our point of view – she had an established connection with Adrian Mansfield. We had her mobile phone, and they had exchanged text messages on Tuesday afternoon. Sharon: *Dont no what U mean by impowrment, feels like giving up 2 me*. He had replied: *If you feel like that, don't do it. It's not about giving up. It's about understanding we were forced out of non-existence by ignorance and vanity and made to suffer. We all go back to non-existence anyway – it's just about choosing when it happens*. She had asked: *So you're def going to do it?* It's not hard to imagine that this was an attempt to mitigate her sense of loneliness. He replied: *Yes, but what's that got to do with you?* Then Sharon, surely

a desperate plea: *Can we do it together?* He: *No, that's really not a good idea. If it makes you feel better, wait until you hear that I'm dead. It won't be long*.

"You don't think you're running a bit of a one-woman show on this investigation, Barbara?"

"Is that a criticism, sir." I probably sounded a bit testy. "It seems to me that you're not entirely happy with what I've been about – not because of any shortcomings in the investigation, but rather because you don't much like what it's uncovered."

He *hmmm*-ed. It sounded apologetic, or at least conciliatory. "Hmmm. Yes, to be frank, there's an element of truth to that, Barbara. You're as far along as one could reasonably expect you to be at this stage of an investigation, and yet I have nothing positive to report up or out." *Up* was his boss, *out* was – *were*? – the media.

"Some investigations are like that, sir." This was, of course, entirely unhelpful. I tried harder. "You could always say it's a complex investigation that requires careful and sensitive handling; and while we want to be as open with the media and public as possible, we must also be respectful of the private tragedies of those involved."

"Yes, thank you, Barbara," he said drily. He was thanking me for the effort not the suggestion. "I'm going to have to tell them that Adrian Mansfield committed suicide. Once I do that, it will cause a media sensation."

"So what?" I said. "It's not like we're doing anything wrong."

"Yes, all right, Barbara." He sounded pained. Clearly I didn't understand. "Keep me posted."

"Of course, sir," I said, and took my leave – feeling, for some absurd reason, vaguely guilty.

Chapter Thirteen.

"I don't think I'm the best person for this job, ma'am," he said testily – *he* being DS Brightly, who had been busy wading through the material on the thumb drive provided by Martha Bottomley. In fact, he was doing himself a disservice. He'd gone through the material assiduously, noted online names – signatures or tags – which he'd cross-referenced with the non-virtual world – sourced by himself or from data provided by Neil's analysis of Adrian's computer – and provided breakdowns based on geography, those at the top of the list being in or around Amberton, and on age and gender. Names of deceased youngsters had been typed in bold italics, and mini-biographies provided. There were six of these, which didn't include Adrian and Sharon. So eight young people had committed suicide, and the rest were writing enthusiastically about the reasons for so doing. Caroline Meadows was on the list, having submitted two pieces entitled *Improperly turned out* and *Just say "Yes, miss"... all the time*. As was Adrian, who had written *One way out* and *Wrong planet*.

Simon was bristling with disapproval, and was eager to tell me what he thought of it all, which was something I was less than eager to hear. Not because I'm uninterested in the opinions of my colleagues – quite the contrary – but rather because I knew what it would be. They were spoilt. They didn't know what real suffering was. They were ungrateful and self-indulgent.

I asked a question which I knew would annoy him: "For what should they be grateful, Simon?"

"Ma'am, pampered young people are committing suicide because they don't want to work for a living, or aren't getting to do what they want all the time – do you think that's okay?" He shuffled through some papers. "Neil got this from one of their forums." He waved a piece of paper at me. "Someone tried to talk this girl out of suicide by suggesting she should consider the impact on her parents. She responds: *Why should I consider that? They've never considered my feelings. I don't want to go to school, but they insist that I do... for my own good, you understand. I really hate visiting my parents' boring relatives, but they force me to do it – every time, every single fucking time. They know best, you see. I'll understand when I grow up. And now I'm expected to go on another boring holiday with them to another hot hell-hole. Why should I care about them? They don't care about me. They don't even know who I am. I'm miserable all the time, and they're responsible. I hope they enjoy the funeral – no doubt they'll get lots of sympathy. I hope they feel guilty because everything that's happened to me is their fault*." He finished reading and looked up. What, then, did I make of that?

I said, "Don't keep me in suspense, Simon. She's dead, isn't she?"

He said, "Yes, ma'am, she is. Jumped from the top storey of a tourist complex in Mexico last week – presumably the hot hell-hole she'd been forced to go to on holiday. Her suicide note read, *Good riddance. Enjoy the rest of your dreary lives. I'm outta here*."

I said, "She was obviously a very unhappy young woman. The relationship with her parents had clearly broken down – if, indeed, it had ever been established."

"So it's the parents' fault, is it, ma'am?" Clearly he thought not.

I said, “You have to do more with a dog, Simon, than just walk and feed it. Some people have children simply as part of the status trip they’re on. Babies go with the car, the house, the job, and the golf club membership. They grow up in a cold environment in which, on the face of it, everything is done right. Who could argue with going to school, or being made to put up with one’s boring relatives? And you’re only going to be laughed at if you complain about being *forced* to go on holiday. Before you know where you are, you're eighteen, and no-one’s ever bothered to ask you what you think about anything because ultimately they never really cared. They were too busy doing the right thing.”

Poor Simon; he looked appalled. It was all so terribly complicated: all those nuanced opinions out there nibbling away at his perfectly sensible world-view. Simon was not the sort to worry too much about why he believed something. He said, “I’m surprised they don’t close down these websites. These kids show no respect at all for their parents – or anyone else for that matter.”

Rather to my relief, Neil breezed in at that point. He was carrying a tray bearing a coffee for each of us, and had a folder of documents tucked under one elbow. He said, “Sorry I'm late, ma’am, but it seems someone borrowed the kettle-lead and forgot to bring it back. I had to hunt it down.”

Simon looked irritated, as though he’d been interrupted, but he said nothing. Instead, he began riffling through his papers.

What I wanted to do was talk through – and visualise – what might have happened. So, then, Adrian had decided to commit suicide and to give the act a poetic flourish. Having taken the drugs and drink, he got into the rowing boat, rowed out out into the lake, and then dispensed with the oars because he wouldn’t be needing them again and because it had an *up-the-creek* kind of symbolism about it. He then tied himself into a sitting position with the scarves, the last part of this operation presumably proving difficult, and probably involving the use of his teeth to tie the final scarf. This done, he drifted into sleep and died. What happened after that? Had someone followed him and watched the whole process? Waited, then, until they thought he was dead, and then waded out to the boat, stabbed him and hung the placard round his neck? And then presumably waded back to the bank.

Simon said, “We don’t know that he went to the lake alone.”

Indeed, we didn’t. Someone, a friend, could have gone with him to watch over him while he died. And then what? Defaced his final work of art? Betrayed him at the end, and beyond, for some ambiguous reason? Of course, and this made my heart sink, what if such a friend had existed but hadn’t betrayed their charge? That would mean a third person had to be involved.

“Does it matter?” Simon asked; “now that we know he wasn’t murdered. Whoever hung that sign around his neck probably had it about right.”

I said, “It matters to me, Simon.”

A musical sound emanated from Neil’s mobile. He said, “Excuse me a moment, ma’am,” and left the room. Simon took the opportunity to say, “I wanted to tell you this earlier, ma’am; but I’d like to be removed from this case. This isn’t even a criminal investigation – unless we can get the Bottomley bitch on an incitement charge.”

I said, “Are you deliberately being offensive, Simon?”

He made much of eye-contact, which nearly made me giggle, and said, “Yes, ma’am, I think I am.”

Oh, dear. What was this? Manly rebellion, I supposed. I said, “I really must meet this Ms Bottomley, Simon. She’s clearly made a very big impression on you.”

"You really should, ma'am," he said. "She's getting a real buzz out of this. She thinks young people killing themselves is an evolutionary step forward."

I said, "I fear you may be over-simplifying things, Simon – either that or you're looking for someone to blame. Is that why you want to be removed from this case? Because you can't handle the philosophical overtones? That's not enough, Simon. You must know I need a compelling reason to remove or excuse someone from a case; it's not a trivial matter." All of which was true, though there was, of course, nothing to stop one taking the simple expedient of phoning in sick; and, of course, Simon knew this. Formally asking to be removed from a case suggested an interest, possibly a conflict thereof, but could also be interpreted as a criticism of the investigation.

Neil returned, tapping discreetly on the door before entering. He sat down and busily shuffled papers, "Sorry," he said, looking up. "I've only just got these. I'm trying to pick out some highlights." He handed three sheets of paper to myself and Simon. "These are Adrian Mansfield's phone records. Those are just the phone-calls, but" – he held up a bundle of papers – "we've also got everything he did using the mobile phone – mostly texting. There are more texts than calls. I'll need a bit of time to go through all this."

Simon, smirking, said, "Interesting last phone-call."

So, of course, I looked at him and then down at the list, which was no doubt something like the reaction he wanted. The last phone-call: 9.54 pm on the evening before he'd died. Duration: 44 minutes, 37 seconds. Outgoing: the recipient a land-line registered to Ms M V Bottomley. When I looked up again, Simon said, "Maybe they were discussing football, ma'am."

Chapter Fourteen.

I decided to go alone, since I thought this would likely prove the most productive approach. The sky was uniformly grey, but the worst of the storm had past, and the rain had abated to a light drizzle. She greeted me warmly and invited me in. I thanked her and followed her into the study, where she invited me to sit down and offered refreshments. She rather gave the impression that she'd been expecting me – indeed, that my visit was somewhat overdue.

"I'm afraid I may have inadvertently offended your young man," she said. "It highlights the importance of considering one's audience when speaking. He strikes me as the sort of man who makes a virtue of common sense. Not, I fear, someone given to, or tolerant of, philosophical musings."

"Or perhaps he just thought the timing was bad," I said. "You did, I believe, describe a young girl's suicide as a philosophical victory."

"I suggested that one might choose to see it in that way, yes. And so one might. We have to be – or become – something more than just survival algorithms, and choosing the manner and timing of our own deaths is a step in the right direction. Understanding that you don't have to be here – that someone else's selfishness brought you to this sorry pass – is to have a worthwhile philosophical insight into your plight. As a society, we spend an awful lot of time trying to persuade our children that they should be grateful for something for which they never asked. The unborn don't weep, Chief Inspector, neither do they suffer, and we were all unborn once."

I said, "You didn't mention your phone-call with Adrian on Tuesday night."

"Sorry, Chief Inspector?" she said. "I appear to have missed something." She sounded slightly irritated.

"You didn't mention to my young man that Adrian had phoned you on Tuesday evening."

"Oh, I see. That's because I rather assumed that that's why he'd come. Isn't that the first thing you do – go through their mobile phones? He didn't ask me about it, so I simply assumed he knew."

"What did you discuss?"

"With Adrian, you mean. Well, quite a lot. We talked about his sister and her writings. Adrian said he wanted to gather them together in one place – as a tribute to her. He wanted to know if I had them all, and if I'd be willing to post them on a blog – a single blog he meant; most of her work is already online. She used to post her school essays to a private blog – open only to invited readers – because she was afraid the school would censor or destroy them."

"Did he give any indication that he was about to take his own life?" I didn't add, *and would you have done anything about it if he had?*

"No, he didn't, but I wasn't really surprised. Adrian was obsessed with his sister's death and work – by which I mean her writings. He couldn't reconcile her death with the prosperity of what he called *happy idiots* – most of society in other words. Insightful people are always going to be at a disadvantage from that point of view, since they see the walls of the prison all the time and chafe against it. This is especially true of the young because they haven't had the chance to develop the necessary quality of resignation that makes prison life tolerable."

"Were you close to the Mansfields?" I asked.

Martha smiled. "Oh, dear," she said, "am I coming across as rather callous – a cold fish more interested in the philosophy than the people involved? The whole family have gone and I haven't shed a tear, and you can't help wondering why. Perhaps you think me rather ghoulish. Or are we simply engaged in the more practical business of looking for scapegoats?"

"You haven't answered my question," I said calmly.

"Close?" She made much of considering this. "No, I don't think that's quite the word – though I do have to remind myself that I never actually met Emma, so powerful was her presence in – or absence from – the family. If I was *close* to anyone, it would be Emma, though that statement's probably best interpreted through an artistic prism as opposed to a purely social one. I admired – and admire – Emma in much the same way as one might admire any other dead artist, particularly one who died tragically young."

"Did she go to school in Amberton?" I asked. "Sorry, I'm assuming you know a very great deal about her, Ms Bottomley. Correct me if I'm wrong in that assumption."

"No, they moved to Amberton after Emma's death – an attempt to make a fresh start. She went to school in Essex – the London end of it. Not a happy experience by all accounts. She played truant, spending her time in libraries reading and writing. She recorded with some amusement that no-one suspected you were playing truant if you were sitting in a library; they assumed you were doing some school project. The school behaved rather badly in the wake of her suicide, making rather obvious efforts to shift the blame elsewhere. Politics played its part. The school had been in the local paper over allegations by some parents that it was covering up incidents of bullying while obsessing about political correctness, though there was no suggestion that Emma had been affected by either of these issues. The English teacher came under some scrutiny because she'd raised concerns about the dark content of Emma's work with the head teacher. She was, she said, concerned that it might hint at psychological problems. Actually, she was just a dumb bitch who couldn't cope with a talented pupil. I believe it would have changed the course of Emma's life had she had a teacher capable of appreciating the merit of her work. What she got instead was someone whose talents extended to spotting spelling mistakes and noticing whether or not a comma was misplaced or a sentence started with a capital letter."

"You sound rather bitter on her behalf," I said. "I can't help but wonder how much this reflects your own experience of school."

"I didn't go to school, Chief Inspector. We – my sister and I – were educated at home, and I assure you we felt, and were, fully appreciated. Thanks to my parents, we adored learning. We were never bored, and never discouraged. Educating children at home is something that's becoming increasingly difficult because the state wants everyone who isn't privileged to be schooled in the same way. We can't have too many people thinking for themselves."

"You never wanted to go to school?" I asked. "You weren't curious?"

"I wasn't, but my sister was – or said she was. When she was ten – she's a year older than me – she mischievously suggested that it might be fun to go to school for a day just to see what it was like. The next day, my father took us to see a local school at playtime. We stood on the free side of the railings and witnessed small creatures in uniform push and shove and fall over each other to an audio backdrop of shrieking and screaming. There seemed to be so many of them, and the noise was terrible. I remember dresses and short trousers and exaggerated, curiously blank, cartoon expressions. And lots of movement – they never stopped moving. I held hands with my sister and watched appalled. I remember her saying very formally, 'Thank you, Father; I'd like to go home now.' We tended to call him *Father* when we wanted to be serious about

something. My father said, 'No, Charlotte, wait for the bell.' So we waited for the mysterious bell. When it rang, the creatures stopped and looked up, and then filed into the school building. I can't remember if it was then or later that I thought of the Eloi marching to their doom in the film *The Time Machine*. When they had all gone, my sister said, 'Can we go now, Father?' She was rather shaken. When Mother asked us later where we'd been, Charlotte, somewhat recovered, told her, 'Daddy took us to see the white monkeys' tea party.' I remember Father very much approving of this reply."

I turned to look out the window – at the garden and the rain. A plump ginger cat made its way – with reluctant haste – onto and over the fence, presumably *en route* to dry and warm domesticity. I was thinking, rather mischievously perhaps: *I wish my young man were here to hear this*; on more serious consideration, though, perhaps not. It was unlikely she'd have been quite so frank with him, or with him present.

"How did you become involved with the Mansfields?" I asked.

"Rather appropriately, in a library. Amberton library to be precise. I was doing a talk. Afterwards, Anne approached me to ask me what I thought of some writing she'd brought in in a folder. She told me it was her daughter's, but she didn't tell me her daughter was dead. I'm fairly used to people asking my opinion of their writing or that of their family and friends, and usually I'm non-committally polite because it's usually dreadful. It's a sad thing, Chief Inspector, but most people involved in most artistic endeavours have absolutely no talent in it whatsoever. I wish it weren't true, but it is, and it means that the talented few must struggle all the harder to be heard over the expected dross. And I do mean dross. We're not talking about stories I don't like, or a sniffy sneering at the populist; rather, we're talking outright, technically inept dreadful. And I do mean dreadful. Poor grammar, faulty punctuation, that sort of thing. This is to say nothing of dreary sensibilities and dull minds. Mostly one is simply dealing with an incompetence when it comes to craft. It's quite extraordinary. You can imagine, therefore, I did not look upon Anne's offerings with much in the way of hope. Indeed, before I'd even read the first sentence, I was, as it were, limbering up to be polite." She paused. "Well, you can gather the rest. I read a page at random, and was immediately struck by the meticulousness of the writing. Such is the corrosive effect of low expectation that I couldn't help wondering if the writer had made use of an editing service. I began reading another page and moved away from the main activity to sit down at a corner table – a sure sign I was interested. I began pulling pages out and reading bits of them before moving on to another page. This sounds rather more dramatic than it was, but she must surely have picked up on the fact I was impressed. I asked her if the work had been edited. She shook her head and said, 'No, that's exactly how she wrote it.' I said, 'Well, you should be very proud. Your daughter has a very promising literary career ahead of her.' I was, as you can imagine, astonished when she dissolved into tears. *Disintegrate* would be a more apposite verb; it was like watching a statue fracture and fall apart in soggy clumps."

"*Non-committally polite*?" I said. "You don't feel moved to tell them the truth – or, at least, what you really think?"

"A nice distinction, Chief Inspector," she said, amused. "No, I don't. What would be the point of that? I don't subscribe to the view that the truth is always good for you. Dreams – even unrealized ones – can sustain and nourish, and a good delusion can see you comfortably to the grave."

"Why do you think Adrian killed himself?" I asked.

"Because he didn't want to live any more," she replied.

We stared at each other.

I said, "I'm sorry, is that amusing?"

"Not at all, Chief Inspector. I'm simply stating a fact. You want to hear that he was distraught or disturbed, or broken in some way. Perhaps he was, but that would be an assumption and a *pre*sumption. Perhaps he simply added up the numbers and didn't like the total."

I asked, "Do you know a girl called Sharon Hall?"

"No," she said. "Should I?"

"Perhaps you should," I said. "She hanged herself in her room in a grotty lodging house. I'm not sure yet if it would be entirely fair to say Adrian talked her into it, but he certainly encouraged her in that direction. She even asked him if they could commit suicide together, but Adrian didn't think that was a good idea – probably for sound intellectual reasons. Perhaps you have a monograph he wrote on the subject in your collection. I'm fairly certain you won't have any of Sharon's literary output. All she wanted was a friendly arm around her shoulder and someone to tell her it was going to be all right. I'd have happily obliged."

"That's surely not all she wanted." She sounded curt, dismissive. "What she wanted was to have lived a different life, one that didn't lead to loneliness and despair in a grotty lodging house. Of course, if she'd led that different life – one perhaps of privilege and indulgence – she wouldn't have been the wretched, disenfranchised thing so worthy of your middle-class sympathy. Imagine a world, Chief Inspector, where there's no need for charity or the condescension of kindness."

I said, "Can you think of any reason why Adrian would want to tie himself into a boat?"

She said, "Symbolism probably. Something to do with being adrift on choppy, unpredictable waters. He was fond of boating, so it's not surprising that he should choose that as his final *mise-en-scène*."

"Yes," I said; "but someone spoilt it for him. Someone came along and stabbed him post-mortem, and someone – presumably the same someone – hung a sign round his neck declaring him an arse. Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to do that?"

"Someone who didn't like him, obviously. I don't know of anyone in particular, I'm afraid, but I do know his opinions often made him unpopular. I know because he told me so. And I did suggest, for his own good, that he might express himself rather less freely." She considered. "A disgruntled relative perhaps – someone who blamed Adrian for the death of their loved one? I'm sure you must already be looking into that."

My phone rang. Later I would remember this call through the filter of a dream in which the phone went on ringing after I'd answered it. *Something very dreadful has happened* – Emily Brampton's voice. The persistent ringing of the phone and Emily's voice: *Something very dreadful has happened*.

The phone did, indeed, ring. I excused myself prosaically enough and answered it.

Sergeant Turner: "Ma'am, something very dreadful has happened at St Mary's school. A student has been found dead in the school grounds. Seems she fell from the school building."

"Thank you, Ron," I said. "I'm on my way." *Well, that sounded brisk and professional enough. Next step, get up and get in the car. Come on, Barbara, you've done it many times before. It's a simple case of pretending nothing's wrong*. A friend of mine told me she used to worry about going mad as a child, but solved the problem – and stopped worrying about it – by telling herself that, if she did go mad, she'd just look around and copy what she assumed to be the sane people. Later on, she said, she began worrying that that's what everyone else was doing.

I looked at Martha and she seemed a long way away, though she clearly had no idea anything was wrong with me. My body felt huge and unwieldy – as though gravity had doubled

on it – and I was plunging down through space on Martha's sofa. Strange, distant noises came to me, and my head swam with shadows.

I stood up. *There, that wasn't so bad. You really should try to be more phlegmatic, Barbara. Police officers are meant to be phlegmatic*. I said, "Thank you for your help, Ms Bottomley. I appreciate your seeing me." That must have sounded slightly stilted – I may even have misjudged the volume – and might have hinted at something further being amiss. Not that it mattered. In police work, something – notionally – is always amiss. I got into the car, and, with my hands on the steering wheel, experienced something like a sense of relief. I was alone now; I had made it this far. Deep breath. I started the car, and turned towards St Mary's.

Chapter Fifteen.

Perhaps the mind can't help dramatising bad news. I imagined the whole school – children and teachers – with their faces, wet with rain, upturned to the child teetering on the brink of the building. Spectating rather than witnessing. Hoping to forestall or waiting for fate to cast the die. And then the Rubicon moment, the step into disaster, the silent fall – real and symbolic – elongated in time, lessening the second when sound returns and the world rushes back in, and the child lies smashed and broken on the unforgiving ground.

Of course, or *actually*, it hadn't happened like that. There were no witnesses, or none that came forward. There was certainly no audience. The child had disappeared between classes, and her absence was raised and remarked upon by another pupil who had been with her in the previous lesson. Since there were plenty of innocuous explanations, the teacher simply suggested that the girl step outside and try ringing her – mobile phones were not allowed in class and were meant to be turned off. When she came back in and reported that there was no reply – which, of course, there wouldn't be if the callee were obeying the school rules – he did what he was supposed to do and reported the absence to the deputy head teacher. At this point, the child had been missing for twenty minutes or so. As yet, no cause for alarm. The deputy head teacher, *en route* to the head teacher's office, put her head round the staff-room door and asked the two teachers on a free period if they'd mind checking the toilets and the playground. Mr Goddard, being male, took the playground, leaving Ms Hays to check the toilets. Mr Goddard had drawn the short straw. He found the child at the back of the school, broken and bloody, *and almost certainly dead*. He sprinted back to the head teacher's office and raised the alarm, having left his mobile phone in his jacket in the staff-room.

Ms Brampton took the decision to keep the children, and their teachers, in their current classes on the basis that to evacuate the school would cause unnecessary alarm. As was mentioned later in the local press, this effectively – given the school rule on mobile phones – kept the children incommunicado. Also worthy of later press comment was the prompt arrival of the ambulance. It was estimated that the time from discovery to removal of the *body* – the implication being that the child was already dead – had amounted to less than ten minutes with the suspicion being that this had been done to get the *body* off the school grounds. The ambulance service, of course, simply stated that they were trying to save her life by getting her to hospital as promptly as possible. Emergency treatment, they added, had been given at the scene and in the ambulance, and she was pronounced dead at Amberton General Hospital.

Her name was Chloe Johnston; she was fifteen years old. At the hospital, a suicide note was found folded and tucked into her right sock. In forward-sloping handwriting on lined jotter paper, she had written in blue ink: *If you're reading this, I'm dead. I wonder who you are, which is more than anyone's ever bothered to do for me. Sorry for the mess. Seriously. I hope you enjoy the rest of your life. Chloe*. After that, she had printed the address of a website or blog – which, for reasons more to do with curiosity than investigation, I sat in the car reading on my phone prior to driving to the family home to give them the news of her death. I would later wonder, guiltily, if this had ungenerously coloured my view of her parents before meeting them.

Hi, if your reading this I'm dead. It's good that I'm dead because it wasn't much fun being alive. I hated my father. I'd like to say he abused me, but we were never that close. There was a picture of her father in a business suit, looking rather pleased with himself. Presumably it had been chosen for this reason. Underneath were three lists with comments on the entries.

Things my father likes:

Money. Yup, he adores it. It's the measure of everything. Winners make money, losers don't. My father thinks he's a winner.

Business people. All the people he admires are rich arseholes.

His car. It declares to the world he has money. He likes that.

Himself. Caroline reckons I'm wrong about this. People like my father are, she says, insecure, which is why they desperately want to be approved of by being what they think of as successful. I'd like to believe she was right, but I think some people are just arseholes, and my father's one of them.

Football. He likes to watch it with his mates. They drink beer and eat pizza, and shout and grunt at the television. We usually go out.

Things my father dislikes:

Losers. This includes a lot of people. The homeless are losers. People on benefits are losers. People in shit jobs are losers. Teachers and social workers are losers because they're the kind of people paid with his money, who always have too much to say for themselves. People who care about things other than making money are losers. He calls them "bleeding hearts".

Us – being me, Mum and my sister. My father would like to have had a son to bring up in his own grubby image. He imagines that such a boy would have turned out to be a mini-he. Instead he got lumbered with girls. Pesky females with their emotional concern for things other than money and football.

Not being admired. Oh, dear, poor Daddy. No-one looks up to him. All his family thinks he's something of a joke. Rather magnificently, Mother's shagging the electrician who came to rewire the garage. Who can blame her? It's hard to imagine anyone finding Father attractive. I don't know if she knows we know – but she must know we wouldn't tell if we did.

Things my father says:

"It is what it is. You have to learn to live with it." There are, of course, variations on this pearl of wisdom. "That's how the world is – deal with it." Oh, Daddy, you're so philosophical. "It's a dog eat dog world." Which means: I'm entitled to be an arsehole. "You have to look out for number one." Which means: I'm entitled to be an arsehole. "You only get out what you put in." Which means: I'm an arsehole, who thinks he's put a lot in. "I am what I am. I don't put on airs." Which means: I'm a vulgar, self-righteous arsehole.

I was, I realized, laughing. I caught my reflection in the rear-view mirror and it was shaped and shadowed with humour. The theme here – the *leitmotif* – seemed to be that her father was an arsehole. It was my job, my duty – indeed, my *solemn* duty – to visit said arsehole and inform him that his daughter was dead.

The house was on Longtree Drive, near the centre of Amberton. It was a modern house with futuristic pretensions – lots of glass and shiny wood – the front jutting out over the entrance like the prow of a ship – or, less generously, a Neanderthal forehead. A man I recognised as her father answered the door. He was thickset with thinning sand-coloured hair, and was wearing a white shirt – with a blue silk tie pulled down from the collar – and charcoal trousers, presumably the bottom half of a suit. He had a mobile phone pressed to his right ear and he was expressing his displeasure at something to somebody. He beckoned me in with two fingers without inquiry –

verbal or mimed – as to my identity. I entered and stood in the spacious hallway while he turned away from me and made his telephonic demands. He wanted something or other by Saturday, Sunday at the latest; Monday, it seemed, wouldn't be good enough. Having, I assumed, been assured of satisfaction, he terminated the call and turned to me. "What can I do for you?"

I introduced myself and produced my identification. "Are you Mr Johnston, Chloe Johnston's father?" For formality's sake.

"Yes. Why, what's she done?"

"Is your wife at home, sir?" I asked.

I watched sand shift under trivial assumptions. "What's happened? My wife isn't here. She's at work. Has something happened to Chloe?"

"Sir, if you'd like to sit down." This, of course, only served to confirm his worst fears. He didn't move. "Sir, I do need you to sit down." I was thinking that I should have called DC Taylor and told him to accompany me here. Mr Johnston turned and led the way into a small sitting-room – or *snug* – and sat down on a white sofa. He looked at me expectantly. I said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you, sir, that your daughter has died."

Silence – entirely expected and understandable. No emotion, though. Finally, he said impatiently, "Well, are you going to tell the me the hows, whys and wherefores, or is that still under investigation?"

"We think she committed suicide, sir – by jumping from the main school building between lessons. She left a note. But, yes, we're still investigating."

He stood up and said, "I'll give you my wife's work address. I'd rather she heard it from you. You see, Daddy's going to be the villain in this little drama."

"You didn't get on with your daughter, sir?"

"She was a dreamer. Head in the clouds all the time. Wanted the world to be all fluffy bunny rabbits." He was walking out of the room. Obviously I was meant to follow.

I said, to his back, "That's not so very terrible, is it, sir? Better, surely, than wanting it to be cruel and ugly."

"The world *is* cruel and ugly," he said. "That's just the way it is. Chloe couldn't handle that. She used to say if that's how it was, then life wasn't worth living." He laughed drily. "I didn't realize she was that serious." We had moved into a study, or home office. He sat at the desk and wrote something – his wife's work details – on a scrap of paper and handed it to me.

I said, "Can I get someone for you, sir?"

"What? Oh, I see. No, I'll be fine. Johnnie Walker's in the next room." He stood up. "Unless you have more questions, you can piss off now. I have things I need to do."

"You have another daughter, sir?" I asked. I had nearly said: *She has a sister, sir?*

"Yes – Samantha. She's very like her sister, and shares her opinion of her dad. She won't survive this."

"Sir?"

"Some people aren't strong enough for the world," he said, "and are better off not in it."

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"Ms Johnston?" Late thirties, early forties perhaps. Blonde hair with dark roots tied back in a ponytail. Spray-on tan provided by a salon. Smartly dressed for business in black and white. We were in an office with two desks, in which she was something with *manager* in the title. I didn't care. It hardly mattered.

"Yes."

"Chief Inspector Black."

"Yes?"

She was, of course, alarmed now, expecting bad news, which I duly delivered, though not before, considerately, inviting her to sit down behind her own desk. I watched her face spider-web into anguish, heard, oddly muffled, the accompanying soundtrack, and – appallingly – found myself wishing that she might have managed some restraint. Some expression of compassion was surely in order, and yet I simply watched her – *observed* her – with a mixture of detachment and distaste. The breakdown, the disintegration, continued. She shrieked obscenities, directed at her husband, and choked on sobs. She held herself and rocked backwards and forwards. She was struggling to breathe. I called for assistance, which amounted to a doctor to minister to her and a WPC to sit with her and accompany her to her sister's, which was where she said she wanted to go. As she was being helped into the car, I asked about Samantha.

"I don't know." She shook her head. She seemed unfocussed, only vaguely aware of her surroundings. "I haven't seen her. I think she might be dead."

"What?" I stopped WPC Levitt from closing the car door and crouched down to Ms Johnston's sitting level. "I need you to explain that to me, Ms Johnston. Why would you think Samantha was dead?" I thought she might be confused, addled with grief, and thus confusing her daughters.

"They were always talking about dying," she said; "about life not being worth it. Chloe loved Samantha, and wouldn't go on living without her. I don't think Chloe would kill herself unless she knew Samantha was already dead."

"You think *both* your daughters are dead?" I was dimly aware of the rain falling on my back, and of WPC Levitt standing over me.

"Yes, I think so," she said vaguely. "You will find her for me, won't you? I'd like to bury them together, you see. I think that would be nice, don't you?" She reached out and touched me on the shoulder. "Thank you for your kindness."

Kindness. I smiled bleakly and straightened up. I glanced at the clouds, which were surrendering rain in increasingly heavy droplets. WPC Levitt closed the car door. "Take care of her," I said. "Make sure she isn't left alone."

Chapter Sixteen.

"It's a sad thing, Barbara," he said, "but it has nothing to do with your investigation."

Superintendent Wilson's office – again. He had invited me to sit down and had subsequently done so himself – legs crossed and hands folded on the uppermost knee. How confident he looked, how assured. Was it all just a silly, absurd game that two other actors might so easily have played out in our stead? Same substance, different style – talking around disasters we had failed to avert.

"Really, sir?" I said; "I rather thought it had. Perhaps I'm too tired for the subtleties of nuanced agenda." I was thinking: *I wonder how long it will take us to find Samantha*. I assumed, was assuming, that she was dead – something to do with her mother's fatalism, her air of utter, abject defeat. That and the fact that rather a lot of proximate young people seemed rather keen on taking their own lives. So? So what, then? What was he talking about? *...but it has nothing to do with your investigation*. Did it not? What was I being told?

He said, tentatively, "You've established a connection?"

"Yes, sir," I said; "I think we have." Actually, not quite, or not quite yet; but he didn't need to know that – yet, or ever. I was assuming that the *Caroline* mentioned in Chloe's blog was Caroline Meadows, a fact – if such it turned out to be – that would connect all the local deaths. But this was, I fear, missing the *political* point.

"*Think* you have?" he said.

Oh, dear. I was obviously missing something. Not getting the hint, as it were. I said, "Sir, I'm getting the impression there's some conclusion you don't want me to draw or reach. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell me what it is."

He smiled ruefully. "You have a way of making political considerations seem insalubrious, Barbara. Unfortunately, those are what I have to consider. We don't want stories in the local press about an epidemic of teenage suicides, do we? That benefits no-one, and is the sort of thing likely to be picked up and exploited by the national media on a slow news day. The press love a good moral panic, especially where young people are concerned. It's the kind of thing that ends up as a topic for debate on those awful morning television programmes they have on in doctors' surgeries."

I smiled and said, "I'm surprised you're so exercised by things over which you have no control, sir. The story's already out there for anyone who wants to run with it. Martha Bottomley's probably writing a book on the subject as we speak."

"Yes. My point is, Barbara, I don't want any serving officer quoted in it, or anywhere else for that matter, unless they're stating facts. We don't address *why* questions, nor do we engage in philosophical speculation."

"Perhaps, sir, in the interests of constabulary PR, we should refrain from thinking as well. Even if we're prone to having thoughts, we don't want to be going around expressing them, do we?"

"Don't be cute, Barbara," he said. "You'd be the first to complain if DS Brightly went to the press with his opinions."

"Should I gather from that that he's been less constrained about coming to you with them, sir?"

"He's asked to be removed from the case, Barbara. He wants to manage it informally, without fuss or bother, or without criticism, implied or otherwise. He was – *is* – hoping that I can persuade you to allow him to be reassigned – to something rather more morally straightforward, I think, though he didn't say that."

"And are you, sir – persuading me, I mean?" I was making an effort not to sound prickly.

"I told him it was up to you, of course, Barbara."

"*But*, sir. There must be a *but* or you wouldn't be raising it with me."

"Well," he spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture, "don't you think he's a bit too phlegmatic for this sort of thing, Barbara? Lacks the necessary refinement of sensibility that an investigation such as this requires. Brightly's an A to B to C sort of man, a bit join-the-dots and paint-by-numbers. Smart enough in his way, of course – the sort that retire after a solid career as a DI – but not what you'd call sensitive or discerning."

I said, "You missed out the bits about his getting married, having children, getting divorced, and becoming a booze-dependent workaholic. Don't you think you're doing him something of a disservice, sir? He has a long way to go before he retires, and has – one would hope – a lot of personal development to do along the way. It's a little ungracious – not to say patronising – to map his life out so disparagingly."

"Perhaps it is, Barbara," he said, smiling. "Perhaps he'll eventually leave the service to pursue a career in music or poetry. In the meantime, I'll leave you to deal with him howsoever you see fit. If you'd prefer to be shot of him, though, Chandler will be happy to take him off your hands. He's always bleating about manpower."

"And would I get a replacement for him?" I asked.

"DC Sayer would jump at the chance," he said. "She's young and idealistic, and thinks you're the embodiment of all that's good in modern policing. She's not happy where she is, and has requested a transfer. She's yours for the asking."

"Why does she want the transfer?" I asked.

"Between ourselves, Barbara," he said, "I think she was hoping for something rather more intellectually stimulating than DI Rodgers and DS Keane, both of whom are rather plodding and – well, shall we say *traditional*. It's an open secret she'd like to work with you."

"Which is fine, sir," I said; "and much appreciated – but shouldn't I at least try to keep Simon on board? Wouldn't that be better management? You can't transfer every time you don't like the nature of the case you're on, or the manner in which your boss is handling it. Similarly, it would be unrealistic and unreasonable of me to seek to work only with people who like and admire me." I paused. "You look unconvinced, sir."

"It's all about teams, Barbara," he said. "Why wouldn't you want to create a team built on mutual respect and admiration? A talented footballer may not work in some team set-ups yet flourish in another. It's important that we as a service produce teams and team leaders that maximize individual talent. I know you're sceptical, Barbara, but it *does* matter. There are plenty of talented officers who struggle horribly in some teams – perfectly good teams – and yet flourish when moved to another. It's important that we acknowledge and recognise that, and match the most suitable individuals to the most suitable teams. This isn't to deny that there are some individuals that are ultimately – and regrettably – unsuitable to any team, nor that some teams are weak and unfit for purpose; it simply acknowledges that a group of talented people doesn't necessarily make a team and that not all talented people fit in everywhere, which should

be obvious. Our objective is to build good teams. We waste time and energy if we put people together who simply can't get on."

I said, "What do you do with the talented individual who can't flourish in *any* team, sir?"

"Well, if, notwithstanding, they have something substantial to contribute, you would allow them, where possible, to work alone because that's the situation in which they're most likely to be effective. But there is surely something to be said for the ability to work with others, and to be part of a team that's greater than the sum of its parts because of the way its parts interact. There's always going to be the place for the individual, Barbara, even the loner, but nothing is better or more satisfying – or more effective – than the chemistry of a good team."

"No, indeed, sir," I said. "But a good team doesn't happen overnight. It has to gel and grow together, and part of that growth is overcoming individual differences and responding effectively to new external stimuli. This case discomfits Simon because of its complexity and moral ambiguity. Coming to terms with it will help him grow as an individual and a police officer, and he needs our support to do that. Simply to transfer him would be to deny him this opportunity, and would be neglectful and expedient on our part. If he definitely wants to be transferred, I wouldn't want to stand in his way; but by transferring now, he simply avoids an issue that makes him uncomfortable. I think we owe it to him to see that he confronts and overcomes his issues with this case because it will make him a better officer and future team member and a greater asset to the service."

"I'm sure you're right, Barbara," he said; "but do bear DC Sayer in mind. She would certainly benefit from working with you, and I'll have to move her soon anyway. Can't leave her with those two buffoons for much longer."

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"Please – sit down, Simon," I said.

Well, it had to be done, so best to get it over with.

He sat – with his knees apart and his hands folded in his lap. I assumed this was one of a limited range of standard male sitting positions, crossing one's legs being *non*-standard apparently.

I said, "I wanted to have this meeting with you, Simon, to discuss your desire to be removed from this investigation. I know you haven't made a formal request, but you have made your wishes clear to both myself and to Superintendent Wilson."

He said, "Yes, ma'am. I thought it would be better if it could be managed informally."

For whom, I wondered; but I said, "That's fine, Simon. I have no problem with that – but I would like to discuss your reasons before we reach any decisions. Sometimes simply moving people is an expedient way of failing to address underlying issues."

"Superintendent Wilson seemed fine with it, ma'am," he said.

I said, "That's because he doesn't think you're good enough for me, Simon. His idea is that I should just let you go to DI Chandler and get someone a bit more groovy and fast-track for myself. Your career's all mapped out for you. You'll retire as a DI after decades of solid, unremarkable service. You'll probably have lost most of your hair by then and be a bit on the paunchy side, but age and the job can do that to a man. Hopefully, you won't get married because it'll only end in divorce if you do; and if you make the mistake of having children, you'll have access rights that you'll fail to keep due to the pressures of work. Understandably, the failure of your marriage and your failure as a father will weigh on you and make you feel guilty, which you'll numb with drink and immersion in your work. You'll fear retirement

because retirement will just mean an empty house and a bottle of something forty per cent proof. Or you could stick with me, Simon – for a while at least – and walk a more fragrant, enlightening path. Personally, I'd prefer if you opted for the latter."

"Why, ma'am? People move on all the time – and it's not as if you need me on this case. If we arrest anyone, it's going to be whoever stabbed Adrian Mansfield, and I'm not sure I wouldn't rather shake their hand. His *philosophy* – one which Martha Bottomley *and* you seem to support – boils down to *Give me what I want, or I'll kill myself*. That's appalling and self-indulgent. It would be a joke if people weren't actually killing themselves. You might find it fascinating, ma'am or revolutionary, or whatever, but I don't. It's not what police work's about – unless we're trying to get someone on incitement charges. Are we?"

"Is that why you want to *move on*, Simon?" I was amused and a little exasperated, and it probably showed. "Because I'm not roundly condemning these ideas? Really, Simon – is that what it comes down to? Would you prefer if I proceeded in an orderly fashion, called a spade a spade, and made much of common sense as a virtue? Preferably all in trousers. I expect to be contradicted here, Simon."

Simon said, guardedly, "Is this a formal meeting, ma'am?"

"No, Simon, it's not. It's what I hoped would be a free and frank exchange of views. I also had the idea that, if I were frank with you, I might talk you out of transferring because I believe that to be the best outcome for both of us. Not doing terribly well, am I?"

"Why, ma'am?" he said again. "I mean, why do you believe it to be the best outcome?"

"Well, isn't it all a bit too cosy and convenient otherwise? I want to be able to work with people who don't necessarily like me. I certainly want to work with people who feel free to disagree with me and argue their point of view – don't you? Do you really want to be – or work with or for – the kind of absurd person who seeks to surround him- or herself only with people they find personally agreeable? Organisations are polluted and corrupted by such people, Simon. Diversity of views and opinions is vital – right up to political discussions about what a police service's role should be. Anything other is just empire building or canteen culture writ large."

"I agree with most of that, ma'am, but there's still a lot to be said for moving on. Loyalty and long-service *might* be a good thing, but they can just as easily be a positive spin on inertia. People often stay where they are because they're afraid of change – and overcoming workplace difficulties often just means putting up with them until they go away, or learning to live with them if they don't. The longer you're in a job, the harder it is to move on because people become institutionalised to some extent. I don't want the life or career you so amusingly described, ma'am; I'd rather leave the service and do something else, and I don't mean work with a security firm. As daft as it sounds, I joined the police because I wanted to do some good in the world, but maybe I'd do better as a teacher. It's not something I've entirely ruled out. I think what I'm trying to tell you, ma'am, is that I'm not wedded to the job. The possibility of not being a policeman doesn't frighten me – it doesn't even bother me – but I do know the type of copper you're talking about. My brother's a gas-fitter, and makes more money than I do, so that's another possibility if I decide I've had enough of policing – or policing decides it's had enough of me. It's a job at the end of the day, ma'am." He must have caught something in my expression, for he hurried to clarify: "It's getting me down, ma'am – the case, I mean. I can't cope with how deeply I'm thinking about it. It's normal enough to think about a case when you're not at work, but I'm getting *depressed* about it. And – frankly, ma'am – I couldn't, and can't, get my head around you thinking it a good thing. You and Martha Bottomley seem to be hailing teenage suicide as the new revolution."

"It's an idea, Simon – one I find interesting. So what? Would you have found it less depressing if these youngsters had been raped and murdered? I think you would, Simon. I think it wouldn't have depressed you at all. They'd have been victims, then – *innocent* victims – of an external evil, and it would have been your duty – simple and honourable – to apprehend the beast and bring it to justice before it did more harm. An agent of good doing the right thing against a backdrop of panic and moral outrage from press and public."

Simon said, "I don't know what to say to that, ma'am; I really don't."

"You could do me the courtesy of answering the question," I said; "or at least considering it. Or is that something else you can't get your head around?" For a second, he dropped his gaze to his hands; and in that second he seemed – well, rather *lunkish*, doggishly male. I felt a twinge of guilt, and worried that I might be bullying him. I said, "I'm sorry, Simon, I'm bombarding you."

He said, "It's certainly a lot to think about, ma'am." He tilted his head and rubbed his nose – an expression of relief, of knowing he was being let off the hook. He wanted to be told he could go.

"Well, you go and have a think about it, then, Simon." I tried not to sound condescending or dismissive. I concede I may not have wholly succeeded in this. "You *do* need to let me know, though." He was standing up, ready to make good his escape. "If you tell me tomorrow you still want to transfer, I'll arrange it for you immediately. I promise. This is not about a long-grass solution."

"No, ma'am," he agreed. "Thank you, ma'am." He wanted to leave – in the immediate, situational sense – and was in the process, or act, of so doing. It had not been a successful meeting. My fault, of course. I should have planned it better, prepared something. I was, after all, trying to convince him to stick with me for *his* benefit. That must have sounded vain and rather arrogant with nasty undertones – entirely unintentional – of a political threat: *Leave, Simon, by all means, but it will mean the slow, plodding lane from here-on in*. I was – had been – frustrated and had handled it badly. Perhaps Superintendent Wilson was right, and Simon and I were simply not suited to the same team.

Chapter Seventeen.

Silk scarves – those that had bound Adrian in the boat. Black, red, and yellow. Could they be traced? *Ah, yes, madam; red, black and gold. We sell them in packs of three. Very popular with the boating bondage set. We've sold ten sets in the past fortnight. Names and addresses? Of course, madam*. That, or some real-world approximation thereof, is a technocrat's fantasy. The rubbish bag that came from the roll, that came from the warehouse, that supplied the shop, that sold to the house where Jack lived. Ideally, the bags, like the scarves, would be, have been, a singular purchase bought for a singular purpose. Life – even in the laboratory – tends to be messier than that. Sophisticated tests take time and cost money, and then – annoyingly – tend to reflect life's untidiness. The scarves, as far as we knew, and more than likely, were plucked at random from a collection gathered over time, possibly a long time. What, though, about the sign that had been hung about his neck? Had that been designed for the purpose? Had someone painted the word *arse* on it knowing full well that it was destined to be hung around Adrian Mansfield's neck? That, too, was a moot point. It was, after all, merely a word painted on a piece of plywood. Possibly there were other pieces of plywood with other words painted on them – part of an arts project, perhaps, or a game. *Arse* – a very British, or Irish, word. Our transatlantic friends would say *ass*. *Arse-ass, bottom-Bottom, ass-donkey*. Thoughts, like furniture, jostling for mind-room – seeking somewhere to be they wouldn't look out of place. What about the knife, then? What if *it* had originally been part of the intended tableau? That would mean that the despoiler, the defacer, had removed and disposed of the knife. It would also mean that Adrian had not been alone when he took his life; that he had had an accomplice or sympathiser – or, more sinisterly, a disciple – who had aided and abetted and helped to create the image that would later be despoiled. Risky, but not very – especially if you later planned to take your own life. Had that person recorded and got away with – and got out in the multimedia sense – the death-image that Adrian had wanted the world to see?

I had just parked outside Caroline Meadows' home. It was raining thinly, and the street-lamps glowed in the twilight. I sat for a moment thinking about the knife. Why hadn't that occurred to me before? Perhaps I'd been seduced by a clichéd image of artistic vandalism – the ugliness of a knife, fuelled by rage and frustration, slashing at a painting.

I was in a suburban street of extended 1930s houses with neat lawns and flower-beds and off-road parking, so presumably above the tasteless territorial disputes and plank-and-bin markings of the *gotta-right-to-park-outside-my-own-house* brigade. There were lights on in the downstairs of the house, though the curtains were unclosed. A black and white cat looked out at the darkening world from the bay window. I pushed the doorbell and heard it softly chime inside. A tall forty-something woman answered the door. Her hair was dark-blonde, cut short, and she was dressed in grey jeans and a baggy white shirt, which she wore outside the jeans. There was a family resemblance to her daughter, but it was passing rather than striking – there only if you were looking for it. I said, "My name's Barbara Black. Could I speak to Caroline, please?" I put it like that because I wanted to avoid her worrying that something dreadful might have happened to someone close to her, which I feared might be the effect of a more formal introduction.

She said, "Yes, she mentioned you. I'm afraid she's not in. Cat-sitting duties this evening. If you want, I can give you the address." She went back into the house without being asked and returned with a scrap of paper with an address written on it in pencil. Handing it to me, she smiled and said, "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Tell you what, ma'am?" I said.

"Something terrible happened at the school today, didn't it?"

I said nothing, but neither did I move away.

She said, "Caroline knows – I'm sure she does – but she won't tell me. I suppose that's why you want to speak to her again. Caroline's very good at keeping her own counsel where her parents are concerned. She says it's because she doesn't want to worry us."

A euphemism of sorts: *I don't, or didn't, want to worry you*. Meaning what exactly? Meaning, sadly, and rather cruelly: *It's a waste of time talking to you about anything I care about*. In Caroline's case, there was a distinct note of kindly condescension in the mix. They *really* wouldn't get it, so why worry them? Why not let them believe that their daughter was a happy high-achiever interesting herself in *appropriate* teenage things? Clearly her mother had virtually no idea about her virtual friends, and still less about her online writing.

I thanked Mrs Meadows and returned to the car. The pencilled address was not far – less than a quarter of a mile. I arrived there in a few minutes and parked in the residents car park. A round white street lamp – brightly lit – stood sentinel at the entrance, casting the cars and the few trees into silhouette.

The address was of one of three detached houses on a private estate with a "No drive through" sign, and a notice announcing that parking was for residents only. The gardens of the houses backed on to a private wooded area, also for residents only, though part of a larger, public wooded area. As far as I know, no-one has ever complained about trespass – whether because no-one has, or no-one has noticed or cared when someone has, I couldn't say. Caroline answered the door, and – absurdly, I suppose – the transformation in her appearance surprised me. She was wearing blue jeans and a grey T-shirt with a brightly-coloured cartoon depiction of a duck and three ducklings in a marching line printed on it. Her hair, which at school had been tamed and tethered in a horsetail plait, now hung freely and shone in the artificial light. The display was momentary, though, and – probably – accidental, for I was no sooner in the hall than she was gathering it into a ponytail, around which she twice looped a green hair-tie. I followed her through to the kitchen, where she pushed the button on a half-full kettle – suffusing the water with a blue light – and invited me to sit down at a modern chrome-and-glass dining-table. The kitchen was square and spacious, and tiled everywhere except the ceiling, the walls entirely in white, the floor in a black-and-white chessboard pattern. Against one wall were the food and drink bowls of an animal, presumably the cat Caroline had come to sit.

She asked if I wanted coffee, and how I preferred it, and then said, "I hope Mum isn't too upset. Did you tell her about Chloe?"

"No," I said. "And neither did you. I can't help wondering why not."

"I didn't want to worry her." I must have betrayed a degree of scepticism, for she added, "No, I *really* didn't want to worry her. Mum's uncomfortable with the idea of *really* unhappy people, and Chloe was really unhappy. She hated her father – not because he'd done anything bad to her but because of who he was. She thought he was repulsive, and was repelled by the idea that he had anything to do with who *she* was. Her mother went up in her estimation when she started having an affair. Her father embodied everything she despised about the world."

I said, "Or maybe *he* was the world she despised."

She smiled, but not very much. "That's a clever thing to say, but it isn't true – and it's unfair on Chloe. Chloe cared about the world and the way we abuse it. True, it might have helped had her father, or either of her parents, been supportive or sympathetic, but her mother was indifferent – too interested in shoes and shopping – and her father thinks concern for anything other than yourself is a sign of weakness. I've met him; he's an arse. Probably has a small dick." She sipped her coffee and grinned ruefully. "Sorry."

I said, "Not an *insecure* arse, then – with or without aforementioned diminutive dick?"

"Have you been reading Chloe's blog?" A note of surprise or reproach tinged with disgust. "That was quick. She's probably still warm."

"The link was on a suicide note tucked into her sock, Caroline," I said, perhaps a little defensively. "Did you know she was going to commit suicide?"

She snorted. "Hmm – yes, that's really something I'm going to answer *yes* to, isn't it? Seriously, why are you even asking me that? I know lots of people who talk and write about suicide – should I be producing a list of names for the police to investigate?" Clearly she thought not.

I said, "I would, if at all possible, Caroline, like to stop any more young people dying prematurely."

"Prematurely? What does *that* mean? Before we get old, you mean? Before we've served our allotted time in the slave market called the world of work, which – with the help of our elders and betters – we're all supposed to be in training to join? Why not accept that Chloe did the right thing for Chloe? Why assume *you* know better?"

"Is that what this is all about, Caroline – a petulant desire not to work?" I probably sounded appalled. I probably was.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry, I forgot – work's a fact of life, isn't it, like death and taxes, and we – young people, that is – need to get ourselves uncomplainingly ready for it. I mean, really, it's terribly important to think of the needs of the economy and the wider community. It wouldn't quite do to think only of ourselves, now would it? That I might want to dance before the world and be applauded simply for being me – well, that's immature and something I'm bound to grow out of. All right to have my dreams, of course – I'm allowed those – just so long as I don't let them get in the way of equipping myself for the needs of the modern workplace. Yes, there's a lot to look forward to, but it's important to remain realistic."

"Caroline, there's only you and I here," I said; "you might spare me the intellectually aloof posturing." I watched as she placed a mug of coffee on a coaster on the table in front of me. "Did you know Samantha?" I asked.

"You make a lot of assumptions," she said – a sharpish hint of petulance here, of offence taken. "I don't have to talk to you. Actually, thinking about it, there's probably rules and regulations about questioning someone my age without a representative or guardian present. I mean, sorry, what gives you the right to be so patronisingly dismissive? There's more to thinking about life and death than your plodding brand of common sense. Or do you think anyone who disagrees with you must be wrong, and therefore misguided or *intellectually posturing*? I understand things; I *get* things. You do *not* know better than me or Chloe simply because you've lived longer. You surely recognise how insulting such a suggestion is."

I said, rather sharply no doubt, "Is Samantha dead, Caroline?"

She looked at me defiantly. "I don't know for certain, but I don't think Chloe would have left Sam in the world without her. She probably waited for news of Sam's death before killing herself. Sam had a thing for the sea, so she probably didn't die in Amberton."

What was an appropriate response to all this? Should I have been thinking about instigating procedures to have Caroline taken into care – on the basis that she might be a danger to herself, by committing suicide, or to others, by sympathising with their desire to do so? The idea struck me as patently absurd. I worried, though, that it might only take one story in the local press about teen suicide clusters or pacts to drown the investigation in tabloid-political moral panic. If Caroline died, committed suicide, I would be accused of complacency – probably *monstrous* complacency by the press – and expected to explain why I hadn't reported her as a suicide risk. Why hadn't I suggested counselling? Why hadn't I notified the social services? Blah blah, etc. I didn't because Caroline never at any juncture struck me as a young lady in need of care or protection.

I asked about boyfriends, specifically if Chloe had anyone special. Caroline rolled her eyes – presumably at the banality of the question – and said, "No, she wasn't interested. Didn't see the point. Thick people go in for that sort of thing because they think that that's what it's all about – winning other people's approval and affection. Oh, and fucking and having children. Goes with the mortgage and dull job. Chloe wasn't thick."

I said, "Can I take it, then, you're not romantically linked to anyone?"

She smiled. "I'd like to shock you, and say Adrian. At least he's dead. The dead ones are always the most interesting and romantic." She picked up her coffee, and said, "You should meet Lady Penelope." Coffee in hand, I followed her into the sitting room, where stretched out along the back of a cream sofa was an amber-eyed, white and platinum Norwegian Forest Cat with its right forepaw stretched out and dropped, like a hand offered for a kiss. Her tail, reminiscent of a squirrel's or skunk's, lolled down the front of the sofa. Caroline gestured grandly, and said, "I give you... Lady Penelope."

Lady Penelope regarded me for a moment with a modicum of interest, and then slowly closed her eyes and yawned. I asked, "Is there a Parker?"

Caroline smiled, and said, "I think we're all Parker." She put her coffee down on the glass-topped coffee table and knelt on the sofa – gently, so as not to spook the object of desire. She stroked Lady Penelope's head and massaged behind her ears. She turned to me then, pleased with herself, and said, "Isn't she gorgeous?" She was smiling, and seemed much younger than she had previously. I had the sensation of blinking on sand. She paused to consider me for a moment, and then said, "Oh my god – you're crying!"

Chapter Eighteen.

The school issued an immediate statement expressing sympathy for Chloe's family and describing her as "a first class student with many friends who will miss her acutely". It was decided not to describe her as *popular*, since this might suggest that it would have been somehow less tragic had she been *unpopular*. An internal investigation would take place and counselling offered to the other students. The school were worried politically, of course. In an age of easy – and ugly – attribution, they wanted to avoid responsibility for her death being laid at their door. I couldn't help wondering about the possible consequences for the school if Caroline added to their woe by killing herself. *Just say "Yes, miss"... all the time*. It's hard to escape the conclusion that the most powerful weapon young people have available to them is the ability to take their own lives. It must be curious if and when one realizes that, and it was fairly obvious Caroline already had.

Unlike the school, the family were understandably less deft at issuing a statement; but under pressure from the press, they issued one via their lawyer: *The family are coming to terms with the death of their daughter, Chloe, and are too distressed to talk to the media at this difficult time. They ask for space and privacy in which to grieve*. In other words, *Please leave us alone*. We had yet to locate Samantha, and nothing was said about her officially. She was seventeen and notionally a free agent and could be anywhere in the world. It was only her family's conviction that she was dead, a conviction supported by Caroline, that made her a priority in our investigation. That is, or was, until DC Neil Taylor sent me two links – or URLs – and phoned me to say I should view them as a matter of urgency. I remember feeling put upon – somewhat irrationally, clearly, since people – my colleagues – were only doing what they were supposed to be doing. I had, I think, a sense of, a worry about, things running out of control. Rather obviously, this was something I had – and wanted – to keep to myself.

I considered the sites for less than five minutes before forwarding the information on to Superintendent Wilson with the message that I thought – and was sure *he* would think – that this was likely to prove media sensitive. He would want to prepare a strategy to firefight the press, who would be dribbling and frothing at the prospect of a social interest story. *What leads a talented young person to choose death, and those left behind to celebrate that death?* It was the kind of story that could – and would be made to – wear a lot of different agenda costumes.

The first site I clicked on was a tribute to Chloe and Samantha Johnston, the other was dedicated to Adrian Mansfield with links to articles about his sister, and a blog site dedicated to her writings. As well as tributes and comments and discussion on the main sites, there were also links to social networking sites and video sites. Someone had captured Adrian's preferred death image and published it online, presumably something that had been pre-planned. The image, interestingly from an investigative point of view, had him dead in the boat with the handle of the knife, hitherto unseen and still undiscovered, protruding from his chest. His head was thrown back in an echo of a crucifixion. So someone simpatico *had* stabbed him post-mortem, and had obviously been with him at the end. The despoiler had come later.

We would – rather disastrously – now be expected to find out everything about these blogs and accounts – who had set them up, when and from where – and probably, and absurdly, be expected to have them taken down. As we stood on the threshold of this – teetered on the brink, as it were – I wasted time advising Superintendent Wilson that we shouldn't do anything other than glean from the sites that which would benefit the investigation. These were, after all, simply personal weblogs that could be set up by anyone in five minutes for the price of an email address, and then later personalised to good, bad, or indifferent taste. A video taken down in one account could be uploaded to another and then posted in a blog. An account could be opened as quickly as it was closed, and there were numerous sites from which to choose. It was, in short, something of a waste of time and resources. He disagreed, and said that we needed to know when they were set up and by whom – and, if possible, the IP numbers of the computers from where they had been viewed, since these were likely to be in the vicinity, and would give us the account details and addresses of those who had accessed the sites. More importantly, and this was the nub of it, we had to be seen to be making the effort. He was non-committal at this stage on whether or not he thought some or all should be taken down. I said, somewhat disingenuously, "Don't you think it's a bit too early to be fretting about media hysteria, sir?"

To which he replied, "I'm going to assume that that's a sophisticated joke, Barbara."

*

Picture me, then, alone in my office in front of a computer, somewhat dispirited, surfing sites dedicated to young people recently deceased. I had dispatched DS Brightly and DC Neil Taylor to pursue the pointless investigations mandated by Superintendent Wilson. I knew – or was fairly sure I knew – that the site dedicated to Emma Mansfield's writing had been set up by Martha Bottomley. So what? Who could reasonably object to that? Who would want to write a young woman's writings out of history? I phoned Martha out of interest and curiosity and asked her the question directly. She acknowledged the site as her work, and added that she fully expected to take some flack for it: *from those who imagine they have a right – god-given or secular – to tell others how to think*.

I asked her if she knew about the sites that linked to hers. There was, of course, no reason why she should. No-one could be blamed for the sites that chose to link to theirs, though it was relatively easy these days to know who did. She said, "The *diplomatic* answer to that is *no*, Chief Inspector – and, as I'm sure you're already aware, I've only added links to literary sites that might be of interest to young people. Nothing to help the authorities in search of a scapegoat."

Ron Turner put his head round the door, saw me on the phone and immediately withdrew. He returned a moment later with a large green post-it note, which he stuck on the desk in front of me without speaking. In black felt pen: *Samantha Johnston found. DI Richards, Burlington-on-Sea*, and, below that, a land-line and a mobile phone number. This minor absurdity had to do with Superintendent Wilson's directive, or decree, that all information concerning this case was to be passed on and up immediately, and no-one, myself included, was to stray from the prepared position – which differed depending on rank and role in the investigation – when commenting to the press. There was no *off the record* where this case was concerned. I could be as cynical as I wanted, but I was to make sure my team got the message. I was getting the message that Superintendent Wilson was loitering with intent on the outskirts of panic.

I finished my call to Martha and phoned the land-line number for DI Richards. He answered the phone after four rings and announced himself. I reciprocated by announcing *myself*. It was – and is – no more or less than a formality, but I had an image of us reading off top trump cards in

which I had won on rank. I added that I believed he had some information for me regarding Samantha Johnston.

"Yes, ma'am. We have a body fitting your description and a suicide note with that name. There's a copy of the suicide note on her weblog, and it's reasonable to assume that she put it there. I'll send you the details, ma'am, but I've been told to emphasise that we haven't *officially* ruled out foul play yet. We think she tied herself to the end of a groyne in the very early hours of the morning, got very drunk, and waited for the tide to come in. She was probably listening to music at the time – we found earphones connected to her mobile phone. It's too early to tell if drugs were involved or how drunk she was. She may have been unconscious at the time. Let's hope so."

"Where did you find the suicide note?" I asked.

"Notes, ma'am," he replied. "There was no shortage of them. There was one on her – wrapped in plastic. There was one in a bag on the promenade with a link to the online version, and she also left one in the guest house she'd been staying in. The landlady phoned us as soon as she found it, or so she said. We've no reason not to believe her, and we acted as soon as she'd called us, which, incidentally, was about half an hour before we got the alert from you."

Two emails appeared in my in-box at the same time – one from my present interlocutor, the other from Superintendent Wilson, who had marked the message *high priority* and had requested a receipt. I opened it while still on the phone, and my heart – *not* literally – sank. It was more in the manner of a communiqué than a personal email. A meeting, presumably urgent or considered so, would be held in an hour to discuss the *social impact* of recent events – these being the recent suicides of young people in Amberton *and our* – our! – *wider community*. Attendees: Superintendent Wilson; myself, being the officer in charge of the case; Lauren Coleman, billed as an expert in teenage psychology; Adam Towler, Melinda Markham's constituency "Chief of Staff"; Ian Foster, the council's education director; and incredibly – or, at any rate, distastefully – someone called Jeffrey Lamp from the local Chamber of Commerce. I couldn't help wondering who'd come up with this little initiative. Probably someone in the police authority with political ambitions, likely prompted by our parliamentary representative.

DI Richards asked if I'd received his email. When I acknowledged that I had, he asked if there were anything – other than the death of a young woman, that is – that he ought to be worrying about. In other words: *What's your interest, ma'am?* I told him frankly that her younger sister had also committed suicide, and mentioned that we were investigating the deaths of other young people.

"Connected, ma'am?" he asked.

"That's something we're worrying about, Inspector. Thank you for your help." I put the phone down and opened the link to Samantha's suicide note. Black font on a lime-green background. It was titled *My last post… hopefully.*

I should be dead if you're reading this – otherwise it'll be embarrassing. I had to go. I really did. I mean, how was I supposed to learn to like this ugly world? They – that's mostly you, Daddy – were always telling me I should, that I needed to grow up – that if I was miserable I could always buy myself something to cheer myself up. Retail therapy – ha ha! Mummy dear, you must be really, really miserable.

I feel I ought to say something earth-shatteringly significant, something that explains how awful it was for me. Have you ever been somewhere and thought "If I had to live here, I would die"? I mean, really? Well, that's how the world is for me. Every day. All the time. Torture.

Goodbye, my wonderful, amazing, beautiful sister. You deserve to walk with angels. Goodbye, Mother. You said I'd feel differently when I got to your age, but I never will.

Sorry about the mess, but it's worse for everyone if you just disappear.

Her previous post a week and a half earlier was a short angst-ridden rant entitled, unambiguously enough, *Selfish greedy ugly world!*

Selfish greedy ugly world! Through the window on the screen – sold with sex and perfume-scream. Want your money and your life. Grope your mistress, fuck your wife! Grab everything that you can get, and never mind what you upset.

It's a rollover, takeover, fuckover forever world!

On TV, watch the thrill of the kill on the hill. Brainy bombs and friendly fire burning down the house and school! Know the drill! Do the deal! Handshake happen! Make it real! How much is this, how much for that? Keep on spending while the cats get fat.

Someone calling themselves *KatYarn* had left a comment. It read: *Jeez, Sam, you sound really pissed off. Hope you feel better soon. Hugs.*

In the post preceding that, written a week earlier, she reflected on school being a prison, *one you don't really know you're in until it's too late. Something inflicted on you by your community and your parents. In the early days, you cling to another prisoner and try to work out what happened to you, and why your parents allowed it to happen. Then you look forward to leaving, only to discover when the time draws near that you'll be moving on to an adult prison called work.*

So – the search for signs post-mortem, and the dubious attribution of significance. The two posts prior to her suicide note – what, if anything, had they portended? Was it reasonable to believe that someone or some authority should have intervened based on thoughts she expressed in a blog or elsewhere? I find this a rather chilling prospect, since it implies that there's a *healthy* or *unhealthy* – a *right* or *wrong* – way for people, in this case, teenagers, to think, and that some *expert* can and should be the arbiter of this. It's a short walk from concern to control, and the path is often paved with dubious intentions.

I was preparing for the meeting, fearing something in the way of a politically motivated ambush, when I had a phone-call put through to me from Lisa Markham. She said, "Hi. How's my favourite lady policeman?"

"Busy," I said.

"Well, I won't keep you." A slight hint of, possibly affected, huffiness. "I just thought you'd like to know that Mummy's been taking quite an interest in l'il ol' you recently – asking all sorts of people all sorts of questions about you. Senior police officers, local journalists, business people – those sort of people – and a lot of damage can be done in the nature of the asking, as I'm sure you'll appreciate. I mean – well, they're bound to wonder why their local MP's asking these questions. They might even get the impression that you're not exactly her flavour of the month – that, just maybe, she doesn't have confidence in you, though it wouldn't quite do to come out and criticize a police officer publicly, especially one heading a sensitive investigation."

I said, "Why are you telling me this, Lisa?"

"Short answer – because I like you, Barbara, and I hate her. I don't care if you believe me; just watch your back."

I said hurriedly, for I thought she was about to hang up, "Does she know about your part in the investigation?"

"No, she doesn't." There was a hint of amusement in her voice. "Odd that."

"Can I take you'd prefer if it stayed that way?" *Meeting in 15 minutes* appeared on my computer screen.

"Actually, I couldn't care less, Barbara," she said; "I really couldn't. But as cards go, it would have to be considered one of the face ones, wouldn't you say – if played carefully, maybe even an ace? Take care, Barbara."

As she hung up, an email appeared in my in-box from Kelly Draper, the reporter from BBC local radio. It read: *Hi Barbara, Lots of interest in your case now. Must be difficult when an investigation takes on a social/political dimension! Give me a ring. It would be nice to hear from you. Hugs. Kelly.* Influenced, no doubt, by Lisa's phone-call and the fact I was in a hurry, I read this as heavy hint, of the friendly variety, that there was political interest in the case. It was only later, after the meeting, that I considered how well crafted the email was. She had warned me without saying anything that could be used – or spun – against her, and could argue, if pressed, that she was just tentatively angling for a story.

The meeting was scheduled to take place at a time when most people would be home, or returning home, from work, which should perhaps have rung alarms bells with me. The venue was a meeting room on the floor *above* Superintendent Wilson's office – dizzying, nosebleed territory rarely visited – a place to fret about strategy and funding, or to worry about the service's current standing with the press and public. Is it possible to have an *un*vague sense of uneasiness, I wondered, or is uneasiness by its nature vague – or, at least, inchoate? I had, anyway, a sense that something was amiss. And the lift didn't work. It had – temporarily, at least – packed up, and there was something premonitory about the laminated *out of order* sign that had been affixed to the door. There being little choice in the matter, I took the stairs, which were mostly used during fire drills. I was on time, and did not expect to find people waiting for me. But so they were. Bizarrely – or so it seemed to me – everyone had seated themselves and appeared to be awaiting my entrance. I thought perhaps I should drop a bob and say, "Evening, all." Instead, addressing Superintendent Wilson, I said simply, "Sir."

He said, "Thank you for coming, Barbara." Then, to the room: "Perhaps we should begin by introducing ourselves."

The room was windowless and utilitarian. Colourless save for the mahogany table. Sharply black and white, marker pens like splashes of cartoon colour in a monochromatic film. The table had seating for twelve: five on either side and one at either end. Superintendent Wilson sat at one end, the head presumably – though, again presumably, the *foot* would have become the *head* had he chosen to sit there instead. There was no designated seating, as there sometimes is, especially when meetings have been scheduled some time in advance. I sat down in the vacant seat immediately to the right of Superintendent Wilson, fearing that the politically minded would make much of it if I put any distance between myself and him. Next to me but one sat Lauren Coleman, the psychologist, a thirty-something woman with a slightly Oriental appearance. She was wearing fashionable, I happily assumed, thick-rimmed spectacles and a white button-down dress patterned with green fractal-like fronds. Next to her but one sat Adam Towler, a council member who had run Melinda Markham's election campaign and now ran her constituency office. He was groomed and dressed for television and doubtless entertained parliamentary ambitions of his own. Opposite Adam Towler sat Ian Foster, the council's Director of Education. He was in his fifties and had cultivated an academic look. His black hair was greying and longish and wavy, maybe even a little tousled, and he sported a full-face beard that had rather more silver in it than his hair. Round-framed tortoiseshell glasses perched halfway down his aquiline nose ready to be pushed eye-wards or removed at an apposite moment. He was wearing a dark-

blue shirt with a narrow burgundy-coloured tie – the knot pulled down a little from the collar – and a slate-grey corduroy jacket. Next to him but one – opposite Adam Towler – sat Jeffrey Lamp, who was Chair of the local Chamber of Commerce, and therefore purportedly represented the interests of business in the area. He was shiny and bald – with a hint of pinkness – and wore a dull business suit that suited him perfectly.

I introduced myself: "DCI Barbara Black. In charge of the investigation into the death of Adrian Mansfield."

When it was obvious that that's where I intended leaving it, Ian Foster smiled and said, "I think you're rather under-selling yourself, Chief Inspector." He removed his spectacles and placed them – unfolded – on his notepad. "Perfectly understandable in the circumstances. I'm Ian Foster by the way, Director of Education for this borough. Since, as you should be aware, the school will be carrying out its own investigation amidst an ongoing police investigation, you may expect me to be discreet to the point of opacity." This effectively announced that the meeting had not been called at his behest – indeed, that he doubted and questioned its usefulness.

Adam Towler said, "This meeting isn't, as I understand it, about particulars. Nor should it be. What I hope we can achieve here this evening is some agreement on a broad, multi-agency approach to a community problem. Our community – our very good community – is in danger of being labelled by the media as somewhere where young people are so despairing that they see suicide as a viable option. This kind of reporting does untold damage, and is something that it is in all our interests to avoid. Sadly, the press, if given the excuse – and we shouldn't be naïve about this – will be only too happy to print headlines about suicide epidemics and a loss of hope amongst our young people. And that wouldn't be fair or representative of our town and community."

Lauren Coleman smiled and said, "Well, I'm Lauren Coleman." Fingers splayed gently on her chest, drawing attention to the fact that Adam Towler had not felt the need to introduce himself. "I'm head of adolescent studies at East Chiltern University. We run a counselling and support clinic for adolescents suffering with or from depression – which, incidentally, society is often reluctant to acknowledge in young people. We glibly assume that the young have nothing to be depressed about, and are unhappy with the idea that we might have some responsibility as a society for their mental well-being. This is especially true of the compulsory education system, which a good many young people find difficult – sometimes impossible – to navigate." She stopped talking – perhaps fearing that she'd gone on too long too early – and made a handing over gesture, fingers pointing to Jeffrey Lamp, who had yet to speak.

Lamp shifted in his seat – to a more upright position – and cleared his throat with a fist over his mouth. "Jeffrey Lamp. I represent the local business community. I also run a company that employs a hundred and fifty people." His tone suggested that we should all be very grateful for this. "If you ask me," – which presumably we were, at least implicitly – "the problem is the absurd expectations of our younger people. Most of them don't actually want to work. They'd rather be unemployed or reality TV stars. They're not interested in training for the real world. They're not equipped for the needs of the economy, locally, nationally, or globally. And this is a problem with the education system, which is not teaching its students the skills needed for the modern workplace."

Ian Foster yawned conspicuously, clicked his pen, and rolled his eyes. "It's a rather limited and limiting view of education, don't you think – a sort of conveyor belt for the economy? Isn't education supposed to be at least somewhat ennobling – not just a set of skills, a toolkit, to be flogged to the private sector? That's not what you're saying, surely: train your children well and

make them useful to us, and we will buy them in the market place; then we can all get on on with the business of exploiting them in the name of GB PLC and the bottom line? Is that really your view of education? I think I'd prefer to be cultivating absurd expectations."

Lauren Coleman said, "I agree wholeheartedly with that. Pragmatism in education – which sadly seems to have become quite fashionable – is pernicious. It manifests itself in ugly questions like 'What's the point of teaching children poetry – they're never going to use it? What use is it to them?' And, sadly, children and parents often unthinkingly buy into this. No-one should be conned into consenting to having their horizons, or those of their children, narrowed. The idea that education should be economically useful is distasteful because it promotes a view of human beings – children, indeed – as units of work, or units of work in the making."

Lamp twitched, or flickered, with irritation, but Towler cut across him before he could speak. "I don't think we should devote too much time to arguing our differing views of education, do you, Jeffrey?" he said, a hand hovering over the table in a politically calming gesture. "That's not really why we're here, is it?"

"Why are we here exactly?" Ian Foster contemplated his spectacles at arms length. "To protect the local economy – and certain political careers – from the regrettable and inconvenient fact of teenage suicides?"

Towler said, "It's about trying to do one's best in a sad and difficult situation, Ian. We do need a strategy for the press here. I make no apologies for saying that. We have the other pupils of the school to consider as well as their parents and the wider citizenry of our community. It's easy to sneer and portray politicians as acting only in the interests of their careers. It's fashionable and possibly justified given the regrettable behaviour of some politicians, but ask yourself the question: do you want the media running stories about suicide epidemics and a sense of hopelessness amongst our young people? I don't. I don't think anyone does. Who is served by that except the media?"

Lauren Coleman said, "You do accept, presumably, that the pressures produced by the environment in which these young people grew up and lived had something to do with their suicides? You're not seeking to absolve everyone of everything – or, to put it another way, sweep it all under the carpet? Politicians do like to bang on about parental responsibility when it suits them – usually when it's convenient to shift responsibility from society onto the individual. They've even been known to mention the education system when they think there's political capital in it."

Adam Towler said, "The precise circumstances surrounding the suicides should be a matter for sensitive investigation, not an opportunity for the press to increase circulation. We have a problem – and we may as well recognise this – with so-called tribute sites. It must be a concern that they encourage other young people to take their own lives, to say nothing of the pain they cause to surviving relatives and friends. I think they should be taken down, and I'm optimistic that we can get the co-operation of the various companies that host them."

"I fundamentally disagree with you," Lauren Coleman said; "and I hope you don't get the co-operation you so glibly assume will be forthcoming. Do you really want to deny to these young people – some of whom are dead – the right to have and write their own history? Worse than that, are you seriously proposing erasing it for political and social convenience? That's a disgraceful and indefensible position. And why are they *so-called*? Why describe them in such pejorative terms? Imagine if I described a site set up by friends to mourn a dead soldier as a *so-called* tribute site – and argued that *it must be a concern* that it encourages young people to

glorify war and death, and promotes a cult of the fallen hero? But don't worry; we think we can get the co-operation of the host to take it down."

Ian Foster smiled and said, "I think you'll find Mr Towler happy to draw a convenient distinction between the two."

Jeffrey Lamp, who was visibly becoming irritated, said, "Where's the common sense in all this? Not much point having a history, I wouldn't have thought, if you don't have a future. They're spoilt and self-indulgent. They need to learn that the world doesn't owe them a living."

Ian Foster laughed. "I wondered how long it would be before we had an appeal to good old-fashioned British common sense. Hard work and straightforward black-and-white thinking; it's the British way – with a little hypocrisy thrown in just to oil the wheels. Maybe they have learned, and that's why they're killing themselves."

Lauren Coleman, smiling, said, "You're very quiet, Superintendent."

"Yes, Ms Coleman." He seemed amused. "Unless anyone has anything specific they want me, in particular, to address, my role here is entirely facilitatory. I called this meeting at the behest of the police authority, who – without wishing to be cynical – must surely have been politically prodded, presumably – with respect to Mr Towler, who may or may not wish to confirm this – by our local MP, whose duties on the national stage doubtless keep her from being with us in person."

Towler said, "It's not unreasonable for an MP to take an interest in what's going on in her constituency."

"No, indeed," Ian Foster remarked. "Some would argue it's a novelty that ought to be widely essayed."

Superintendent Wilson said, "I can't help wishing that her interest had been more directly and discreetly expressed, Mr Towler. There is now an impression among the police authority and some sections of the local media that there is political dissatisfaction with the investigation. That's obviously unhelpful from a police perspective."

"I hope you're not suggesting any impropriety." Towler's composure had slipped a little. He had not, I felt, expected to be so directly challenged.

"I am surprised to have come under political pressure quite so early in the investigation, Mr Towler – particularly since the investigation has been so carefully handled. I can assure you – and Ms Markham – that I'm more than sensitive to the possible and actual media interest in this case. Media interest in teenage suicide clusters is not unprecedented."

Lauren Coleman said, "Indeed, the *cluster* can be a media event created by a feedback loop that blurs the line between cause and effect."

Jeffrey Lamp, irritably: "Isn't that also true of the online media they create themselves – which you're so against taking down? They glorify someone's suicide, and then another one decides it's a good idea, and then they've got two to talk about. That leads to another site or page or video, or whatever, and more discussion, and then another one decides it's a good idea. Isn't *that* an event created by – what did you call it? – a feedback loop?"

Ian Foster said, or quipped, "Much better, no doubt, if they all talked – positively, mind you – about the dull jobs most of them will end up doing." He mimed typing at a keyboard. "*Don't despair, kids; Mr Lamp is hiring*."

Lauren Coleman laughed openly at this, and Superintendent Wilson and I made only token efforts to disguise our amusement. For a second, I thought Jeffrey Lamp might be about to get up and leave. Instead, his emotional struggle – resentment iced with indignation – played out on his face. He said finally, and with some effort, "Are we sneering at job creation now?"

Lauren Coleman said seriously, "No, we're sneering at your making a virtue of it, Mr Lamp. The distinction is an important one. I wouldn't dispute that jobs have been created as a result of your economic activities, but the jobs created are incidentals. You're not creating jobs for philanthropic social reasons, but simply for your own economic betterment. If you could make yourself twice as rich by halving your workforce, then that's what you'd do. It's corporate and political slight of hand to suggest we should be grateful to you for creating jobs, since presumably you don't expect any moral censure when you cut jobs. Rather, you'd expect us all to accept it as a regrettable consequence of an unfavourable economic environment. Isn't that what business means when it seeks to lecture us on living and working in the real world – that we don't have a right to a living or a job?"

"Jobs *are* important, Ms Coleman." Adam Towler asserted this with the slightly worried tone of someone forced to defend his orthodoxy against a left-field attack. "Young people *need* jobs."

"Whether they want them or not, presumably." Lauren Coleman turned to him with a smile. "My issue was not with job creation *per se*, Mr Towler, but rather the suggestion that those who create them do so out of some kind of moral mission, as opposed to the less laudatory promptings of economic self-interest."

"Yes. I have to say I doubt the usefulness of prescribing what we think is best for young people, since they're unlikely ever to agree with us anyway." Superintendent Wilson – sounding rather august. "We have to deal with the situation as it is, not how we'd like it to be. You might think the provision of jobs is the way forward, Mr Lamp, but how do you convince a young person of that, particularly one who'd rather be unemployed, or dead, than do one of your jobs? A dull job is, after all, a dull job notwithstanding political and business admonitions to the contrary. It may provide someone with a living and the means to contribute to society by way of staying off benefits and paying taxes, but it probably does precious little else. Indeed, arguably, it diminishes the person as an individual. It seems to me absurd to send someone to university and then expect them to fill shelves, which is where we appear to be going as a society. And many of the jobs we force young people – and, indeed, unemployed people in general – to do tend to be humdrum and low paid. It's right and proper that young people should dream, and surely no human spirit can be satisfied filling shelves or breaking boxes. I'm not sure what purpose is served by pretending otherwise, and yet that's what we seem bent on doing. Is it cynical to suggest that it has something to do with political expediency – rather like the convenient fiction that poverty has nothing to do with crime? I'm not suggesting these jobs aren't necessary, nor indeed that someone shouldn't do them – merely that it's absurd to suggest that anyone should want to do them."

Adam Towler, testily: "I don't think that's a particularly helpful view, Superintendent. Young people need leadership and guidance in their lives."

"To what purpose?" Lauren Coleman demanded. "To – if you'll forgive the colourful expression – accept what's coming to them; to acquiesce, to surrender uncomplainingly to their plight? To be grateful for the scraps thrown from the corporate table? No politician supports young people against the business community; there is no sense of obligation towards them. On the contrary, we live in an age where our politicians are busy selling us out to the highest corporate bidder. Business, with the help of political connivance and cowardice, has turned the workforce – particularly the young and unskilled – into courtesans engaged in a Dutch auction. Young people who protest are characterised as troublemakers and delinquents. It's practically

impossible now to protest legally, since a legal protest has come to be defined as one that can safely be ignored by those in authority and power."

"I have an image" – Ian Foster, delicately, histrionically, putting his spectacles back on – "of the government as an Neanderthal pimp beating the workforce into submission for its high-rolling business clients. Terrible bore, of course, when the whore decides to kill herself. Can really spoil someone's weekend that – especially if they entertain hopes of a knighthood or MBE for services to self-aggrandisement."

I had the feeling then, and filled in the details later, that Adam Towler had lost control of an agenda he had initiated, probably at the plausibly deniable behest of his political mistress. Superintendent Wilson hadn't played ball in quite the way it was – rashly and condescendingly – assumed that he would. Possibly, probably, he knew something I didn't – to do with the politics of policing and/or the policing of politics. Adam Towler had, it seemed, approached a friendly body on the police authority, who had then persuaded enough of the others to press for the meeting. Towler, of course – or in fact – was not in a position to dictate who attended the meeting. This was notionally left to the Chief Constable, who briefly consulted with his senior officers on strategy before delegating. They then consulted amongst themselves and delegated, and so it fell to Superintendent Wilson to arrange the meeting. Presumably there where subtle signals to do with rebuffing political pressure to which I was not privy. Perhaps Towler had hoped the meeting would be chaired by a more senior officer, one more remote from the investigation and therefore more likely to countenance criticism of its handling.

I insisted on a word with Superintendent Wilson after the meeting, though both he and I wanted to go home. I said, "Am I missing something, sir?"

"Missing something?" He seemed amused.

"The meeting?"

"Ah, I see. Politics, Barbara; you're missing politics: what people with less moral fibre than you are prepared to do to get on and up. Mr Towler believes his ascent up the greasy pole can be hastened by going above and beyond for his political mistress. His problem is he doesn't have the full picture, and neither does she. And, rather obviously, she doesn't entirely trust him, which, rather obviously, he knows. They're both in politics, and that's the problem with being in politics."

"You're being rather Delphic, sir," I said. "Does Melinda Markham want me off the case?"

"Melinda Markham, I believe, has some inkling that her daughter might be involved in the investigation and worries that this might damage her flourishing political career. What to do, Barbara? What would you do?" He smiled. "You will have to imagine yourself differently morally constituted in order to effectively answer that question. What *she* does is mention to her favourite lieutenant that she's worried about the social impact of an investigation going on in her constituency and hints that she'd like to learn more about it – off the record and unofficially, you understand. She will not have mentioned her personal interest for fairly obvious reasons. Adam's her go-to guy for as long as he continues to benefit her political career, and his loyalty to her is similarly conditional. Of course, you don't get to quote me on any of this to anyone. To answer your question directly, Barbara, I don't know. I don't know how much she knows about you or how interested she is in you. If she knew you, she'd certainly want you off the case. Politicians like people who can be relied upon to put personal ambition ahead of integrity and the greater good – or at least blur the edges between personal interest and public good – and you're not one of those."

I said, "That's a good thing, sir, isn't it? Just checking."

He laughed. “Go home, Barbara. Don’t worry about the politics. I’ll tell you if you have anything to worry about on that front. You don’t. I hope that’s sufficiently unambiguous.”

I walked home and went through to the kitchen, where I poured myself a large glass of red wine, which I drank, or gulped at, in the sitting-room. Paul was asleep on the sofa with Midnight curled up on his lap, and Barney and Maggie curled up together next to him. He had been reading a book on Linux, but was now snoring gently. It amused me to think the book might be responsible, but it was more likely the wine – a Spanish red, three-quarters consumed, stood on the table in front of him – and the contentment that comes with cats and a comfortable couch in a centrally heated room. I left them to it and went up to bed, where I finished my wine and read a popular science book for a quarter of an hour. I must have slept like a log, or top or rock, soundly anyway, for I had no memory of Paul coming to bed, which he must have done, for he was there in the morning when I woke up. I kissed him on the forehead before leaving for work.

Chapter Nineteen.

Sergeant Turner said, "A young lady to see you, ma'am. Lorraine Nash from Princes Street. Insists on seeing you personally – won't talk to anyone else. I did try. She's in a bit of a state."

Lorraine – or *Rain* – had fallen asleep on the vinyl bench in the waiting area, her head – hair tucked under a woollen beanie hat – resting on her arm. She was well wrapped up, which made me suspect she might have spent the night out, in a capacious over-everything black coat that went down to her ankles. A green plaid scarf hung loosely about her neck, and she was wearing fingerless purple gloves and pull-on canvas boots.

I put my hand on her shoulder and roused her gently. "Lorraine?" I said softly. She opened her eyes and looked up. "I'll buy you breakfast," I said. "We can talk in the car."

Prompted by her mode of dress, I asked her if she'd slept rough. She said that she had because it was an okay night weather-wise and things had got a bit *antsy* at the house, and Ken – who apparently looked out for her – was away visiting his nan in Bolton. "She lives in – what's it called? – supported accommodation, but he's afraid she might have to move into a nursing home because she needs more and more help doing normal stuff. I think it'd be better if she just died."

"Better for whom?" I asked.

"For her – *obviously*. She's just going to end up sitting in her own piss otherwise being shouted at and pulled about by thicko staff who don't give a shit about her."

I parked the car in the shopping centre car park and we walked the short distance to the main road and a café called *Everyday Fryday*, which has its premises on the corner. *Everyday Fryday* was, and is, popular with shoppers, and is always crowded at weekends. There's another café two doors down, which also does good business, but *Everyday Fryday* gets our vote and patronage – myself and Paul's, that is – because of their generous helpings of scrambled eggs, and the fact they make a virtue of using free range, their set vege-breakfasts, and the consistent quality of their coffee. The floor is terracotta-tiled with rows of four-seater tables on either wall. The chairs are metal framed with upholstered red vinyl back and seat. There are mirrors and plants and abstract paintings on the walls. You order at the counter and pay while you're there, are given a ticket with a number on it, and then wait for your order to be brought to your table.

Lorraine opted for the full English and I scrambled eggs on toast. I went to the counter to place the order and returned with two cups of coffee and two sets of knives and forks in paper napkins on a tray, and the ticket with our number on it. I passed Lorraine her coffee and her knife and fork.

"What did you want to see me about?" I asked.

She said, "I don't want you to arrest me before we've had breakfast."

I smiled and said, "Breakfast is unconditional, Lorraine. We'll have breakfast whatever you tell me."

"Seriously?" she said, and I wondered if she were trying to build the drama for reasons to do with an inadequate desire to be – momentarily – the centre of attention. "So if I confessed to murdering lots of people, we'd still have breakfast."

"Yes, of course. Why not? We're here now, and it's on its way."

She had undone her coat and removed her gloves, but the hat remained in place – perhaps because she was self-conscious about the current state of her hair. Her face was bloodless, unadorned with make-up, or the residue thereof, and looked as if it had been washed a lot in cold water. Her eyes were edged with redness, though they weren't bloodshot. Her lips were thin and whitishly pink. And, rather pathetically, she was about to confess to something she hadn't done.

She said, "There's no such thing as a free breakfast."

I said, "Well, this one is – unless you imagine you're going to be lulled into telling me something over breakfast that you might have remained guarded about at the police station. You wanted this meeting, remember?"

"Maybe I should go," she said. She sounded sulky, a little forlorn.

I said, perhaps a little impatiently, "Oh, don't be absurd – you can go after breakfast. You might as well eat. If you must go off in a pet, you might as well do so on a full stomach."

The waiter, a young man wearing a striped apron over his jeans and shirt, brought our food on large oval plates, one in either hand. No tray. He was, however, wearing disposable latex gloves. I dusted my scrambled eggs with pepper, while Lorraine set about her fare with something approaching abandon. Once she'd made inroads into her breakfast, she paused and – with her head down – said, "I killed Adrian."

To which my immediate thought was: *Oh, surely not. How perfectly ridiculous*. I said, "You will need to explain how and when, Lorraine – and, if at all possible, why."

She returned her attention to her breakfast, head down again, avoiding eye-contact. I suppressed an urge to giggle while watching the top of her hat. I was sure – all right then, *assumed* – that she was ashamed of something, but wanted her, while confessing the facts, to avoid representing herself in a shameful light. She finished her breakfast, and, pushing the plate away from her, said, "That was nice. Thank you," – rather as if I'd cooked it for her personally.

I said that she was very welcome.

She said, "I wanted to die, but I was afraid." She stared at – or through – me, her eyes moistening. "Do you believe in God?" she asked.

I shook my head and said, "No, I don't," and left it at that.

She said, "Neither did Adrian. He called him the bogeyman in the sky."

"You do, Lorraine, I take it. And you can't commit suicide if you believe in God, can you? Because your body and soul are not your own, are they? They're his. You should be busy thanking him for your shit life – preferably on your knees – and wondering wonderingly at his mysterious ways." I was quoting – *almost* verbatim – from an online discussion between Adrian Mansfield and Caroline Meadows, both of whom were contemptuous of religious belief.

"You sound like Adrian," she said, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin. "That's the sort of thing he used to say."

I said, "How did you kill him?"

She said, "I stabbed him. He wanted me to. He said it was symbolic. I would be killing a dead man. He said things like that a lot."

"And your belief in God didn't stop you going along with that?"

"That's what's so fucked up," she said. "I knew it wasn't right, but he made it sound okay, like I was doing a good thing. He said God would know I couldn't do anything evil."

"He must have been tremendously persuasive, Lorraine – Adrian, I mean, not God – so persuasive that you agreed to kill him. I'm sorry if I sound incredulous, but there must be more to it than that. Were you having a sexual relationship with him?"

"No," she said. "Honestly, I wasn't. I wouldn't have minded, but we were just friends. I think he might have been having sex with Sharon. She was really into him – talked about him all the time. Probably killed herself over him."

"And yet *you* allowed yourself to be talked into murder? Why, Lorraine?" I sounded like a frustrated parent who desperately wanted to understand.

"I told you. He asked me to. He wanted to die. After the picnic, I went with him to the lake."

"The picnic? What picnic?"

She faltered. "We had a picnic. Didn't I tell you? We had a picnic in the dark – before we went to the lake. I should have set him on fire. He wanted me to set him on fire in the boat and push it into the lake. We thought it would be beautiful, but I couldn't do it. I was scared. I suppose I let him down." She was crying quietly. "I betrayed him," she said. "He said I would. He said it jokingly – that it didn't really matter – but I wish I hadn't."

"Who else was at the picnic?" I asked.

Suspicion, like flint, sparked in her eyes. "*You* want me to betray everyone," she sneered. "*I'm* the one who killed him." Defiantly. "Aren't you going to arrest me?"

"Was Sharon at the picnic?" I asked.

"I didn't come to see you to grass on people," she said. "Anyway, she's dead now? Does it matter?"

"No, indeed," I said, sipping at my coffee, "which is why I asked. You can hardly *grass* the dead. Anyway, according to you, she's already on God's naughty step, so how will it hurt her – or you, for that matter – if you tell me whether she was at the picnic or not? I can't help thinking you've already blown your chances of an eternity listening to angels playing harps."

It was a mistake, and inappropriate, to talk to her in this way. I think I was rather too buoyed by the knowledge that she hadn't killed Adrian, and assumed, when I got around to telling her, that she would be too; and I grossly, and crassly, underestimated the other complicated things that were going on with her. I should have told her there and then that she hadn't killed him. It was a mistake not to have done so.

She said, "I prayed that something good would happen for me and Sharon. I prayed and prayed in my room, and then went to church to see if that would make a difference. I lit a candle and offered to hurt myself." She shook with emotion, her face etched – shadowed and cracked – with grief. "And now she's dead. *You* don't think she's being punished?" She sounded accusatory, bleakly hopeful.

"No, Lorraine, I don't." I was lumpishly emotional, though I don't believe I was close to tears. "And isn't that a good thing? Being dead is like all the years before you were conceived. You just don't exist. You obviously didn't experience a hundred years ago, and you won't experience a hundred years hence." What on earth was I thinking of? I'd have done better – and I really ought to have realized this – to try and persuade her that her friend, Sharon, had, suicide notwithstanding, been afforded a warm welcome by Saint Peter at the pearly gates. It would surely have been fairly straightforward for me to have represented myself as having a better knowledge of her belief system – and comfort story – than she did, and then to tweak it and play it back to her in such a way that it suited the circumstances and offered the solace she needed and craved. When I was fifteen, a nine-year-old neighbour told me her grandfather had died and was now a *star in the sky*. We were sitting on the doorstep together, feeding a stray cat. I didn't contradict her, and rather felt ashamed of myself for not doing so. Much later on, of course, I was relieved I hadn't done so, and wondered at the intellectual arrogance of my younger self.

"Great," she said; "so nothing and no-one gives a shit about me. Cheers."

"It's not up to me or anyone else to make your life meaningful, Lorraine. That's up to you. If you need a vision of a god or gods to do that for you, then pick a religion and go for it. We all have to find meaning somehow, even if it means lying to ourselves. I'm quite comfortable with the idea that my existence is an accident, that I would have been a different person had I been conceived an hour earlier or later than I was. I don't know, but it might be that a minute or a second would have fundamentally changed who I turned out to be. Indeed, it's wrong to think of it in terms of being an *I* or *me* at all; it would have been someone else, no more me than a brother or a sister." I sipped at my coffee. Lorraine was staring down at the table-top like a sulky teenager. "Does any of this resonate or make sense to you, or am I just a boring member of a privileged class going on in the way that people like me always do? I don't mind; I'm just interested in what you think."

She lifted her head and stared at me – rather vacantly, really as if she were ill, or her mind were entirely elsewhere. Finally, she said, "I don't have to worry about all that shit now. I've committed murder. What's the food like in prison?"

I said, "Murder's a crime, Lorraine, of which you've yet to be charged, never mind convicted." I must have sounded irked and impatient. What was the matter with me? I think I had a sense that I was wasting my time and was irritated at myself for the condescending feeling of pity I had towards her. Caroline Meadows infuriated me over the course of the investigation, but at no time did I feel sorry for her. Caroline was exceptional; Lorraine was the small tragedy of the broken *ordinary* – the chip or crack in a household cup that makes it useless for purpose. "We've yet to establish that you killed him. How many times did you stab him?"

"Once," she said. "I did it how he told me to do it."

"Where did you dispose of the knife?" I knew, or thought I knew, the answer to this.

"I didn't. I left it in him. Why, did someone nick it?"

"Who would do that, Lorraine?" I asked. I was forming a bizarre picture of young people writing their own history in terms of life and death, and it not going entirely to script. Someone had taken the knife after the event, and after the filming of the event. So who and why? There was so much I didn't know. Had there, indeed, been a picnic in the dark? I thought of it capitalised, possibly with the definite article, like a historical event – The Picnic in the Dark – though the battle for its definitive narrative had yet to be won. What we call history is a winning spin on events, on things that happened, sometimes very bad things. Half-truths with good PR often become history, and myths are often nothing more than history narratives with the troublesome contradictions removed – truth served the way we like it, unmessy and unequivocal.

"Dunno," she said with a shrug; "but if you say they did, they did."

"Maybe someone wanted a souvenir," I said. "You must have seen the video, Lorraine. The knife was there when that was filmed." I was wondering when the spoiler video would appear, the one featuring Adrian with the *arse* sign around his neck. Surely it *would* appear. It would only take a mobile phone to film or photograph it and a few minutes on a computer to upload it. Wasn't that the point of it – to derail and ridicule the suicide's narrative? I said – for Lorraine, having come to confess, seemed reluctant to speak: "What was he doing when you stabbed him?"

"Nothing," she said. "He was tied in the boat, completely out of it by then – dead to the world. He'd been drinking and taking drugs all night. He planned it like that."

I said, "He *was* dead, Lorraine – you didn't kill him. And, yes, he did plan it like that. I'm guessing he wanted you to stab him because he didn't want to risk being alive when you set him

alight, which you actually failed to do. It might have made a good video – we'll never know now – but I wouldn't want to risk being cremated alive, would you? Did you tie him into the boat?"

"I helped with the last bit. He did most of it himself. I mean, I was supposed to be doing the hard bit by setting him on fire."

"How were you going to do that?" I asked.

"A can of lighter fuel and a match basically. I think someone might have brought a fire-lighter. Can we go? I'm getting hot."

I said, "Why don't you take your coat off then?"

She said, "I want to go. Can we go?" She sounded panicked. I wondered if someone had come in whom she recognised, or she feared would recognise her, though I hadn't noticed anyone paying her – or us – any particular attention.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked. But she had got to her feet and was heading for the door. It was a bright day, and her back became a silhouette as she crossed the threshold into the light. Despite a sliver of panic, I got up and followed her without haste.

On the pavement, she said, "Aren't you afraid I'm going to run off?"

I said, "Well, I'd rather you didn't, Lorraine; I'm an inelegant runner – and since you came to see me, it would seem a bit rude." Actually, I was anxious to get her back into the car, though I didn't want to risk forcing the issue.

She smiled coyly, and said, "I think you're afraid I'm going to run away."

"Not really," I said. I swept passed her and returned to the car park without looking back. I got in and slammed the door. She was standing on a raised square of grass on the edge of the car park, where inverted U-stands were provided for parking and chaining bicycles. Darkened to a silhouette by the sun, she looked like a caped scarecrow with its head at an awkward – broken – angle. I leant across and opened the passenger-side door, and waited. A cloud shrouded the sun. Lorraine straightened her head and walked slowly towards the car. She got in, leaving the door open, and stared straight ahead – at, rather than through, the windscreen. I leant across her and closed the passenger door, and we sat, still and silent for a moment, staring out the windscreen. Finally, I started the engine and backed out. While I was doing this, Lorraine shrugged – carefully – out of her coat. Indeed, she did it by increments with a cautious eye on me. I thought of an animal sloughing its skin and its attendant risk of predation. She folded the coat on her lap and tugged at the cuffs of her sweatshirt. I caught a glimpse of something the colour of red wine – a mark, a blotch – on her left wrist. She noticed me noticing and tugged the cuff further down. I said quietly, "Show me, Lorraine."

She said, "Fuck off," and turned away from me.

I said, "Show me. I'm not going to judge you."

We were in slow-moving traffic – which was a mercy – because I wasn't quite prepared for what she did next. She pulled her sleeves up to her elbows and held her arms out in front of her, palms up. I was reminded of depictions of Christ displaying his crucifixion wounds. She said, "I can't kill myself. I don't know why. I wish I could." Her bruised and mutilated arms were apparently being offered to me as a monstrous tapestry of some fairly serious attempts to do so.

I asked about the Picnic in the Dark – who were the attendees?

She said, "Just me and Adrian."

I said, "I don't believe you, Lorraine."

"I don't care," she said; "it's the truth."

I said, "Why did you say someone might have brought a fire-lighter?"

"I meant one of us," she said.

"So who filmed and uploaded the video, Lorraine – you?"

It would not be quite accurate to say she started screaming, though I thought of it like that at the time. Rather, she hugged herself in a desperate, violent way, her fingers clawing her upper-arms, and a moaning or keening – tortured and demented – rose from within her and grew in volume until it filled the car. Deafened and sickened – and a little panicked – I pulled over on to a patch of gravel in front of a church, braked abruptly, and turned off the engine. I might have sighed, but I remember something like non-movement and silence, or non-noise. Lorraine appeared to have passed out and was leaning against the door. Possum-playing or some epileptic absence, I couldn't be sure, but a second after – or so it seemed – the door was open and she was out of the car and running. A trick of the light or mind – to do with her pulling on her coat as she ran – created an illusion of a shadow-bird with a broken, trailing wing trying desperately to take off; but the wing mended and straightened and took air, and then she was gone, vanished in the light. Forever, as it turned out. I would never see her alive again. The open door – through which light sharply splashed the passenger-seat – seemed like a gash, a rupture, in a sinking ship. I called in to have her picked up; I was hoping to save her life.

Her decapitated body – actually, it was less tidy than that – was found two hours later on a railway track half a mile outside Amberton. She had stolen a bottle of Scotch and consumed most of it before making a pillow of her coat and lying down beside the track with her head on the track-side of the rail.

Chapter Twenty.

I sat in my office, staring out through the barred windows at the trunks of the trees, though my efforts to concentrate, or meditate, on them were crowded by swimming images of squalid deaths, of young people mutilated by trains or hanging from trees or the backs of wardrobes. I was – politically or diplomatically, as it were – being left alone for a while, allowed a period of solitude, of undisturbed contemplation. I could, of course – yes, of course – have gone home if I'd so wished – retired wounded, temporarily it would be generously assumed, from the field of battle. I had, narcissistically perhaps, blamed myself for Lorraine's death, for failing to save her; but the/my responsibility had been diffused by her suicide note, which I hadn't expected to exist. Found in her grotty little room, it was written on the back of a postcard that depicted Ixtab, the Mayan goddess of suicide: *I'm going to die today. Anyway, I hope I'm strong enough not to be alive tomorrow. I'll be in prison if I am. Imagine being so useless that you can't kill yourself. I wish I'd been able to do what Ade wanted, but I couldn't; I was weak. I'm so pathetic. I wish I'd never been born. Being me is the shittest thing you can imagine. You have no idea. I don't know why it was all so crap. It's always been crap. Maybe that's just how it is and I couldn't handle it. Bye*. So not your fault, Barbara. You shouldn't blame yourself. It would have happened anyway. Was that true? Was there nothing I could have done or said? Was she, by the time she got to me, beyond saving? Had the Rubicon already been crossed? Was I talking to the dead? Nonsense, surely, and fanciful, exculpatory nonsense at that. The die had not been cast, and I had missed an opportunity to save her – though no-one could reasonably blame me for not so doing.

So another damaged, broken young person ends her own life. Who – colloquially speaking – gives a shit? Darwinian rules apply: if you can't hack it, you can't hack it. We, the living, mourn to make ourselves feel better. The dead are beyond caring. Was I happy in this life? I think I thought I was. Vanity probably played, and plays, its part. I had what consensus opinion would describe as a good life: an interesting and stimulating, even *important*, job. I had succeeded in life. I loved and was loved in return. I took holidays in foreign climes. I, we, had decided it was immoral to bring children into such an ugly world. Was this a failure – in me and us – of the optimism bias? People had mortgaged their – sometimes materially successful – lives to procreate, to bring forth their little bundle of genetic combination, and failure to do so was regarded as a tragedy. So what? So we were not fully paid up members of the game of life, and/or the human race therefore. It is only the thinking that suffer because it is only the thinking that think. The unthinking just do and act unthinkingly. Life just is. There is no why or wherefore. Democracy is just a tyranny of morons, and/or of a sneering, knowing elite that contemptuously exploit and manipulate them. Who decides your children go to, and die in, whatever war? Not you, certainly. You accede, and you mourn, and you offer photographs of remembrance on prime-time television. You don't, of course you don't, question the merits of the war. How could it possibly be wrong? Your betters decided it was right and proper and your son or daughter died for the dubious cause. The thinking, if thinking there be or ever was, stops there. Anything other is too hideous to contemplate and will remain comfortably uncontemplated. A higher power, not to be questioned, has whored your offspring into death. All

that remains to you is the indulgence of an honourable mourning, and who but a monster would seek to rob you of that. History is littered with the slaughter of millions of young people in pointless wars, and yet we remain shocked, appalled, morally offended, by a single teenage suicide.

The tree trunks returned to the foreground of my perception with shocking clarity, the patterns on the barks vivid and vital. I realized I had been crying, or weeping, without being aware of it – tears flowing down my cheeks without sniffles or convulsion. I could not reasonably, then, have claimed to be a reliable witness to my emotional state. I had a sense of endings, but questions remained. There were things – based on nothing more than intuition – that I thought I knew. I thought I knew that Caroline Meadows had been at the Picnic in the Dark. And, in my preferred narrative, so too had Lisa Markham, but I worried that I had been seduced by both at some intellectual level, and then worried, modestly perhaps. that the appeal might, instead, be – have been – emotional; more likely was an intoxicating and dangerous mixture of the two, though it was entirely possible that the intoxicating lure, or allure, would lead me to the truth – or, more prosaically, what actually happened. Who had put the sign around his neck, and why? Who had taken the pictures and filmed the video? Who was there, and – again – why? And, appallingly, did it matter? Wasn't it enough to know that he hadn't been murdered? I could imagine it could easily be spun that way by more senior, politically-orientated officers, particularly when they started costing – *Don't be sniffy now, Barbara* – the investigation; if not that, then a vulgar clamour for arrests on minor murder-less charges. I could hear the plonking voice of common sense: *Gee, we must be able to get someone on something – I mean, someone died, and they were there*. Clunk! This, or the risk of this, has or had to do with appearances, with civic PR. All those young people killing themselves – sympathies go out to family and friends, etc – but, really, not our fault or responsibility, no-one to blame. Didn't we provide the best of all possible worlds? More counselling, anyone – well, until the money runs out or the press stop taking notice? What's seen to be happening is always more important than what's happening, and what's happening frequently stops happening when someone that matters stops or starts noticing.

Sergeant Turner appeared in the doorway – tentatively, apologetically. Perhaps he was aware he'd been here before, or perhaps I was just being fanciful. He said, "I apologise for disturbing you, ma'am, but there's another young lady who'd like to speak to you." He was – of course – just doing his job, but he was better than that. He transcended his role by recognising, by being aware of, his plight. So: *Another young lady to see you, ma'am. We can but hope – for your sake and ours – that she doesn't end up dead*. Sergeant Ron Turner, unbenighted messenger and butler in the service of doom, announced that Caroline Meadows wanted to speak to me. How dismal that this should have lifted my spirits. Why was she here? To confess to death-related things – or just to smile and philosophise?

I stood up. I may even have done something gauche like nervously smooth down my skirt as I did so. I was ridiculously aware of myself, as though I had become huge and clumsy. I think I may have been in a state of – hopefully minor – shock.

She was standing in the foyer under the strip-lighting, her hands in the pockets of a flowy calf-length black skirt. She was wearing a ruffled, loose-sleeved white blouse with a hip-length waistcoat that matched the skirt. Her hair was untied, though two clasps kept it back off her face. She was dressed for something, I thought: me or posterity, or a funeral. A friend once remarked that she preferred funerals under a grey sky; sunshine wasn't quite the right lighting for the scene, she said. She added that she liked it to be raining a little – just a drizzle really – with a

slight wind to blow the skirts of her coat about her legs. Death – or its occasion – offers theatre for the living. Caroline might have been posing on a bridge of some renown – for some shutter-captured moment of historical significance. One imagined the result rendered monochromatically, in shadow and light, in elegant black and white: *Caroline on the Pont des Nuages. Survivor of the generation of despair. Died at her retirement home in northern Italy at the age of 83 after a successful career as a writer and cultural commentator. Her novel* Staring into the Abyss Without Jumping *won a national book award and was made into a successful film*.

She smiled and said, "I thought I'd come and see you for a change." Then, on closer scrutiny: "Have you been crying? You look like you've been crying. I think you're too sensitive for the police."

I heard myself ask, "Why are you here, Caroline? What do you want?" My voice grated on me – ragged and brittle, like a sharp pebble tumbling around a rusty tin can.

She pouted pettishly; succeeded in looking wounded. "Oh, dear; I'd sort of convinced myself you'd be pleased to see me. Do at least pretend. I might be dead the next time you see me."

There was a moment of lightning – blind – emotion when I might have done something silly, acted, as it were, in the white heat of the moment; but thankfully, for dull, social reasons, I did nothing, a tribute I suppose, at least arguably so, to my self-control – more likely, to the power of the default position, which, in my case, is not doing, or *nothing* doing, is inaction, or the absence of action. I might have slapped her – it's what I *wanted*, perhaps *needed*, to do – and I rather conceitedly imagined that that's what some notional other person in my situation would have done, would have surrendered to, and having so surrendered would later, when the passion had passed, have expected to be forgiven – or, at least, understood – for something that might generously be excused as a motive lapse. All of which means what exactly – that I nearly did something I'm glad I didn't? No, actually there was a small, morally ambiguous, part of me that wished another part of me had been big – or sanguine – enough to risk it, to transgress in that way in that moment; and, by so transgressing, have placed myself in her hands, at the mercy, the graciousness or lack thereof, of her reaction.

When the passion had passed without incident, I mentioned the picnic in the dark. I was rather hoping to surprise her with it, to discern something from her reaction, but she must have scented the lightning, or heard the thunder as the danger passed – thus skipping the surprise accidentally because she was too preoccupied with me. My own fault, then. She said, "I thought for a moment you were going to hit me. I wouldn't have minded – at least, not terribly. I think you're probably a little bit in love with me. I had a teacher who told me on her last day she was a little bit in love with me. I think she was relieved to be leaving."

I said, "The picnic in the dark, Caroline?"

She said, "What about it?" There was an eye-rolling quality to her tone and expression, bordering on contempt. Surely I hadn't really expected her to be surprised or shocked, or even bothered. The Picnic in the Dark – it happened, so what? I thought you knew about that. Oh, you want to know who was there – it really is that tedious.

I said, "What was it, Caroline – a kind of last supper?"

She laughed and said, "Yes, our last supper – in honour of Adrian and his sister. The flame flickered in the darkness, and we toasted death and the triumph of art. And fearlessness – because they need you to be afraid to exploit you. They need you to be afraid to turn you into good little whores performing all the right tricks in their free market with a jaunty smile on your

face. They want to buy and own you at a competitive, knock-down, bargain price. Adrian was never going to be bought or owned."

I said, "I need to know who was there, Caroline."

"No, you don't," she said. "What difference does it make? Someone was there and went home after the event – disappointed that the bonfire didn't happen. So what? I mean, gee, we were promised a bonfire. Why don't you find the drunk old tramp who was watching us from behind a dead tree? He must remember us; we hardly had anything on, and we were wearing Venetian opera masks. I think he had a walking-stick, or a crook, and was carrying a lantern of some sort. A breeze rustled the leaves of the trees, and an owl hooted the end of night."

I said, "Caroline, I have considered a care order."

She said, "Of course you have. I would, too, in your situation – just from the point of view of covering yourself. I wouldn't blame you, but I would be disappointed. Do you want absolution now or later, or is your better self going to prevail? I think it is."

I said, "I think you're bit of a monster, Caroline."

She smiled. "What you mean is I'm not afraid enough to be controlled. Actually, I'm not afraid at all. I'm perfectly happy to be dead tomorrow. That's impossible to combat unless you're willing to strap me down and stop me moving, and I don't think you've quite got the stomach for that. Anyway," she continued, "I came here to give you these."

The *these* she wanted to give me – pulled out of either pocket – were Adrian's mobile phone and his suicide note, both in sealed plastic bags. There was an element of premeditation and theatricality about this level of detail and delivery – a considered response to events gone, or going, awry.

I asked the obvious question. "Where did you get these?"

"Lorraine," she said. "She asked me to give them to you. She was going to give them to you herself, but you scared her. I think she was afraid you might lock her up."

"When was that?" I asked sharply. I was thinking of a wounded bird fleeing the car. "When did you get these?"

"This morning," she said. "I can't remember the exact time. Does it matter?"

I knew, then, that she knew Lorraine was dead, but I also knew she wouldn't admit to it – indeed, that she'd be unwise to do so. Lorraine had given her Adrian's suicide note and mobile phone, and then perhaps engaged in some self-indulgent reflection – a confession of sorts – on her own failure, all surely permissible for the soon-to-be dead. Caroline would, no doubt, have graciously indulged her. She would have understood, have offered reassurance, have promised to do what the doomed girl asked of her. And now, in the sure and certain knowledge that Lorraine was beyond moral and legal reproach, here she was doing it by coming to me. But first she would have waited, waited until she could safely assume the deed had been done, the exit achieved. She had not tried to dissuade her; she had not tried to save her life. Death was the given, the ultimate out, the smirking, triumphal character at the centre of everything.

I said, "Do you know where Lorraine is now?"

"No, I don't," she said without hesitation. "I thought you might know."

"I think you do, Caroline. I think you knew when she gave you these that she was going off to kill herself – and you gave her plenty of time to do it before coming here. I can't even be sure she ever had these. You might have had them all the time. The dead can be blamed for anything."

"I wouldn't do that," she said. Slight offence taken, but no shock or surprise at the news of Lorraine's death.

"Whose idea were the plastic bags?" I asked.

"I don't know. Not mine. Probably Adrian's. He wanted to be tidy about things. Is it that important?"

"Who put the sign around his neck?"

"I don't know that either," she said. "Maybe it was the tramp with the lantern. Why are these things so important to you? Do you have boxes you have to tick? I suppose you do. I don't know, and I probably wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Why was Adrian so particularly interested in you?" I asked.

"I don't know that he was," she said. "He was interested in lots of people. He liked people – though mostly he felt sorry for them."

I said, "There's a blog that only you and he had access to. That suggests more than just a general interest, don't you think? Just the two of you – your own private blog."

"I reminded him of his sister." She said this in a slightly hushed tone. "He was a bit obsessed with me. I think we were a bit in love, but my age frightened him. He thought girls my age were vulnerable to the attentions of older boys because it made us feel more mature, and he didn't want me to think in the future that he'd exploited or taken advantage of me in some way. He admired my writing and was obsessed with his sister's. He felt a major talent had been crushed by a vulgar, uncaring world, which is probably not far from the truth. It probably happens a lot. Success is money now, and some people are ruthlessly single-minded in pursuit of it. Art is a distraction that most people don't care about. There is a horrible arrogance about money. If you've got lots of it, you think you deserve it and are better than people who don't have it. Nobility and grace and art are sneered at by money." She paused, remembering herself, reining herself in. "Anyway, we used to discuss stuff like that all the time. It doesn't matter now, does it? People like us always lose – the cruel and ruthless prevail. They bomb and rape the planet in the name of oil, and torture animals in the name of medicine – and then patronise anyone who thinks we shouldn't be prepared to go that low. There must be something really wrong with us."

I asked her if she'd ever met Lisa Markham. I think I had some idea that she might have known about – and been jealous of – her relationship with Adrian.

She said indignantly, "Why are you asking me about Lisa? Lisa has nothing to do with it." I thought I detected a hint of protectiveness.

"Is that a *yes*, then, Caroline?" I asked.

"It's actually none of your business. She's got nothing to do with this. You might as well investigate my mother."

"Your mother wasn't having an affair with Adrian," I said; "nor did she come into the police station to report him missing."

She said, "I think I'd better go. You've got what I came to give you – and this is a wholly inappropriate conversation to be having in the foyer of a police station." A smartly-dressed elderly woman came into reception with a cartoon-snooty chihuahua on a leash. Caroline nodded at them as she walked out. For some absurd reason, to do perhaps with the vanity of authority, I had imagined she wouldn't leave until – implicitly at least – I'd given her permission to do so. As it was, I found myself chasing after her, feeling rather like some dreadful, doorstepping reporter. It was silver and grey outside and raining thinly. She turned and said, "I can't believe you're following me. What do you want? Seriously – why are you so interested in things that aren't important?"

I said, “I need to understand what happened, Caroline. I need to know who put the sign around his neck, and I need to know who was at the *picnic*.”

She said, “You don’t know there *was* a picnic. Maybe Lorraine made it up. Maybe it was a myth, a legend, Adrian wanted her to create for him,” – she gestured loosely and inclusively – “and you, and me, and us – or maybe it was something she wanted to create for herself. You’re never going to know now, are you? She’s dead. You don’t even know if she stabbed him. You only have her word for that. Maybe she was taking the blame for someone else – me or Lisa, or the girl in the golden mask. I can tell you anything now, so long as it fits with the little you do know. What would you like to hear? There were thirteen of us at the picnic, including Adrian. We arrived independently and wore masks because we were worried about infiltrators and informers. Three of us waded out to the boat after the failed cremation and hung the sign around his neck. Why did we do that? Because we didn’t have a dunce’s cap, and we baulked at the idea of using a marker pen on his face. We had some idea we were protecting the weak and vulnerable, and the easily led, by defacing a dangerous icon. Or maybe we were just drunk or stoned.” She paused. “Is this the sort of thing you want? What about a bit of sex by the water to spice it up for the press?”

I said, “I don’t find this amusing, Caroline.”

“Why don’t you arrest me, then – or whatever it is you have to do to get me in one of those dark rooms with my mother and a lawyer and a tape machine? Then you can ask your questions in a po-faced, self-important way, and tell me I’ll be in serious trouble if I don’t answer them. My mother can add pathos by quietly sobbing into a handkerchief.” Her tone softened. “Can I go now, or do you want to *detain* or *hold* me, or whatever, so I can *help with your inquiries*?”

I looked up at the sky, which was darkening; felt the fine needles of rain on my face. A child screamed somewhere across the road. It was a sulky, resentful, rebellious scream, a screech really. It signalled a battle of wills with – a protest against – a power greater than itself. A parental thwarting of childish desire was going on, prosaic and commonplace. No, you can't do, or have, that: not now, not today, not until I say.

Caroline sighed. “One day the Earth will just be an empty, lifeless rock going round a dead sun, and no-one or nothing will ever know or care that we’ve been here. I don’t think we’re going to make a good world in the meantime, do you?”

I let her go. What else was there to do? To have held her would have been weak and wretched, a nebulous, childish fear of the dark. I believed that she *might* take her own life – indeed, that it was a distinct possibility – but not that she intended to do so; and I suppose I believed, at bottom, that she was best placed to decide. She had succeeded in convincing me that they knew best for them, and that she knew best for her.

I returned to the office and read Adrian’s suicide note: *If you can’t reproach me for this, then I’m dead. Call it selfish and cowardly if you wish – truly, it’s your pain. And you are, after all, the ones with the problem – you must find a way to go on living. You will, of course – most of you anyway. It’s amazing how absurd everything ends up sounding. Afraid to die, everyone seems to be making paltry excuses to go on living. The creature IS, so must find a reason and rationale to stay that way. I think I died when my sister died. She was a beautiful, incredibly talented person who was too gentle and sensitive for the ugly world she was expected to survive in. I’m truly sorry for the pain caused to the already broken. I hope what remains isn’t too unbearable.*

I examined his phone, but not for very long. It had been factory reset, probably something to do with his desire to be *tidy about things*. I passed it on for form’s sake – with next to no

expectation that it would yield anything useful to the investigation. So what. So what did I/we know? We knew that Adrian had been stabbed post-mortem, though we hadn't found the knife. We knew that someone had hung a disparaging sign around his neck, though we didn't know who or why or when. I believed that Adrian had gone to the lake with person or persons unknown, and with enough drugs and drink already inside him to – in the absence of medical intervention – kill him. I *knew* that drugs and drink *had* killed him. There was a preponderance of evidence to suggest, very strongly, that he had – whether, or not, aided or otherwise abetted – committed suicide. So much so that it seemed – in the absence of some compelling puncturing point to the contrary – absurd to suggest otherwise. The Picnic in the Dark could have been an invention, a making of history or mythology, as Caroline had suggested. Lorraine might have used the term to Caroline and others after the fact, and they had then conspired not to deny or denounce it – *it* being the myth she wanted and needed to create. No-one need have knowingly gone, or been invited, to a picnic in the dark, no-one need have thought at the time *Oh, we're having – or going to – a picnic in the dark*. What had happened at the lake had happened, and the mythologising, the turning of it into a narrative, a history, had come later. Actually, that didn't quite ring true. Someone – the person who had recorded and posted the video – had certainly gone to the lake with posterity in mind, and it was likely they weren't the only one or ones to have done so. Perhaps more had been planned and scheduled in the way of multimedia, but second-thoughts were currently keeping heads prudently down. Everyone, these days, was *managing* their *message* and making editorial decisions. Perhaps there *was* more to come, but perhaps now wasn't quite the time – the climate not being right, and all that. Media landscapes change and undulate with today's topless sensation becoming tomorrow's spiked discretion, the bottom line and the next television football franchise being the better part of it.

I went back to the scene of crime reports and re-read them, looking for some tangible evidence, or passing allusions thereto, of a picnic or gathering. Had drinks been passed around? Toasts been made? It wasn't hard to imagine that alcohol and drugs might be more important than food on such an occasion – something to enhance the surreal scene-setting and perhaps, incidentally, to keep the pre-dawn chill at bay.

For reasons to do with mood and whim rather than investigation, I returned to Amberton park. I wanted to walk round the lake, revisit the scene of the crime - or, rather, the event. Bouquets of flowers wrapped in paper and plastic had been left round the lake with their small, calling-type cards offering messages of condolence. It was, and had been, raining, so they were looking rather sorry and soggy and weathered. Ink had run, and small puddles had formed in the cellophane. They, the bouquets, looked cheap and tacky, tokens really – the flowers unconsidered and possibly unnameable by those who had purchased them – really the sort of flowers men pick up at petrol stations as a desperate afterthought on Valentine's day. There's something distasteful about flowers clipped and wrapped in paper and plastic, beauty and nature tamed and vulgarised into a crass quick-turnaround product. It's the same lack of aesthetic sense that imagines a bird can be admired in a cage, or that a butterfly's beauty is enhanced by being chloroformed and pressed between the pages of a book.

I noticed a woman standing alone at the side of the lake. Caroline's mother. I noted this without surprise or emotion, and I think she must have noticed me before I noticed her. At any rate, she was unsurprised at my approach – indeed, seemed rather to be expecting it. She was staring out across the lake, holding a black umbrella, her other hand in the pocket of a raincoat, also black, its belt undone and hanging down at the sides. She smiled and said, "I thought for a moment you might not recognise me, but then you are a detective, so presumably you have a

good memory for faces." She turned and looked out over the lake. "This is where it happened, isn't it? This is where he died."

I said, "Yes, it is."

"And you think Caroline was involved?" A hint of amusement, of pride even. "She probably was. Caroline's inconveniently intelligent, Ms Black – inconvenient for her, I mean, and for those who care about her. She thinks too much about the world, and it makes her angry and miserable, though she's become rather good at keeping it to herself recently. Her teachers describe her as *intelligent, but*... There's always a *but*. One teacher described her as *thoughtful*, and rather made it sound like an affliction. She doesn't have the right sort of intelligence, you see. What passes for intelligence in the media and popular culture is little more than a skill-set – calculating ability, *creative* problem-solving, a capacity for retaining facts and figures. It's perfectly possible to be intelligent and also dull and uncaring, and most intelligent people are usually one or the other, or both. That sort of intelligence has nothing to do with insight or morality, or a large world-view. Rather, it's a narrow skill narrowly applied – much admired and encouraged in schools and universities. The computer programmer is the modern apotheosis of this type of graceless intelligence. *Gee, I made a tool to exploit people and a weapon to kill them, and now – shock, horror – someone's using them to exploit and kill. Boo. That makes me sad. Still, on to the next opportunity to be clever and well-compensated*. Most people don't want to reflect on the consequences of their actions or inactions. What they want is to live in their little bubble and feel good about themselves. To do this, they must be completely ignorant and uninterested in anything beyond the bubble, or else buy into a simple and childish narrative about the world beyond it. Most people do some version of the latter. The thoughtless and vulgar have inherited the Earth."

I was reminded of Martha Bottomley talking about Emma Mansfield. Clearly Mrs Meadows thought the world wasn't good enough for her daughter, and Martha had certainly thought something similar on Emma's behalf. I said, "Does it not worry you that she might be in the process of persuading herself that life's not worth living?"

She said, "Oh, dear, you sound like her heart-of-gold, commonsensical friend. Well, we all need one of those, I suppose, to get us through the darker nights. Chin up, and all that; it could be worse. Are you reproaching me? Do you think I'm failing her – letting her down in some way? Perhaps I should take her shopping at the local mall, get her something pretty to wear, something bright to compensate for all those dark thoughts she insists on having."

I said, "Is it not possible she might be depressed? Depression takes many forms."

She sniffed. "And what form would you have it take, Ms Black? One that conveniently allows you to characterise a bright young woman's philosophic take on a vile world as a species of mental illness? This is the sharp edge of Panglossian thinking, isn't it? Have you told her yet how lucky you think she is? How fortunate? How much she has and ought to be grateful for?" She paused, shivered or shook herself – reproach stopping for a moment at her grave? "Life is a curse," she said. She sounded mournful, as though she regretted how long it had taken her to come to the truth of this. "As parents, we should probably spend more time than we do apologising to our offspring for inflicting it on them. I often think of a soldier, an adolescent, lying on a battlefield with an indifferent, darkening sky looking down on him. The battle goes on around him, but he's no longer interested in it, nor it in him. He's dying. He's lost his legs, and one of his arms, and is bleeding into the mud. He might justifiably ask: *Mummy, Daddy, did you have me for this?* More pertinently: *Should you have had me if you couldn't protect me from this?* As with everything we do for entirely selfish reasons, we find a way of giving it a nice,

positive, saccharine spin. It's rather sickening the way we gush approvingly over news of someone having a baby, and nauseating the lively expectation of this gushing approval."

"You sound bitter on her behalf," I said. "It's almost as if you believe – notionally at least – that she existed as she is now in some other pre-natal world, and you betrayed her by bringing her into this one."

She smiled ruefully. "Yes, I suppose that's not a bad approximation of how I experience it emotionally. Caroline resents ordinary things and makes me feel guilty for conspiring to inflict them on her. I'd feel better about it if she rebelled, but she just puts up with it. She once told me having to wear school uniform was dressing to please, and was probably good practice for becoming a whore, which I thought showed a subtle and mature understanding of what was being done to her. It's distasteful to reflect that ultimately we're engaged in the business of training our children to be useful and attractive to someone else – to be *economically useful*. After all, a CV's not so very different from a phone card offering sexual services. We're not really protecting our children; that's a lie we tell ourselves to produce that cosy self-righteous feeling we're so addicted to. Parents are pimps, and society the clientèle. The best protected children are never born."

"I'm afraid your daughter's going to kill herself," I said. I watched a coot disappear under the curtain of a willow tree. "It's probably deathly dull of me, but I feel I ought to make some sort of effort to stop her. I don't quite know what or how, though. A girl of her age shouldn't have the capacity for philosophical despair."

"I did do something about it," she said coldly. "I begged her not to. I apologised for bringing her into an ugly world, and begged her to put up with it for my sake. Pathetic, isn't it? *Don't kill yourself, dear; it would make me and other impotent adults feel quite dreadful. You're here now, sweetie; you might as well listen while the band plays on. No-one's forcing you to dance. Well, okay, they are. But could you, please – pretend. Just for Mummy*." Her eyes had filled with tears. "She's an angel," she said defiantly; "something other. She's perfect. She'll never be better than she is now."

"Forgive me," I said, "but that sounds disturbingly like you've resigned yourself to her imminent death.

"No, not really," she replied; "but I'm not going to betray my daughter to anyone. I'm not going to persuade myself I know better, and then spend the rest of my life justifying my shoddy, self-interested actions to myself and others – especially to the kind of people who would support me in them. *Oh, yes, you were quite right. Young people are so ungrateful; don't know what's good for them, do they?* – the assumption always being that we did them a favour by having them. It wasn't for us; it was for them. What a horrible inversion of the truth."

I said, "At the risk of seeming drearily commonsensical, don't you think you're being a teensy bit hard on yourself? Your daughter's a credit to you – an intelligent and thoughtful young woman interested in, and concerned about, the wider world. The vulgar and facile produce unthinkingly every day, and, in our culture, mawkishly celebrate the event. In that context, there's something rather tragic about someone as thoughtful and sensitive as you reproaching yourself for the existential plight of your offspring."

She snorted. "Is it really supposed to be a comfort to me that there are morons in the world to whom I can favourably compare myself? I don't believe that, and I don't believe you believe that." We stood for a moment in silence, staring out over the lake. I remember idly wishing I'd brought some bread for the ducks. "Tell me something personal about yourself," she said gently. She had turned to me, smiling warmly. It transformed her face.

I considered. "I don't have or want children," I told her, "and I adore cats. The two things are not related."

She laughed. Her grey eyes twinkled briefly, fleetingly, and I caught the cutting edge of white teeth, quickly eclipsed – or occluded – by closing lips. The twinkle faded just as quickly. An unkempt man with a florid face and grizzled beard walked by with a can of Special Brew in one hand and a roll-up cigarette in the other. He said, "Afternoon, ladies," in a formal, hearty way, raising the can in salute as he passed.

We replied, "Good afternoon," in unison, and I wondered at the need – sometimes casual, sometimes desperate, occasionally wretched – to connect with other people. For some, the exchange at the supermarket checkout or post-office counter is all there is, which is, usually, far less than is needed or wanted.

"I'm glad we had a chance to speak," she said. "Andrea by the way, but you probably already knew that."

"Barbara," I said, and we shook hands.

She smiled and said, "I'll leave you with a cat story, Barbara. When I was a girl, I lived next door to a quiet boy called Tom, who lived alone with his mother. He spent most of his time reading, and showed no interest in making friends. Despite performing better than average at school, his mother and the school worried about him. A boy his age – he was twelve – *should* have friends. It was unnatural his lack of interest in other people. The only creature that excited any display of affection from him was an overweight tabby cat that belonged to someone who lived across the road. The someone had a gran who liked to make her own chips while on babysitting duty, and Gran was about to become the kind of statistic the fire brigade have campaigns about. In short, she set the house on fire. We watched it burn. Then we saw Tom go into the house. We thought he'd gone mad, but he emerged a minute or so later – with a baby in one arm and pillow case with something in it hanging from his free hand. Tom casually passed the baby over to a woman – who shouted something like, "Oh, you wonderful boy," – then he crossed the road, still holding the pillow case. He put it down gently in his own front garden, and a fat tabby cat sloped out. It made the local newspaper. Tom was pictured standing next to his proud mother. Saved baby and relieved and happy mother were also pictured with Tom. Neither Gran, who died later in hospital from smoke inhalation, nor the cat got a look in. The neighbourhood kids knew what none of the adults wanted to hear – that Tom had gone into the burning building to save the cat. My mother would laugh and shush me whenever I mentioned it. Saving the baby had been an afterthought. If he'd had to *choose* between the baby and the cat, he'd have saved the cat. It's been making me smile for years. I hope we meet again, Barbara, but not for a while." I watched her back as she walked away. Rain, I thought, suited her. So did smiling.

Chapter Twenty-One.

My mobile phone rang.

"Hi, Barbara." Lisa Markham. "I'll be at the hotel if you want to talk to me – or arrest me. Unless you'd rather meet somewhere else – not the police station, obviously."

I said I'd come to the hotel. I imagined she was watching me as she made the phone-call; that she had waited for Andrea to leave before calling.

She met me in the foyer. I was struck by another dramatic change in her appearance. She was dressed in black shorts and a black tank-top, or vest, that left her midriff uncovered, and she had done her lips with black lipstick. Her hair was held back off her face with an Alice band of the same colour. She had painted her nails, fingers and toes – she was wearing Grecian sandals – with black nail polish or varnish. The first thing she said was "Come outside. I want to smoke." I followed her outside and we sat at a white concrete picnic table, which stood on an expanse of lawn under a gazebo to the rear of the hotel. Notwithstanding the cover, the on-and-off rain meant we had it to ourselves.

I said, "You wanted to see me, Ms Markham."

She said, "Oh, don't lie. You were coming to see me anyway. And don't call me Ms Markham." She did something on her mobile phone and a young red-headed waitress came out and asked what she could get us. Lisa said, "I'll have a large glass of red wine, and whatever she wants." She said this without looking up from her phone. I wondered if she dressed to try out different personae, this being the sulky, spoilt adolescent.

"Ma'am?" The waitress.

"Coffee, please," I said, though I'd much rather have had the red wine.

When the waitress had gone, Lisa lit a cigarette and said, "You must get lied to a lot." She didn't sound like she cared overly much.

"Yes," I said. "All the time – often when I'm being told the truth."

Lisa grinned and gazed into the distance. She was posing, of course, but then she was, and had, dressed for posing. I wondered if she were exploring who she was, or trying to find out who it was she was. It was also possible that I was being fanciful, that it was nothing more or less than a trivial fondness for clothes and dressing up. We grow used to what we see in the mirror, and it's surely reasonable to want to subvert the familiarity from time to time, to shock or surprise the eye, particularly amongst the young. *Mirror, mirror, on the wall, is that me I see at all?*

The waitress returned with the wine and coffee on a round tray. She transferred them to the table and stood for a moment watching Lisa contemplate the wine. Finally, she said, "Shall I bring the bottle, ma'am?"

Lisa laughed and said, "Fuck off," and the waitress, grinning, returned to the hotel.

I waited. I think I must have been numb. Certainly, I had lost all sense of urgency. Very little seemed important then, least of all the job I was supposed to be doing. Things were moving in sharp focus outside my bubble.

Lisa drank half the contents of her glass. "I fucked up," she said. "So did you. You should have arrested Lorraine if you wanted to save her."

I said, "And what should you have done?"

"What shouldn't I have done? I shouldn't have tried to save her from Adrian. She didn't want to be saved. She wanted to sacrifice herself, immolate herself on the altar of his ideas. If we'd understood everything, we'd have tried to give her the strength to go through with it. Instead, we did what all privileged people do – assumed we knew better and best. Not just for us, but for her too. It's awful to think Adrian might really have understood her and cared about her."

"Who's *we*?" I asked.

She dropped her gaze to the contents of her glass. "Me, then," she said at length. "I, singular," but I knew who *we* was, or some of we, and she knew I knew. *Noblesse oblige* or simple snobbery, she and Caroline had come to believe that Adrian shouldn't be taking his brand of Promethean fire to the lower orders.

"Were you there, Lisa?" I asked."I'm assuming you were." I sipped the coffee. It was a little hot for comfort. "Why did you come into the police station to report someone missing you presumably knew was dead?"

"I didn't *know*," she said; "or, anyway, I wasn't sure. I was trying to find out. I *knew* when I saw you." She stubbed out her cigarette rather as if she regretted having smoked it. "It wasn't a well-organised event," she said. "No-one was sure what was going on. Everyone had their own agenda, their own reasons for being there – *something to do* being a major part of it. I was worried more about Lorraine than I was Adrian. None of this would have happened if he'd had the class to die quietly. It was vanity, of course. He wanted to make his death a big deal, and he's certainly managed that." She took a gulp of wine. "You want a neat, coherent narrative, don't you?" she said reproachfully. "Something compelling to tell your shady friends in the press. And all you've got is a mess." She grinned mischievously. "Life's like that sometimes."

"Lorraine told me she stabbed Adrian," I said. "Was that just another story?"

"That's what she told me too," she said. "I didn't see her do it. According to her, she was supposed to stab him and cremate him on the boat – all very Byron-Shelley. Thanks to you, I got the impression she might have killed him."

"Do you know who took the pictures and videos?" I asked.

"Quite a few people I should imagine. All that mobile technology on the loose, and bright techno-literate young people to make use of it. I don't know who they were. I can't give you names, and I wouldn't if I could. I'd expect you to think less of me if I did. I'm sure I didn't know most of the people there anyway."

"You know Caroline Meadows?" I said.

Lisa drained her wine histrionically. "I think Adrian might have mentioned her." She tapped on her mobile phone again, and the red-headed waitress sashayed across the grass and – smiling pertly – put an open bottle of wine down on the table. She left without saying anything. "I may even have met her," Lisa continued. "It's possible. I meet lots of people." She poured herself more wine. "Do you think Lorraine and Sharon are better off dead? I mean, they were broken and damaged and in pain. Presumably you wouldn't deny that. All's quiet now. The suffering has stopped. Suffering – it goes back generations in some cases, all the way back to when a master could amuse himself with his servant or slave with impunity and die with his reputation intact. It sickens the soul thinking about it. Adrian sent me this," she said, reading from her phone: "*How will it be come the end? I like to think it'll be cataclysmic, but that we'll have a bit of time to reflect on us. We won't be able to say we made the best of it, will we? – that we enriched the*

world, and made it a better place? Ours will be a legacy of selfishness and greed, like the killer after the bloodlust and mutilation, numb but never entirely sated – the rapist after the ejaculation, whiningly wishing he hadn't done it, and wretchedly baying to the sky for a better nature." She sipped at her wine and lit another cigarette. "I think that about sums us up, don't you?"

I stared at her without speaking, and must have seemed a little dazed, or dense. I heard a crow caw and the cooing of a wood pigeon.

Lisa, holding her wine glass in both hands, said, "Poor Barbara. Pity you can't arrest misery."

I said, "I don't suppose you know who took the knife." I had a choppy, badly cut film running in my mind of what might have happened: *Death on the Lake*. Adrian was the star with Lorraine as his leading lady. The rest of the cast changed with every run. It was relatively easy to cast Caroline as the person who'd hung the placard about his neck in an act of pre-emptive iconoclasm, and she *had* volunteered herself for the role. And it would also be easy to have her take the knife and dispose of it in a creative way, or perhaps – boldly – keep it as a souvenir. Perhaps it had lain for a cycle with the dishes in the Meadows' domestic dishwasher.

Lisa said, "Whoever did, did it to protect Lorraine. I can volunteer if you're desperate. I could even argue I was trying to save his life." A pause while she pensively sipped wine. "This isn't going to turn ugly is it, Barbara?"

"Ugly?" I said.

"Oh, you know. Taking people in; different rooms; playing one off against the other; false confessions; *he said she said he said*. I understand the police can get quite desperate, what with everyone wanting a result these days. Is that what they want, Barbara? A result? I think you're too good for that. In fact, I know you are."

I drank coffee. I considered – in a fanciful way – emptying the cup and filling it with wine. I said, "I think you'll find they'd rather it just went away, Lisa. We'll be left with grief counselling to help the families and the wider community come to terms with the death of their young people – and bland pleas from career-minded politicians for the media to allow space for this necessary healing process. Blah blah. It's the sound of a carpet being lifted and something unpleasant being swept under it."

Lisa smiled. "You're one of the good guys, Barbara." She pushed a card across the table with various contact details on it. "Don't feel you have to be investigating anything to get in touch."

I took it and returned to the station, where I wrote a report for Superintendent Wilson – not one likely to gladden his heart. There was no baddie or culprit expeditiously apprehended following a briskly efficient, media-friendly investigation. No pictures of an arrestee in handcuffs, no post-arrest television interview for the Superintendent cast in the role of stoical public servant and community care-taker. Moral ambiguity is a bummer PR-wise. *Pity you can't arrest misery*.

I walked home, and, in the kitchen, filled a tumbler with red wine. I drank half of it in one go. The wine was excellent, the sensation better. I was thinking: *I'm happy; we're happy. We've created our own happy death-defying illusion*. Reality would, of course, chip away at it. Charm would be taken from us. Cats had died on me, and would die again. Age and infirmity would claim us, and interest and pleasure would be displaced by aches and pain and the struggle of mind and body in an increasingly hostile environment. And the dreary awfulness of loss, a quiet desolation the old must bear with uncomplaining fortitude. If it hurts too much, then get along

and die. Maggie jumped up on the work surface, surprising me, and making me laugh. Unlike Barney, who could spot a landing like a gymnast, Maggie's landings were like a badly controlled skid on ice. She was a big, wide-eyed, rabbity white tabby with a pink nose and large paws. I air-kissed and stroked her head. She closed her eyes and opened them slowly, approvingly.

I drained the wine and poured more. Why do people behave like life's going to go on forever? A symptom, I suppose, of escaping the truth of our demise. The grubby decline, the clinging onto the last scrap of the fire no matter how wretched the price? Quivering and demented in a chair, we missed the opportunity to make a dignified exit, to decide for ourselves, and laws and fear and indifference leave us grovellingly dribbling to an unseemly end.

Still for me/us, the happiness illusion still had, and has, a way to go, a while to run. I touched my nose to Maggie's. I thought: maybe I'll try smoking in my sixties. Certainly, I thought, draining the tumbler again, I shall drink more. Probably a lot more. Indeed, why not drink myself to death – live then, anyway, as though tomorrow you're going to die?

About the Author

I was born in the South West of Scotland half a century ago, and now live in Kent with my partner and cat. I work as Test Analyst (a wilful breaker of software) and write and drink to keep myself sane.

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